

NOVEL

5

# 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 5 -**

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**-ILLUSTRATOR-**

fuzichoco

**[ SEVEN SEAS ]**





Once she was fully cleaned, Mira soaked her now-cool body in the tub again to warm up. She looked back toward the view of the garden. The rhythmic sound of the shishi-odoshi was all too soothing. After relaxing in the water a bit too long, she was once again pruned.



Mingling melodies flowed from Leticia's spread wings, accompanied by her soft yet clear voice. The sudden solo concert silenced the rest of the train car as all passengers listened, entranced.

"So this is the Queen of Melodies herself..."

The Spirit of Song was holy among bards. Emilio had been suspicious of Mira's claim...but as the rich notes of Leticia's song reverberated through the depths of his soul, a tear rolled down his cheek.

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*Seven Seas Entertainment*



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# CHAPTER 1

TWO HOURS AFTER LEAVING Lunatic Lake, Mira lay on her back near a babbling brook and gazed at the sky. She sipped an apple au lait and watched the clouds drift by, their billowing forms changing shape like clay in a child's hand.

It was a comfortable afternoon, and the wind gently caressed her cheeks. Leaning against Pegasus, as animals gathered nearby and the wind blew through the plain, she allowed herself a moment of total relaxation.

"How tranquil..." she murmured. Pegasus whinnied, and a few animals around them chittered in apparent agreement. This was pure bliss.

After some time to recharge, Mira jumped onto the back of Pegasus, barely noticing the dried blood on the horse's hooves. As they rose into the sky, the assembled woodland creatures began a battle over a carcass—the carcass of a titanic bird with a distinctive, hoof-shaped hole stamped into its cranium.

Mira never looked back.

\* \* \*

As the sun dipped below the horizon, a veil of darkness was pulled across the sky. One by one, stars began to twinkle in the heavens. City lights winked on in the distance, and one structure was conspicuous among them. Stretching high above the other buildings of the city, it seemed to cast a shadow across those lights.

"Finally, we can see it." Mira held fast to Pegasus's mane and strained her eyes in the darkness. The faraway lights slowly resolved into a bustling city center.

Silverside, the Station City. It wasn't quite as impressive as Lunatic Lake, but it was still quite large and modern, with a railroad running straight through it.

Mira's usual tactic was to land outside of town, then walk in to avoid attention. But it was already late, and she was eager to get settled at an inn for the evening. She started looking for a place to land Pegasus a little closer to her destination.

A long building made from wood, steel, and stone had a large sign on it that read SILVERSIDE STATION. She guided her mount to the ground beside the railroad station, congratulated Pegasus on a job well done, and dismissed it with a pat on the nose.

The crowd was shocked.

Within moments a cry had gone up, with onlookers searching for the mythical beast that seemed to have appeared and vanished in the blink of an eye. Using her [Immortal Arts: Shrinking Earth], Mira faded into the crowd and nonchalantly circled around to the front of the station.

Peeking in through the door, she saw the main ticket counter. A shade was drawn over the ticket windows that bore the words, "Today's service has ended." Yet even with rail service closed for the evening, Silverside Station was quite busy, filled with shops that were doing brisk business.

"This is still a fantasy world, right?" Mira marveled at the sight before her.

Stone, steel, wood: the whole building was made of commonplace materials, yet the architecture seemed quite advanced. Uniformed workers dotted the crowd on both floors of the station's main promenade, and brightly lit shops lined the broad atrium.

The prospect of indoor shopping certainly piqued Mira's interest, but despite the temptation, her fatigue pushed her to find an inn. *There'll be plenty of time for that tomorrow morning*, she thought as she turned to walk into the city center.

Though the hour was late, the crowd showed no sign of thinning in the Station City. The main plaza was lit by streetlights and bustling with people of various species and occupations. Some rushed home from their day's work, some were getting pumped up for the nightlife, and many others were fellow travelers in search of a night's rest.

Mira quickly spotted signboards from inns along her route... *lots* of them. "I didn't expect this many..." she muttered.

Solomon had warned her, but she was still in awe of the sheer number.

Each inn looked unique. Some were utilitarian and apartment-like, offering a sense of security. Others promised palatial lodgings. So many distinctive establishments stood side by side that the plaza seemed more like an inn exhibition.

*This could be fun,* Mira decided. Despite her fatigue, she began peeking in the inns that caught her eye in search of her perfect accommodations.

The first inn she ducked into was easy to dismiss. Its lobby was visibly full, and a sign announced that it had no vacancies.

Next was an inn full of countless wine casks. Its first floor served as a tavern—a common arrangement in fantasy settings. Half-drunk men downed cask after cask, hooting and hollering all the while. Even just glancing in, Mira smelled the stench of alcohol mixed with testosterone. She departed immediately.

Third was one of the superluxury inns. Employees and patrons alike oozed high-class snobbery. It wasn't her type of crowd, so Mira moved on.

A restaurant-focused inn that prided itself on its cooking stood nearby, with a sign saying TODAY'S CHEF outside. Pinned to the sign were photos of a very handsome man and his specialty dishes. The food looked uninspired, at best... but Mira was captivated by the *photos* of the food. They weren't drawings—they were *real* photographs.

Cameras existed here, it seemed. Surprised at how fast technology was progressing in this world, Mira walked to the inn. The attached restaurant—visible through a large window—was packed full of female guests. She wondered if they were there for the food or the chef.

The next inn catered to guests of the opposite sex. As soon as she saw employees in maid clothing with male guests lined up to get in, she turned on her heel and walked away.

Another inn offered live music. A hired band played inside, their dulcet tones leaking out of the building and prompting Mira to match their rhythm. MINSTRELS FREE TO JOIN IN! was written on a sign out front. After listening to a song, she decided it was nice... but not what she was looking for.

Soon, she found herself standing in front of a lovely, old-fashioned Japanese-style ryokan inn. Tidy hedges encircled the site, and the building itself oozed Japanese charm. In front of the building hung a paper lantern printed with the words STARRY MANOR. Enchanted, she stepped up to open the sliding door.

The rattle of the door alone triggered a wave of nostalgia. Beyond the black-stone floor of the foyer was a low step that separated the entrance from the tatami-floored lobby.

Mira couldn't help but sigh at the familiar scent of woven rushes.

*This is it!*

Soft orange light illuminated everything in the lobby—from the flowers that looked like pearls, to the India ink paintings of mountains. All of it made Mira feel as if she'd found home as she took off her shoes and headed to the counter.

"Welcome to the Starry Manor."

The female receptionist bowed politely, then lifted her head and smiled. Her black hair and eyes fit the Japanese aesthetic well. After spending a moment enraptured by the receptionist's refined beauty, Mira realized that she'd frozen up.

"I'd like to stay a night," Mira blurted, posing slightly to downplay her lack of social skills around pretty girls.

The receptionist nodded and offered both a check-in slip and a quill pen. Mira tried her best to look cool, a task that became more difficult when she found she needed to stand on her tiptoes to reach the countertop.

"Please write your name and occupation here," instructed the receptionist.

"Hrmm." Doing her best to maintain her image, Mira accepted the pen and wrote her name. After a moment's thought, she finally wrote *Adventurer* as her occupation.

The receptionist accepted the paper and looked over it. "We require identification from adventurers. If you'd be so kind..." The woman placed a tray before her.

Mira nodded, reaching for the license in her waist pouch. Then she froze in place. Eurica, a clerk at the Mages' Guild in Karanak, had put the license in a disgustingly cute leather case. The weapons-grade girliness would demolish Mira's attempts at posturing as a worldly traveler.

She panicked, fumbling as she tried to pull it out of the card case. She settled for opening the case and quickly folding the cover behind it, hiding it under the case as she slid it onto the tray.

"That will do just fine," the receptionist said kindly. She checked Mira's license and noted something on her sheet of paper before picking up the case, gently closing it,

and handing it back over. “The hotel offers several packages. The relaxation option comes with breakfast and dinner and costs 20,000 ducats. The economy option, without meals, costs 12,000 ducats. Which would you like?”

“I’ll go with the relaxation one...” Mira mumbled, staring at her feet and shoving the frilly license case back into her bag. The receptionist continued to smile as she made a few more notes on her paper.

“We will need you to pay up front, if you’d please.”

“Hrmm.” Mira produced a leather pouch full of money and placed two mithril coins in the tray. The bag she used as a wallet was the same one that Solomon had given her, but now she noticed how shabby it looked compared to her license case.

“Thank you for choosing to stay with us, and we hope you enjoy your time at Starry Manor. A staff member will guide you to your room in a moment.”

The receptionist bowed deeply, causing her glossy black hair to fall over her face. When she stood straight again, she fixed it with practiced grace. All the while, her smile remained intact, and her posture remained as perfect as ever. Mira couldn’t help but fall in love.

“Greetings, madam. Allow me to show you to your room.”

Mira turned to see a miao woman waving to her, looking surprisingly comfortable in Japanese clothing.

“Much appreciated,” Mira replied. The staff member gathered Mira’s shoes from the entrance and beckoned for her to follow.

Shoeboxes lay within the next room. They were equipped with lockers, and the woman placed Mira’s shoes in a vacant cubby before locking it. It almost reminded Mira of a school’s shoe rack—yet another perfect touch that she adored.

“This is where your footwear will be kept,” the miao woman explained. “You may access it using your room key, so be sure to take your shoes before returning the key to reception when you leave.”

The tatami-floored hallway leading to the guest rooms extended into the darkness like an undersea tunnel, and the springy mats were pleasant on Mira’s stocking feet as

she walked along. The lanterns mounted along the walls flickered, sending soft ripples of light along the walls and floor. Pillars painted with Japanese lacquer reflected the dim, warm light, while decorative sliding doors completed the Japanese atmosphere.

Even in Japan, it would be difficult to find a place so overwhelmingly Japanese. She couldn't wait to see her room.

The staff member's tail was adorned with a bell and a ribbon, which jingled every time it swung side to side. Mira followed it with her eyes as she walked along. Soon, they arrived at a door labeled SKY ROOM. Her guide opened the sliding paper door, revealing another sliding wooden door behind it.

"A door behind a door, eh? Quite the interesting construction."

"The hallway is beautiful when lined with the painted paper doors. But most guests prefer the security of a wooden door," the woman answered as she unlocked the room.

"Very enlightening."

Mira looked back through the hallway and surveyed the paper doors. She had to agree with their sense of aesthetics.

Mira's room was floored in tatami mats and had a smooth-grained wooden table in the center. On the table was a spread of Japanese sweets. A bright green legless chair sat next to a flower arrangement and a wall scroll depicting a waterfall. It was straight out of a movie set— whoever had designed this interior certainly had a taste for theatrics.

"Would you like dinner immediately?" The staff member asked.

"Hrmm... I'd like to get cleaned up first. Are there baths in this establishment?" If Mira was going to eat ryokan food, she wanted to savor it. And that meant being wholly clean in both body and soul.

"Each room is furnished with a bath, but might I recommend the communal bath? It is our inn's pride and joy," the woman responded pleasantly. She removed a basket from the room's dresser and handed it to Mira. Inside were towels, soap, and other such bathing necessities.

"Oho. A communal bath?"

"If you would like to go immediately, I would be glad to show you the way."

"I'll take you up on that offer." Coming here and *not* taking a dip in the communal bath was unthinkable.

When they left the room, the staff member locked the door behind them. "This will unlock your room and your shoe locker, so please take care not to lose it."

Mira placed the key in her waist pouch before scurrying after the woman's jingling tail.

\* \* \*

Mira spotted several customers relaxing in the hall outside the communal bath. They all wore yukatas, and the smacking of ping-pong balls could be heard. An adjoining booth sold souvenirs, and there was a map of the building on the wall. Under the gentle light, they took a breather and enjoyed a moment's calm.

But Mira could only stare in a mixture of horror and anticipation.

She stood before the red curtain labeled WOMEN'S BATH and cursed herself. She'd underestimated the difficulty of this moment after seeing the maids in the palace baths, but now she felt true dread clutching at her stomach.

The palace maids. Given their constant... *enthusiasm* when it came to helping her, she saw them more as family. It was as if she'd seen her older sisters naked. But the women beyond this curtain would be total strangers.

Perhaps everything up to this point was training, but faced with the ultimate test, Mira was clearly rattled. She'd rushed into a situation where her stress was her own worst enemy.

While Mira tried to screw up her courage, the miao woman gestured to her basket of bath products and said, "Please enjoy! I will bring dinner when you are ready."

"Hrmm, sure sure..." Mira mumbled, distracted. Spurred by the cat woman's words, she took a few involuntary steps toward the entrance... and then a few more.

She was across the threshold.

The tatami-floored changing room was large, with wooden lockers lining the walls and

paper lanterns labeled BATH lighting the room. The skin of the women below shimmered sensually in their soft glow.

Mira surveyed the changing room. Women of all ages, shapes, and sizes were in various states of undress. Realizing that she was blocking the entrance, she scurried over to a corner locker.

She quickly found a vacant one with a key sticking out of its lock—a common setup in public baths. After opening the locker and shoving the basket in it, Mira immediately set about stripping.

*Hrmm... so far so good. I can do this.*

She heard families talking, friends frolicking, squeals that reminded her of Flicker, and the laughter of little girls. Mira put her underwear in the locker, grabbed a towel and soap from the basket, and locked it. She stretched the elastic ring attached to the key around her wrist and fled into the communal bath.

“Goodness...”

The miao woman had said that this was the establishment’s pride and joy. Mira could only gasp in agreement.

Everything was floored with tatami, even the washing stations. Back home this would be called a tatami bath or a mansion bath, and it was a truly rare sight outside of ryokan inns. It was Mira’s first time seeing one in person.

The humidity of the bath slicked her skin, and warmth enveloped her. The faint scent of the rushes from the mats mixed with the aroma of soap, creating the perfect sense of cleanliness. But that wasn’t all. Behind the massive bathtub was a wide panoramic view of a model Japanese garden.

Gentle lantern light illuminated the nighttime garden without upsetting its perfect blend of color. While most would simply feel a moment’s peace upon seeing the scene, it served as a stark reminder that Mira was in a different world. Nostalgia for home washed over her in a wave.

The sounds of flowing water and girls playing filled the space. After taking a few steps, Mira peered around warily and secured a washing station. There she found a silver faucet and shower—two more signs of growing technological advancement. Enjoying

the practicality, Mira rinsed herself off and pranced toward the tub.

In the center of the expansive tub towered a rock nearly two meters high. Hot water poured from the back of it as small children tried to scoop the waterfall into their hands or climb its slippery sides.

Just as Mira dipped her feet into the water, someone seized her shoulder. "Hold on! If you go in like that, your hair will get wet!"

She whipped around to see a tall, muscular woman smiling down at her. Appearing to be in her early twenties with short, lavender hair, the woman gave off serious big sister vibes.

"O-oh. I suppose you're right," stammered Mira. She'd forgotten it was poor manners to shed hair into the communal bath, so she undid the twin ponytails that Mariana had tied for her that morning.

Then her hands froze as she finally got a good look at the woman standing in front of her. She wasn't just beautiful, her breasts were on prominent display and well above average size.

*Hngh! This is too much!*

Mira somehow regained her composure and haphazardly wrapped her hair around her neck. "Thank you for the reminder," she said curtly.

As she tried to step into the bath, the woman grabbed her again. "Nope. You can't relax like that, honey! Here, I'll take care of it for you." The woman rather forcefully pulled Mira close, undid the hair tied around her neck, and skillfully began to braid it up atop her head. Her voice softened a little. "I've got a little sister with long hair like yours. I'm used to this. Can I borrow that ribbon?"

Mira responded with her usual "Hrmm" and offered a ribbon that had been tying her twin ponytails.

"Next, you do this... like this. There! All better now," the woman declared, satisfied.

Mira's new up-do was kept in place by the ribbon. She felt around her hair with both hands and found the woman's work was expertly done.

"Now I can truly relax," she said with a smile as her eyes lingered on the woman's body.  
"Thank you."

"No problem at all... Hm? What's the matter?" The woman cocked her head in curiosity, before realizing what was going on. Mira was caught. "Ooh, I see. Well, you are a growing girl, after all."

"Wha—?! No! You see, I—!"

The woman stooped forward and took a *very* close look at Mira's breasts. Mira tried desperately to look anywhere else.

"Yep, you're about the age where you'd start noticing. But it's okay! You're perfect just the way you are. I think you've got a big, bright future ahead of you!" The woman leaned in and put her hands on Mira's shoulders.

"Oh, erm, th-thanks..."

Now that she thought about it, *of course* nobody would think there were dirty thoughts in her adorable little head. Mira stifled her relief and *other* urges as she looked down at her own chest.

*Of course I'm perfect! I designed this, after all.*

## CHAPTER 2

**HAIR REARRANGED**, Mira excitedly put a foot in the bath. The warmth of the water crept up her leg, and her face loosened into a smile. She glanced at the girls soaking here and there as she waded in deeper to secure a corner, where she could gaze upon the Japanese garden up close.

“Truly fantastic.”

A water garden stretched out into the darkness for bathers’ viewing pleasure. At this time of night, the stone lanterns illuminated the garden with a faint light, as if gently lifting the curtain of dusk. Colorful koi fish swam throughout a crystal clear pond lined by mossy rocks, Japanese pine, and a bamboo fence.

The sound of a shishi-odoshi’s bamboo tube occasionally broke the night’s peace with a rhythmic *tonk* sound before fading into silence. Mira savored the ambiance and looked back toward the spa.

“Whoa! When did you get here?!” she cried, recoiling involuntarily.

The busty young woman from before had sat down next to Mira without her noticing. “Guess you finally noticed, huh?” she grinned.

Mira turned her eyes away from the magnetic pull of the woman’s assets. She casually placed her left arm on the edge of the tub and leaned against it. Finally, she asked, “So, what brings you over here?”

“Oh, nothing in particular! You seemed lonely. Like you needed some attention... y’know?” She wasn’t trying to wash Mira’s hair or her back, so at the very least she had some sense of personal boundaries. Or so it seemed, until she spotted the gleam of the silver bangle on Mira’s wrist and something changed in her eyes. She leaned in to focus on Mira’s left arm.

“Say now... isn’t that a User’s Bangle? You’re not some high-ranking adventurer, are you?”

“Hm? Ah, well, yes.” Mira was confused for a moment. Still unused to calling her

Control Terminal a User's Bangle, it took a few seconds for her to realize there was only one bangle on her otherwise-naked body.

Mira's answer only excited the woman further.

"No foolin'. I wish I had a User's Bangle. I hear they're super convenient! Y'know, I'm D-Rank, but I'm getting close to C. Ugh, *so* jealous of you." She circled Mira like a wolf with an innocent smile. After looking up and down Mira's young body, she seemed to realize something important had gone unsaid. "Oh! Um, my name is Aselia. And you are Miss...?"

"Mira. No 'Miss.' Just Mira."

"Okay, gotcha! So Mira, honey, what's your class?!" With the ice broken, Aselia dove right back into the matter at hand, invading Mira's personal space until they were face-to-face.

Slightly excited by the sensation of Aselia's warm breath on her cheeks, Mira calmed herself by locking her gaze on the nearby garden. She managed to say, "I'm a summoner," before her eyes fell back on Aselia's breasts.

After a short, dumbfounded silence from Aselia, the woman managed to say, "Oh, a summoner, huh? I've never worked with one. Is the class getting trendy with the new kids?" Then she added cheerfully, "By the way, I'm a paladin!"

"Oho, like Solomon, then?" Mira said casually, prompting Aselia to break out into a big, almost childish smile.

"Wanna know something? When I was a little girl, Mom always told me about His Majesty. He's my hero and the reason why I picked my class!" Aselia fidgeted bashfully.

Legends of Solomon's exploits as a paladin were told as bedtime stories. No wonder he'd become a role model for the young woman.

"Oho, so you admire that fool. Have you tried to imitate his fighting style as well?" Mira thought of Solomon's unpaladin-like ferocity and worried whether Aselia was being led down a dangerous path.

"I'm trying to match him, but I've got a long way to go," Aselia affirmed, apparently knowledgeable about his methods. She looked Mira in the eye and frowned seriously.

"Also, you can't talk about kings like that, honey. Especially not His Majesty, King Solomon!"

"*His Majesty*," eh...? Ha!

For most people, that would seem like a fair admonishment. King Solomon was a big deal—a man worthy of respect. That was how citizens of Alcait saw Solomon, at least. But to Mira, he was just a good friend she'd played an online game with for the past few years. The idea of fawning over him when he wasn't around was just... *weird*.

"A little late for me to start doing that..."

Something in Aselia's gaze changed. "Ha ha, you kiiinda sound like you must be close to him. Like you're friends with His Majesty... But nah, no way! Unlessss...?" Her voice was joking, but her eyes were searching Mira for any sign that she might be onto something. Her hands tightened on Mira's shoulders and she leaned in even closer.

Mira broke under the pressure of having a naked woman this close. She nodded vigorously, eyes wide as saucers. "I knew him before he became king. We're like friends." Completely overwhelmed, the truth came spilling out.

Aselia frowned and glared dubiously at the small girl. "His Majesty became king more than thirty years ago. You don't look a day over—"

"Ha! And does Solomon?"

Mira was right—Solomon still had the body of a little boy despite his long reign as king. Aselia muttered in agreement and looked the girl up and down again.

"You look like a normal enough girl to me. I don't see any elf or fairy features..." Aselia hadn't seen any long ears or wings while tying up Mira's hair. "Juuust a sec."

Cocking her head, Aselia took Mira's upper lip and pulled it up to inspect her teeth. There was no evidence of fangs.

Mira suddenly had to wonder what race she, Solomon, and Luminaria would be counted among. They had once been human, but humans grew older as the years slipped past. She only had begun pondering when Aselia's eyes widened.

"Then... could it be? Are you a celestial being like His Majesty?!" Aselia blurted out,

still managing to keep her voice low. “Is it true, Mira, honey?”

“Calm yourself for a moment. What are these *celestial beings* you’re referring to?” Mira asked. She’d managed to break free of Aselia’s grip, but now the woman was scooting closer again.

“You mean you’ve never heard...? Hmm... Celestial beings are people like His Majesty who all appeared around the same time. Unlike long-lived beings, they look like normal humans but never change physically with age. They say a lot of kings are celestial beings. Plenty of adventurers, artisans, and other famous people, too. Some say the heavens sent these people as envoys.”

“Hrmm. So that’s what it means.”

Celestial beings were former players. It made sense. Anyone would start to ask questions when specific people didn’t change at all in thirty whole years. They couldn’t be human, but neither were they one of the known long-lived races. At least the public hadn’t decided they were monsters.

That fate had been a real possibility. Doubt was once cast on her kind, but they had gotten off easily because so many former players had helped the people of this world. Thanks to their work, celestial beings were accepted as a new race and lauded for their incredible power.

“So? Is it true?” Aselia leaned in expectantly.

“You may be right, but it feels odd to think of it that way. In any case, I do have proof that Solomon is a friend of mine,” Mira said, producing the medal that Solomon had awarded her from her inventory.

Aselia turned over the medallion in her hands with great interest. “Wow, it’s true. It has His Majesty’s name engraved on it and everything. So you really are...”

Mira still wasn’t sure how other people recognized the medal as being genuine, or how it linked directly to Solomon. But whatever magic it held certainly worked on Aselia. The paladin gazed at it reverently.

After a long look, Aselia reluctantly returned the medal to Mira. Now she was entirely enchanted with the tiny summoner. “I’ve never seen a celestial being up close! You’re just so adorable. It doesn’t fit how I imagined a ‘celestial being.’”

Aselia did the mental math. Celestial beings were the same folk as Solomon, which meant they were to be respected. If Mira was a celestial being, then she must have known Solomon before he became king.

"Mira, honey... er! *Lady Mira*. If you know His Majesty's past, then I beg of you to tell me how he trained before his ascension."

Aselia kneeled and bowed her head all the way to the floor... which happened to be under water. The sudden act drew the attention of other women nearby, and Mira could hardly bear their gazes.

"Of course! Yes! Now would you cut it out, please?!" Mira yanked Aselia out of the hot water. But the woman couldn't hear her while her head was submerged, so she tried to go back under. "I'll tell you anything you want! Please, just knock it off with the dramatics!"

Mira pulled harder, all the while trying to not think about what parts of Aselia's body she was having to wrap her arms around to bring the paladin back to the surface.

"You mean it?! Oh, do you?! Thank you so much!"

"And knock it off with the *Lady Mira* stuff, too. I am merely an adventurer; nothing has changed between us," Mira said, looking off into the garden again to regain her composure.

"Okay, sure. If you say so, Mira, honey. So, how did His Majesty train?" Aselia sat on her knees, ready to take in every single word.

"I will tell you, but... why are you so insistent on knowing? Surely this is beyond mere interest."

"Weeell... the thing is, I've kinda plateaued. I'm stuck in D-Rank, and it seems like everything's going wrong. Like here, and here." Aselia began pointing to scars on various parts of her body, a few on her ribs and shoulders... others in more delicate areas. "I have to pay a lot for medicine, and none of my Adventurers' Guild Union requests work out. Like I said, I chose paladin because I admired His Majesty. But lately, I feel like I've just hit a wall."

Aselia's face clouded over, and she looked down sadly. Mira nodded in understanding.

"Like Solomon, eh? He's an unorthodox fighter, I wouldn't suggest using him as a standard."

"I've met a lot of other paladins now, so I know that. But His Majesty is still number one in my heart! So please... let's say it's just for reference. Tell me."

C-Rank adventurers were known as veteran adventurers because there was a sharp rise in difficulty between C and D—a wall of power that was too high to surmount by strength or knowledge alone. D-Rank included some requests meant to test one's metaphorical wall-climbing ability.

"Well, okay," Mira surrendered. "If you admire Solomon, then do you have an elemental sword?"

"Of course! My fighting style is specialized for elemental release just like his. Though my weapon is only a crimson straight sword..."

"Hrmm. A crimson straight sword, eh?"

Specializing for elemental release meant the elemental sword's capabilities would greatly affect her fighting power. Still, a crimson straight sword ought to be fine. It was a standard elemental sword with the power of fire. Easy to handle, no quirks, and with real longevity.

Mira wondered what Solomon had that Aselia didn't. If the sword wasn't the problem, then the problem must be behind the sword. "You say you've plateaued. Can you tell me more?"

Aselia smiled sadly and continued, "Lately, my swordplay has been abysmal. I can get a good hit in, but I can never finish the enemy off. I take a hefty counterattack, and in the end, I fail. Aargh, this didn't happen before!"

She slapped the surface of the water in frustration.

"Hrmm. Swordplay problem, eh?" muttered Mira, wiping drops of water off her face. She thought back on the effect of the paladin's elemental release.

Elemental release unleashed the power latent in a weapon or other piece of equipment, temporarily magnifying its attuned element. In this case, the crimson straight sword would become a blade of fire that burned the enemy.

"I've been thinking of ways to solve this myself," Aselia continued. "The crimson straight sword is what I've been using since I was a newbie, so I think I need a change of pace."

"Ho ho. Well, if you have something better, that'll surely improve your odds. What did you have in mind?"

Elemental release became much more effective with stronger weapons. Of the fire-aligned swords, the crimson straight sword was low-middling. Not awful, but she could probably find something better with some effort.

Aselia puffed out her ample chest and proudly declared, "A spirit blade! It's my only choice."

Spirit blades were extremely compatible with the paladin's elemental release. Aselia had the right idea. If she obtained a spirit blade, she would make leaps and bounds as a paladin.

"Spirit blades, hrmm? One would be optimal for a build specialized for elemental release, but I hope you understand that they aren't very easily obtained."

All spirit weapons gained their power from the spirits' favor. It was akin to them cutting away parts of their selves. To obtain these weapons, one needed to have a longstanding relationship with a spirit or to be blessed with great luck.

"Yeah, I thought so, too. But just between us..." Aselia leaned close to Mira's ear and lowered her voice to a whisper. "There's a port city in the direction of Ozstein. I hear they have shops that occasionally sell spirit weapons for 30 percent off market price!"

Aselia then pulled away again and sunk deeper into the water. "I've got a lot of money saved up," she explained. "I've cleared my requests so far with minimal expenses; the only expensive thing I've bought was the crimson straight sword. Even if a high-quality spirit sword is too much, I can afford a low-quality one with a 30 percent discount. I'm on my way there now! Apparently, you can get close by train."

Aselia grinned like a little girl, unable to contain her excitement.

"They have such shops now? How the times have changed," Mira mused.

Buying a spirit weapon with money. Indeed, that was one method of obtaining them.

But given their usefulness and rarity, they fetched unbelievable prices. In some cases, buying an elemental weapon for the same price would be more efficient. But spirit swords were undoubtedly powerful.

Each weapon came with unique traits based on the spirit that blessed the sword. If a weapon had the power of a flying spirit, then the wielder would find themselves much lighter on their feet. In the case of a violent spirit, swinging its weapon might cause power to rage forth. If one had armor from that very same spirit, it would unleash powerful counterattacks when struck. The value of each blessing was part of the spirit weapon's charm.

That was why they synergized so well with paladins. During a paladin's elemental release, this power would be magnified. Mira had seen Solomon in action with a spirit weapon before. And if Aselia had a chance of getting a spirit weapon, Mira would not stop her—it was sure to make her a stronger fighter.

However, Mira had to wonder if Aselia was too fixated on the sword. After all, paladins were defined by their skills at defense, not offense.

Mira looked up and down Aselia's body. She was visibly scarred in several places. Many of them were on her upper body, which should be easily defensible by a shield. Aselia herself had said that she sustained many injuries from counterattacks, which suggested that she was too focused on her sword.

A paladin's primary defense was, naturally, their shield. But Aselia had said that the crimson straight sword was her only major expense.

"Incidentally, what sort of shield do you use?" Mira asked, keeping in mind that Aselia might be using a totally acceptable shield.

"Shield? Umm, just the kite shield I bought from a weapons shop before I started my journey," Aselia answered, cocking her head slightly.

"Hrmm," Mira murmured.

The elemental release paladin build had a tried-and-true way of fighting. Release the shield's element, block an attack, and strike when the enemy's been blown off guard by the shield's effect. This was the foundation from which all paladin skill rotations began, including Solomon's.

“What element does the shield have?”

“None. It’s a totally normal one. Do you think that’s why?”

It seemed she would have to relearn to fight from square one. Mira dug every detail of Solomon’s journey out from the depths of her mind. If Aselia wanted to be like Solomon, then she ought to take this lesson seriously.

“To the best of my recollection, Solomon procured an elemental shield before an elemental sword. It took quite a while before he obtained the sword, in fact. His fighting style was, to be frank, pretty *boring* back then.”

“Huh?! But His Majesty is known for...” Unable to believe it, Aselia recalled everything she knew about Solomon. He was known for his masterful *swordplay*! She wanted to call Mira a liar... but Mira had known Solomon from the start.

“Trust me when I say that the Solomon of today started with the same paladin building blocks as anyone,” Mira assured her.

“The fundamentals, huh? If a celestial being says so, then I have to trust you.” Aselia seemed to be chewing it over and finally swallowed Mira’s words. In search of motivation, she finally asked, “So how do I compare to His Majesty?”

“Hrmm. I have yet to see you in battle, so I cannot say for certain. But if you wish to follow in Solomon’s footsteps, you should procure an elemental shield before a spirit blade. We fought together often, so I *can* say with certainty that his fighting style stemmed from using a shield alone.”

“Okay... *okay*. You’re right. I’ve always wondered if I made the right call about the shield, you know.”

“I’m surprised that you’ve made it this far...”

Aselia’s rash of recent injuries had left her with niggling doubts. Still, she’d kept charging forward, never daring to stop and go back to the drawing board. Light now shone onto Aselia’s lost path. Mira’s knowledge of Solomon’s past made Aselia long to return to her roots. The truth she’d refused to accept began to illuminate the way to her future.

“I’d really love it if you told me what elemental shield His Majesty started with!” Aselia

put her hands together, pleading... which also pressed her breasts together. Mira's eyes wandered as she struggled to maintain her focus.

She finally sputtered, "I believe it was the ruby stone shield."

Mira had witnessed Solomon obtaining his first elemental shield because he had dragged her along. The ruby stone shield was a fire-attuned shield obtainable from a special monster. She reminisced about their journey. The stone shield came in all eight elemental varieties, and naturally, she had helped him obtain each one. She also had to chuckle at what a chore it had been.

"The ruby stone shield was where His Majesty started off. Okay. Thank you, Mira, honey. I'll start off the same way!" Aselia declared, determination plain on her face.

"I won't stop you, but they are rather poor options compared to other elemental shields. You may be able to find something a little better."

"No! I want to walk the same path as His Majesty!" Aselia insisted.

Mira could hardly do anything but offer her support. She smiled, knowing that Solomon would love to hear this story.

# CHAPTER 3

SKIN NOW PRUNEY from the long talk, Mira exited the bath and sat at a corner washing station with a wooden pail in hand. After she filled the pail with hot water and submerged a towel, she noticed her hair had suddenly been untied.

Mira looked up to see Aselia neatly folding the ribbon that had tied her hair. She also couldn't fail to notice her magnificent breasts looming overhead.

"Urk... Ah, you again. Did you need anything else?"

"You did me a favor, sweetie. It's the least I can do, but how about I wash your hair and back for you?" Celestial being or not, Mira still reminded Aselia of her little sister.

Though Aselia and Mariana had totally different personalities, she reminded Mira of her attendant. And now that she thought of it, it might feel nice to have someone else wash her hair. Mira had no reason to refuse.

"Do as you wish," she answered.

Now armed with consent, Aselia grabbed the showerhead and began soaking Mira's silver hair with practiced motions. Though at first it tickled when her fingers touched Mira's scalp, soon the young summoner closed her eyes at the pleasure of it.

And Aselia got to enjoy the feeling of being a big sister again.

\* \* \*

Once she was fully cleaned, Mira soaked her now-cool body in the tub again to warm up. She looked back toward the view of the garden. The rhythmic sound of the shishi-odoshi was all too soothing. After relaxing in the water a bit too long, she was once again pruned.

*I'd best get out and have dinner.*

Finally satisfied, Mira took the next bamboo *tonk* as her signal to get up. Aselia, who had been relaxing next to her, followed suit. As Mira carefully towed herself off,

Aselia swung her towel like a flail, drying herself off in slapdash swipes.

The two women departed the baths together. Aselia dodged the other patrons and snuck toward her shelf in the corner of the changing room.

Mira stood before a mirror and used Ethereal Arts to dry her hair as she gazed upon herself. She was amazed again by the visible speed with which her hair dried.

*What a strange sight this is.*

Her dripping silver hair regained its silky texture in a matter of seconds. Another quick flip of the hair sent more drops of water falling like a spring rain upon her flushed skin. Mira found her reflection quite alluring. When she swept her hair in front to hide her breasts, she was quite satisfied with how she looked—like a photo from a gravure shoot.

*I'm... sexy.*

After her moment of self-discovery, Mira grabbed a bath towel from her locker and savored its softness in the post-bath afterglow.

“Hm? Still haven’t changed clothes?” Aselia appeared before Mira again, now clothed and holding her basket under one arm. She wore a lavender yukata, the cleavage beneath its open top even more suggestive than when she was nude.

“Hrmm. No, not yet.” After tearing her eyes away from Aselia’s chest yet again, Mira grabbed a pair of underwear from a bag pulled from her inventory.

“Oh, incredible! You just used the Item Box of your User’s Bangle, right? Lucky! I want one, too!” Aselia sighed wistfully.

When Mira put it away, Aselia flushed and stared enviously at the gleaming silver bangle. To Aselia, an adventurer mere steps away from C-Rank, the User’s Bangle—essential proof that one was a veteran—was the symbol of everything she aspired to be.

“I’ll get myself one of those soon!” Aselia declared with a wide smile.

Mira looked fondly upon those who were willing to put in true effort to grow stronger, even if she’d never say it out loud.

Aselia watched as Mira reached for her usual outfit. “Hm? You don’t wanna wear a yukata?”

“Well, I don’t happen to own one.”

Aselia turned and dashed toward a closet in the corner of the room. She opened it, grabbed something inside, and ran back to Mira.

“This one ought to fit you!” Aselia handed over a pale green yukata.

“Am I allowed to simply wear it?”

“Of course! It’s in the changing room, after all.”

The ryokan had prepared them and set them there, sorted by size, for guests to use. Aselia also explained that they even had ones tailored to fit other races, such as miaos.

Mira finally assented, slightly amazed, and accepted the yukata.

*So... how do I put this on?*

Despite growing up in Japan, this was uncharted territory. Mira donned it sloppily, assuming that she could just put her arms in the sleeves and tie the sash. Aselia was right; it was the perfect length, the sleeves hanging just over the backs of Mira’s hands. After closing the lapels, she attempted to tie the sash.

“Hold on. You’ve got the collar folded backward.” Aselia circled in front of Mira and began tidying her up. She skillfully straightened out wrinkled parts and evened out the front. Finally, she tied the sash, made some minor adjustments, and stepped away to get a full view of Mira. Smiling at her handiwork, Aselia put a hand on Mira’s head. “There! All done.”

Mira knew she was being treated like a child, but she didn’t swat the woman’s hand away. Instead, she sighed and allowed Aselia to have her moment.

\* \* \*

Upon changing and leaving the dressing room, Mira browsed the souvenir and table-game stalls just outside. Other customers who’d just left the baths sat around simply enjoying the calm.

What was this area lit by paper lanterns? Her old world? Her new world? Or somewhere in between? Mira felt as though she'd wandered into another dimension. She reached over to the table and picked up a familiar object: flat and round, with a stick attached.

*A table tennis paddle. The owner of this inn is undoubtedly a former player!*

The Japanese furnishings, the table tennis, the very concept of a ryokan full of old-fashioned staples... this must be the work of someone she once knew. Mira was amazed at how former players had advanced both technologically and culturally, and decided it was only right to enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Aselia rushed over and offered Mira one of the bottles she had brought back. "Here, Mira, honey. Call this a token of my gratitude. It's perfect when you've just gotten out of the bath."

"Ooh. Very wellchilled!" Mira accepted the bottle, which was labeled COFFEE MILK. Truly an after-bath staple.

Aselia's eyes alighted on the paddle in Mira's other hand. "Ah! You wanna play?" Her eyes narrowed like a hawk who'd found its prey.

"Oh, erm, not especially," Mira answered before putting the paddle back on the table, causing Aselia to deflate. "Do you know the game?"

"Of course! I'm pretty good, too!" Aselia picked up the paddle and took a practice swing. It whistled through the air as her yukata did a heroic job of restraining her bust. Upon seeing Mira's gaze, Aselia smiled innocently. "Have you ever played, Mira, honey?"

"Hrmm, once in a while. But you're quite knowledgeable. Do you come here often?"

Yukata, post-bath coffee milk, and table tennis—Aselia seemed well-acquainted with all of them. Mira liked the woman even more for loving the culture of her old home.

"It's my first time at this ryokan, but Japanese-style places are common."

"Japanese-style, hmm?"

"Oh, I love Japanese culture, y'know. It's really calming. I know how to tie all

kimonos—not just yukatas! My master taught me. Oh, and my master is the one who taught me about Japanese culture,” Aselia prattled on.

Mira was surprised at how her country’s culture had proliferated through this world, but she was happy to see it.

“C’mon, Mira, honey. Drink up before it gets warm! You have to put one hand on your hip and gulp it all down at once!” Aselia said, striking the pose. She motioned with her eyes for Mira to do the same.

Amused by her innocence, Mira struck the same pose. Feet shoulder-width apart, left hand on hip, she gulped down the coffee milk.



*Something still feels a little off...*

“Are you going by train tomorrow, Mira, honey?”

“Yes, that’s the plan.”

“Knew it! Which way are you going?”

“Off to Alisfarius. What of your plans? Do you plan on looking for a new shield?”

After the two finished their drinks, they tossed the bottles in the shop’s recycling bin. Nearly everyone staying at the inn was traveling by railroad. Aselia had been intending to head toward Ozstein the next day, but that was only because of her plan to buy a spirit blade. Now that she’d spoken to Mira and opted to find a ruby stone shield instead, that plan had undoubtedly changed.

“I was thinking of going to Lunatic Lake, His Majesty’s own city. They have a market full of elemental weapons. I should search there first.”

“Oho! I wasn’t aware such places existed.” Mira still hadn’t seen much of the capital. Smiling widely, she added the market to her mental list of places she’d need to visit.

“When I’m C-Rank, could you tell me more about His Majesty?” Aselia ventured.

“Very well. As a celebration, why don’t I teach you some of his training methods as well?”

“Really?! Yay! I’ll do my best!” Aselia jumped for joy at the counteroffer. Mira’s eyes were once again drawn to her bouncing breasts. “By the way... you’re traveling alone, right?”

“Uh, hrmm... yes,” Mira answered, trying to slowly slide her gaze away to avoid looking unnatural. She had built up some courage by now, but she still couldn’t converse with her eyes on the woman’s chest.

“You’re going to Alisfarius on a request? Will you be fine alone?”

Aselia could judge Mira’s strength based on the Adventurers’ Guild Union’s well-established C ranking. She also knew that, as a celestial being, this apparent child was older than her. But her sisterly instinct had been triggered.

Mira flashed a fearless grin. “You need not worry about me. I’m tougher than I look.”

\* \* \*

“Okay. See you later!”

“Hrmm. May we meet again.”

Adventurers could contact each other through the Adventurers’ Guild Union at any time. After making Mira promise that they’d meet again after she became a C-Rank, Aselia departed with determination in her step. A textbook on shield techniques was apparently deep in her luggage, and she was about to dig it out and read every last word of it.

Now alone, Mira took a long, hard look at the sketched map affixed to the wall.

*Where was my room, again?*

She had followed the staff member here, but she didn’t remember the way back. SKY ROOM was written on her key, so she searched until she found it on the map. After a short while, Mira memorized the path to her lodgings and set off for dinner.

\* \* \*

“Welcome back. Dinner will be ready soon. Please make yourself comfortable while you wait.”

When they saw Mira, the staff gathered in her room began setting out trays and other tableware. Mira nodded to them, sat in front of the table, and watched them work. Several colorful earthenware dishes were set out, all beautiful enough for even an amateur to appreciate.

Pickled vegetables and rolled omelets were placed before her. Mira watched the staff members’ tails swish busily as the sliding door opened and the main course was brought in. First came tempura, followed by miso soup, braised dishes, and finally white rice.

Mira’s heart leapt at the nostalgia-inducing foods. Even their presentation was luxurious. Truly, this meal did Japanese culture proud.

"Would you like an explanation of the dishes?" The miao staff asked once the food was perfectly arranged.

"Yes, please!" Mira replied. She was incredibly interested in how Japanese cuisine had been replicated in this world.

"Let us begin here. These rolled omelets are made from the eggs of garden birds and enriched with the stock of smoked black tuna. Next to them is frost bison meat simmered in soy sauce, vinegar, and ginger." Her voice became more impassioned as she spoke at length about each and every item and their specialized preparations. Her attention to detail made Mira wonder if she'd made the meal herself.

Warming up to her subject, the staff member started digressing toward other culinary topics. Tearful rants about how their fresh-caught sushi boat had to be transported from faraway coasts. Miniature lectures about how dried fish is lovely but doesn't measure up to fresh.

Another staff member interrupted before she could wind herself up any more, "Now, please enjoy your meal. Ring the bell once you have finished eating, and we will come to clear your dishes. Excuse us."

With a refined bow, she dragged her coworker out of the Sky Room. It didn't take long at all for Mira to hear them outside the door.

"How many times do I have to tell you to keep it short?!"

"I'm sorryyy!"

She snickered at their exchange and glanced toward the bell they had mentioned. It was exactly like the one Solomon had used to summon Suleiman. Beside it she spotted a wall scroll displaying the words *PEACE OF MIND* next to a lovely flower arrangement. Mira returned her gaze to the table and heaved a sigh.

*The old world or the new... some hotel art stays the same.*

Mira found her "peace of mind" by savoring Japanese food for the first time in so very long.

After pouring hot water from the kettle into her teapot, Mira watched the tea leaves unfurl and filled her teacup. The scent of tea wafted into her nostrils, and she took a

sip before sticking her tongue out.

“Hot...”

Mira decided to take a breather after dinner to let the tea cool.

When she flicked the bell with her nail, she heard no noise. But soon the two staff members from before came to whisk her dishes away.

\* \* \*

The miao woman opened the door to the next room and peeked in. “We’ve laid out a futon for you in the next room. When you wake in the morning, please call us with the bell, and we will bring you breakfast.”

“Hrmm, got it.”

Having a look for herself, Mira spied not only the futon, but a comfortable-looking quilt with a gorgeous dragon design on it.

By the time the staff had cleared dinner, she had downed her second cup of tea. Mira yawned and stretched.

“Time for bed,” she muttered to herself and headed for the bathroom to find a Japanese-style toilet. Amazed at how committed they were to the Japanese aesthetic, she hiked up the bottom of her yukata.

After finishing her business, she grabbed the complimentary toothbrush at the sink and prepared for bedtime.

After slipping into bed, she looked out at the twinkling stars through the wood-framed window. When she closed her eyes, she was enveloped in calm as the scent of incense wafted through the room.

Wrapped in a soft blanket on the futon, Mira’s breath turned into a quiet, peaceful rhythm.

# CHAPTER 4

SUNLIGHT PAINTED THE MORNING mist with a soft glow. As Mira slept in the tatami-floored Japanese room, a crisp chime sounded somewhere outside.

"Hrmh... What was that?" She pulled her head out of the blanket and squinted about.

"Continental railroad service status announcement. The Counterclockwise Loop train departed from Woodholm Station at 8:15 a.m. Expected arrival time is 12:45 p.m. Again..." It was an informational broadcast from the station's PA system. Train arrival times were not perfectly precise to the minute every time, so the loudspeaker was broadcasting arrivals and departures through the entire town.

Mira opened her System Menu and checked the current time. It displayed 8:30 a.m.

*Still got four hours and change.*

She groggily got out of bed and stretched as she walked over to the window. Rubbing her sleepy eyes, she surveyed the outside world. People of all sorts walked about the city, and the station was already bustling.

Vacantly staring at the wave of people, Mira remembered the vast shopping district inside the station. It would take some time to look around there.

Excited by the prospect of wandering around the shops until her departure, she stepped back from the window, threw off her yukata—which was already half-falling off by now—and got to her morning business.

She washed her face at the sink, which resembled a shrine's water basin. After that, she used the Japanese-style toilet once more and changed into her technomancy robes.

"Oops. Right, right," she murmured, stopping to flick the bell next to the flower arrangement.

Mira finished changing, brewed tea, and sat on a cushion. She spent a lazy, peaceful moment simply doing nothing as she waited for breakfast.

"How tranquil," she muttered. Then she wondered if this was how a retired person spent every day. She felt oddly sad for a moment.

Soon, a calm, eloquent voice came from the hallway. "Good morning. We've brought breakfast."

Mira got up and opened the door to allow the staff inside.

The meal they placed on her table was a truly traditional Japanese breakfast. Mira sat through another lecture as it was laid out, then began her meal by mixing her natto.

\* \* \*

Once her belly was full, Mira glared at herself in the mirror with a ribbon in hand. She couldn't tie her hair as well as Mariana did.

*Nngh... Those twin ponytails were as cute as could be,* Mira agonized.

A few weeks had passed since her arrival in this world, and she had begun to get used to her new self. Though this was her ideal form, she realized that others might think her vain if they could hear her thoughts. After some trial and error, she finally managed to get her hair straightened out. Mira posed before the mirror.

Now ready for the day, she surveyed the room to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything and reluctantly left the Sky Room.

After getting only a tiny bit lost, she found the lobby. But she turned right around when she spotted the ledge at the building's front entrance. Her room key was also the key to her shoe locker, and she couldn't leave without its contents.

Now with shoes in hand, Mira returned her key to the desk. "Thanks for everything."

"Thank you for choosing us. By the way, Miss... do you plan to leave with your hair like that?" The receptionist asked, a look of slight worry coloring her usual customer-service smile.

Mira felt her hair to make sure it was still in place. It wasn't undone anywhere...

"Um... Should I?" she asked.

"May I have a moment of your time?" The woman replied, offering a gentle smile as she took a handheld mirror out of her desk.

Mira had somehow managed to tier her hair up in the most disastrous way possible. Setting the mirror down, the receptionist stepped around the side of the desk to render aid.

Deflated by her failure, Mira stood patiently as the lady fixed it anew. Upon looking in the mirror again, it was clearly much improved. The receptionist gently flipped Mira's hair, which fluttered like feathers, to check her handiwork.

"That should do it!"

"Much obliged."

\* \* \*

Mira left Starry Villa and headed straight for Silverside Station. There, she once again looked up at the massive structure that was easily as large as Alcait Academy.

Mira passed through the wide main doors. Stores continued all the way to the back of the station like a shopping district, but near the entrance there were a few counters labeled TICKETING. She made her way over to learn more about the railroad.

"May I ask you a question?" she asked, her twin ponytails bobbing as she poked her head over the counter.

"Of course," a female agent greeted her, with officious politeness. "Please feel free to ask me anything."

"I wish to travel by rail, but this is my first time. How does this work?"

"I see. First, allow me to explain ticketing," she replied, her smile unfaltering as she showed Mira a display with three tickets on it. Instead of paper, they were made of a material like the one used for dungeon permits. "There are three kinds of tickets, one for each seating class. We sell all three at this counter. In order of increasing price, they are economy class, premium class, and first class. You will need one ticket per station, and their prices are 3,000 ducats, 10,000 ducats, and 20,000 ducats respectively."

"Hrmm. One per station, eh?" Mira grumped as she looked upon the three tickets. *Very*

*different from Japan.*

They differed in color and the text written on them. Economy class's amenities were easy to imagine as someone who grew up in a working-class family. But Mira had always dreamed of premium and first class.

"I wish to go to Alisfarius," Mira said. "How many stations away is that?"

"That would be five stations from Silverside, making a total of 15,000 ducats for economy class," the woman answered with a smile.

"Then I would like five of these." Mira pointed at the first-class ticket and set ten mithril coins on the counter—100,000 ducats.

The woman at the desk made a slight choking noise, but her smile quickly returned. "Yes, of course. To confirm: you would like *five* first-class tickets?"

"Indeed." Mira nodded. Once she had accepted the tickets, she put them in her waist pouch.

The receptionist watched, seemingly searching for words. "First class tickets are quite expensive. I would avoid letting others see those if I were you," she finally warned in a hushed tone.

"Right. I'll be careful," Mira agreed. She turned her waist pouch just a little closer to her belly.

She thanked the receptionist and strolled toward the line of shops, wondering with excitement what first class would be like.

\* \* \*

Mira checked the time in her System Menu; it was now 9:30 a.m.

Knowing that the train would not arrive for more than three hours and faced with an even larger shopping mall than she'd expected, her heart leapt for joy.

The shops lining the walls of the two-floor atrium seemed to supply any want or need. Mira walked into the nearest store, ready to enjoy shopping until her departure time. She would use these three hours well.

The first shop was named Moon and Towers Boutique of Silverside, and seemed to be doing quite well. It was a chain souvenir shop and had many customers inside. Displayed quite prominently were nine very familiar-looking robes in child sizes.

Mira winced.

They were those terrible replicas of the Wise Men's robes. Chagrin aside, Mira couldn't help but notice the uneven distribution of stock. All the other Wise Men had at least five in on the shelf, and there was blatant bias toward Luminaria in particular.

*Why do they only have three of mine? Surely that means they sell the most of mine, right? Right. I must be the crowd favorite.*

At least that's what she told herself.

After the clothing racks, Mira continued to the food shelves. They seemed very popular. And *very* expensive, for some reason.

The first to catch her eye was a sleeve of cookies made with jam from the famous Alcaitian muscat grape. An emerald-green dollop of sweet-tart muscat jam was placed in the center of each plain sugar cookie.

There were also muscat candies and muscat drinks.

Mira continued on. The next shelf was full of another genre of common souvenirs. Pennants labeled *Nine Wise Men*, pins with the nicknames of the Nine Wise Men and King Solomon, mini paper lanterns labeled *Kingdom of Alcait*, and even replica Linked Silver Towers, each shining with artisanal skill. Mira wouldn't know what to do with them even if she'd bought them, yet strangely, they had most of the customers' attention.

Ultimately, Mira bought muscat cookies for 600 ducats and left the souvenir shop.

Next, she visited a bookstore. Given the contents of the store, it was full of people who looked like mages, some accompanied by brawny—and bored-looking—warriors.

Mira plucked a book from one of the stacks. The cover read *Introduction to Magic*, and the book presented the fundamentals of magical catalysts and maneuvering for newbies. Indeed, it was a basic introduction.

Mira realized that they sold all sorts of introduction guides. Enclosed at the very end of each was a pamphlet for Alcait Academy, not-so-subtly suggesting that readers should enroll if they wished to learn more.

She put the book back and smirked at the martial arts guidebooks piled next to it. They taught the basics of swordplay and spear-handling. Of course, each one had a pamphlet for a dojo enclosed at the end.

*Bold marketing indeed.* More amazed than anything, Mira headed further into the store.

She spotted magic encyclopedias, botanical encyclopedias, sightseeing guides, and collections of heroic tales. Yet further back, she found a shelf of picture books. They seemed to be children's literature and novels, the most conspicuous among them being *The Story of the Nine Wise Men*.

In a far corner—well out of reach of children's hands—she spied dubious titles for adults only. Mira tried desperately to reach them, much to the horror of onlooking customers and staff.

She finally gave up in apparent surrender, prompting a collective sigh of relief. A moment later she used an Immortal Arts technique to hop up and retrieve a book. One staff member panicked and dashed over to pluck it from her grasp.

*Argh... Confiscated, eh?*

No matter. Her next discovery caused her to immediately lose interest. It wasn't high literature for adults; it was amusement for the masses.

She had found *manga*!

*So many manga I've never seen before... I can't wait to dig through these!*

No doubt this aspect of Japanese culture had been brought over by former players. Of course, the titles were unfamiliar to her; every single cover was new. Mira grabbed each series from the shelf and checked their covers and summaries. Now that she was excitedly looking through the manga shelf, the crowd finally relaxed and began to disperse.

In the end, she gathered several series' first volumes and a single map of Holy

Kingdom Alisfarius to buy.

\* \* \*

Afterward, she looked around many other shops. The chain store, Denoir Trading, which specialized in useful tools for adventurers, was especially interesting. She glanced around other jumbled souvenir stores, variety shops, drug stores, and everything in between.

Waiting on a train was a fine time to enjoy window shopping.

Some time had passed since the beginning of her tour. Just as she'd extricated herself from a dress shop, Mira heard a familiar chime.

"Continental railroad service status announcement. The Counterclockwise Loop train is en route to this station. Expected arrival time is in one hour. Again..."

"One hour, eh?" Hearing the announcement, she calculated how much more retail adventuring she could do and resumed.

Apparently spurred by the announcement, crowds began flowing to the second floor via nearby staircases. Mira found herself caught in the torrent and allowed it to carry her upstairs. This new floor was lined with restaurants and shops that specialized in the kind of delicious bento lunches only sold at train stations.

The intermingling smells made her stomach rumble. Mira remembered the true joy of travel by train: train station bentos. That singular moment of extreme bliss in which one set upon their chosen bento as the sights rushed by. Before she realized it, Mira had begun examining every bento there.

The first looked to be a Western-style restaurant with pastel colors. It usually ran as a restaurant, but they switched to selling bentos close to arrival times. They mainly sold meat, fish, and veggie sandwiches. The many colors seemed popular among women. Mira pushed her way through the growing throng of ladies and checked out the next store.

The second floor continued to fill with more and more people as Mira visited Hot 'n' Tasty Meals. It seemed to only sell bentos; their lunch varieties including fried chicken, seaweed, grilled meat, and meatballs—solid crowd pleasers. With their low prices and large portions, adventurers were their main customer base. Mira spotted a burly

warrior buying two seaweed lunches.

*I never realized how much I missed station food.*

Though tempted by the fried chicken meal, Mira continued on. The next store was rather fancy, with elaborate options: omurice with demi-glace, cabbage rolls simmered in tomato broth, Scotch eggs with herbs, and so on.

Mira put her nose as close as she could to the exquisite omurice sample. The combined scent of demi-glace sauce and butter made her face melt into a smile.

But there might be better meals out there.

She put the omurice on her shortlist of candidates and headed off to her next stop. Mira would never know that on this day, sales of that particular bento would shatter the previous record.

The following shop was cut from the same cloth as Starry Villa. A saleswoman in Japanese attire worked at the counter selling packaged onigiri. Over ten different kinds of fillings were on offer, with pickled vegetables and tea sold on the side. The tea was even packaged in retro Japanese-style tea bottles.

*They have fried chicken here, as well.*

The onigiri varieties ranged from the usual suspects to otherworldly mysteries. Their simplicity seemed to make them flourish in this world.

The neighboring store was a part of the same chain as the onigiri store. This one sold bentos composed of mushrooms, bamboo shoots, and sweet chestnuts cooked in brown rice. The fragrance of the ingredients and the sight of the plump brown rice were truly superb, and the side dishes only added to their allure.

*I recall the bamboo shoots cooked in rice that I ate back in the countryside were truly wonderful.*

Making a mental note of this one as her second candidate, Mira continued peeking into shops.

One was a classy one where even the cheapest meal was 2,000 ducats. The next used a charcoal grill to make extravagant skewered meats. Another had that true staple of

fast food—the hamburger. And yet another was a sushi joint that suited all tastes and price points.

Eventually, after perusing dozens of them, Mira found what she considered the platonic ideal of train station bento shops. They were selling classic divided bento boxes filled with rice and several different sides at once. Their cheapest was 500 ducats, their most expensive 1,300. Simple, yet chock full of food. A pleasure on both the eyes and tongue.

Here, on Mira's first railroad ride in a new world, there could be no more reassuring meal.

She looked at the samples greedily, comparing their prices and differences. The veggies differed in kind and number between the cheap and expensive ones, but the main attractions—the meat and fish—were the real difference. The cheaper ones had fried whitefish, while the more expensive ones contained salted salmon and Hamburg steak.

Having already made up her mind, she brazenly ordered the most expensive box of them all.

# CHAPTER 5

AFTER MIRA PURCHASED her meal and descended to the first floor, there was an announcement. “Continental railroad service status announcement. The Counterclockwise Loop train will soon arrive at this station. Be aware that it will depart one hour after its arrival. Again...”

“Hrmm. It’s time.”

She gently cradled the bag containing her bento, checked the map, and began walking toward her platform. The surrounding adventurers rushed as a mob to the economy gates. Their seating was not assigned, so it was first come first served.

As Mira proceeded down the marble hallway, it split into two paths: forward and directly right. She checked the wooden sign hanging from the ceiling and turned right. Further on, a silver pillar about three meters in diameter stood in the middle of the hall. When Mira approached, a door in the pillar swung open. Station personnel in striking uniforms emerged from within.

A sturdy man of middle age smiled and greeted Mira. “Up ahead is the platform for first class customers. May we please check your ticket?”

*Could they be ticket inspectors?*

Mira retrieved the first-class tickets from her waist pouch, presenting one of them to the man. He checked the ticket, stamped it with a special seal, and returned it to her. The seal embossed the ticket with a pattern that, under the right light, would cause the word *Silverside* to float above it like a hologram.

“There’s another ticket check inside the train proper, so please show them the stamped ticket. Please enjoy your trip.”

*Quite elaborate.* Mira stared at it with great interest before putting it back in her pouch.

After passing the ticket inspectors, she arrived at the first-class waiting room. There were leather couches and chairs, in which many smartly dressed men and women reclined. The space, enclosed in wooden walls, was perfectly furnished. An unlit

fireplace stood along one side.

Mira swaggered over to a nearby couch, which she promptly plopped onto. Curious eyes gathered on her. Everyone in the first-class waiting room was of particular status. Children of nobility with butlers, prosperous merchants, and corporate executives with a handful of bodyguards.

Mira was breathtakingly beautiful... but an intruder, nonetheless. She had such presence that they might believe her if she'd said she was royalty. However, she had no butler, maid, guardian, or bodyguard alongside her to mark her rank.

Becoming rather uncomfortable under the critical glances, Mira pulled up her left sleeve and opened the System Menu. The current time was 12:37 p.m. Before long, the train would arrive. Since the Menu was open, she pulled out a bottle of apple au lait.

*Nrgh... I'm running low.*

Her once seemingly endless supply was beginning to run dry. Mira brought the bottle to her lips and wondered where she might buy more. It was then that a man approached her.

“Good day, Miss.”

Mira glanced at the man. “Hrmm, hello.”

He was young, wearing a gray coat and carrying a large bag. Since he had no obvious features of the long-lived races, he was probably about as young as he looked. Reddish-brown hair poked out from under his deep-green Tyrolean hat. Behind him stood a male and female bodyguard, each with swords.

Mira was instantly suspicious.

“Sorry for the sudden intrusion. My name is Cedric. I work for a trading firm headquartered in Grimsdale,” he introduced himself, as if to prove that he had no untoward intentions.

“Mira,” she replied curtly.

Cedric’s two bodyguards bowed. The tall, brawny man stayed expressionless, while the woman smirked at her response.

After gauging the bodyguards' strength, Mira looked back to Cedric and asked, "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I happened to notice that User's Bangle on your arm. I see that you are a veteran adventurer. It's rare for adventurers to take first class, so I had to speak with you. It's a bad habit of mine, I poke my nose into whatever interests me."

"Hrmm. Is that so?"

"Yes, indeed. The only veteran adventurers who ride first class are those who are well-connected or those who desperately want to avoid contact with others."

"Well, unfortunately, neither of those applies to me," Mira fibbed. Then she added, more truthfully, "I was simply excited for my first trip by rail."

"That's wonderful. You know how to put your money to good use." Cedric's voice went half an octave higher, and he produced a palm-sized case from within his coat. "My card, Miss Mira."

It listed the name DENOIR TRADING over an emblem with a horse and spear. Following that was the man's name, Cedric Denoir. Mira skimmed the text on the business card and said, "Denoir, hm? Wait... Have I heard that recently?"

"Have you not heard of us? Oh dear, I am undone by my hubris. In short, our firm primarily sells products for adventurers. But if you prefer to use your money on fun and leisure, I'm certain that we have products to suit your needs as well!"

"I see. Stuff for adventurers, hrmm?"

Mira remembered the medicine that Emella and the others had used to make bad smells more tolerable. Now that this game was reality, such items were in high demand. Perhaps this would be an interesting conversation after all.

"Ah! Now I can see *your* curiosity is piqued! Allow me to give you another push. What if, as a gesture of friendship, I offered you one of our newest products? Free of charge!"

Cedric opened his bag to withdraw the contents.

Mira was astonished at the proportions of the thing that came out of the small bag. It was the size of an entire tatami mat. Its front was covered in blue cloth, while the back

was a sturdy black material. At a glance, it looked like a thick plank with some frills attached.

"And... what is this?" Mira asked, raising an eyebrow. "More importantly, is that bag an Item Box?"

Cedric had no User's Bangle, so he couldn't use Item Boxes. However, User's Bangles were made by people in this world; surely it would be possible to make a bag with the same technology. Mira found herself far more interested in Cedric's bag than what he had pulled out.

"Yes, that is correct," he answered. "It was manufactured using the same technology as veteran adventurers' User's Bangles. Though it is one of a kind... *bespoke*, as it were."

"Hrmm. Bespoke, you say?"

Adventurers *rented* the User's Bangles they used. Meanwhile, Cedric personally *owned* an item that served the same function. Mira did not know the details, so she couldn't be certain just how expensive the thing was, but it was fascinating.

"Now," Cedric said, "I was hoping to focus your attention on our new product."

"Right. What is it?" Mira looked at the mysterious object, now lying flat on the ground, inert.

"This is our newest model of sleeping bag," Cedric announced proudly as he put his hand into it. When he lifted it slightly and gave it a shake, the blue object transformed into a mattress. A little more work, and this time, he had a pillow.

"Oho. Now this is interesting."

"I knew you'd appreciate it. Allow me to explain the details." Cedric excitedly chattered on about the veteran adventurers' sleeping bag, which he planned to sell in a month's time. "As you can easily tell, this sleeping bag is not meant to be carried. No adventurer would carry such an unwieldy item. However, what if you were to use your Item Box? Personally, I'm fascinated by those User's Bangles. It would be no exaggeration to say that I made this bag as a means of testing their convenience myself. And I was blown away! I knew it would be a perfect business opportunity."

In terms of manufacturing, Mira only knew about refining—and that was only because

she'd had to make so many things for herself in the old days. As such, she listened attentively to Cedric's accelerating pitch.

"I've used my connections to gather information on what adventurers demand," he continued. "This sleeping bag is the culmination of the wealth of data we received. It is an item for promising adventurers such as yourself, Miss Mira."

Now Cedric launched into his sales pitch in earnest. The capacity of a User Bangle's Item Box was affected by weight, so the sleeping bag was designed for optimal lightness even though it was bulky. Look! Even Mira—who had only the strength of a mage!—could lift it.

Next came cleanliness. Cedric dismantled the sleeping bag into all its individual parts and explained how each one could be sanitized.

Then came the insect-repellant feature, included thanks to his survey results. His surveys indicated it was the feature most desired by female adventurers. No lady liked spending a long day adventuring, only to find creepy-crawlies in her bed! Cedric had used a magic conduit—a power source for many of his firm's products—to create an insect-repelling device for use in the sleeping bag.

He demonstrated the feature.

There were no insects in the first-class lounge, so nothing happened.

He assured Mira there were no insects in the lounge *because* of the repellent feature.

"I'm quite confident about this item, but tell me: what does a promising adventurer such as yourself think?" Cedric listened solemnly, prepared to hear her every word.

Come to think of it, she couldn't recall a time when she'd actually *needed* a sleeping bag. Since the game becoming real was relatively new to her, all of her adventures in this new "reality" had been short enough to see her back to a comfortable inn bed by the end of the evening.

"Hrmm, it does seem cozy though..."

"Doesn't it?! You've a good eye, Miss Mira. Denoir Trading promises you the comfortable sleep you've been dreaming of!"

His gushing continued, and she couldn't get a word in edgewise; instead, she stooped down and felt the sleeping bag. Its front was covered in sturdy-looking material, and when she put her hand inside, soft fibers enveloped it. The bottom was springy, too. She could tell that this would be more comfortable than a cheap bedroll.

"And you're certain I can just have this?" she asked suspiciously.

"Absolutely! All the better if you use it in places where many adventurers will see it."

"Aha. That's the angle, then."

Currently, Cedric was on a rail tour around the continent to visit each and every region's Adventurers' Guild Union branch. His goal was to advertise his new product, mainly by offering it to the most famous adventurers he could find who might spread the word that it would soon be for sale.

Mira was the perfect spokesmodel: a veteran adventurer, an attractive girl... and loose enough with her money to ride first class.

It seemed ethically dubious, but since he didn't attach any strings to this offer, she decided to accept.

"Our firm sells a wide selection of other goods," Cedric added. "Perhaps fate brought us together, Miss Mira. I would love it if you would try out some of the many items we pride ourselves on. Here, have a complimentary coupon."

"Hrmm, well. If I need anything, I'll be sure to check in."

For different reasons, both Cedric and Mira gave each other an artificial smile.

\* \* \*

"Train 7 on the Counterclockwise Loop will soon arrive. All waiting passengers, please stand behind the white line."

The sound of a warning chime filled Mira with excitement.

"You said this was your first time riding the train, Miss Mira?" Cedric asked. "Why don't you try watching as the train arrives? I've witnessed it many times now, but the first was something special." Now that he'd finished his pitch, he seemed more like a person

sincerely making conversation rather than a walking advertisement.

"Ho ho. If you say so, then perhaps I shall." Mira's excitement grew, and she began walking to the platform. "Goodbye, then. I will use the sleeping bag well."

"Yes, let us meet again! If you ever need repairs, mending, or a replacement magical conduit, please come to any of our locations. They'll take care of you." Cedric watched her distinctive figure as she left and checked his bag again. "Got a bit carried away there and gave it to her. I wonder if she'll like it."

Glowing with a mysterious sense of accomplishment, Cedric turned his mind to his next new product.

\* \* \*

Mira reached the train's platform and gasped in amazement at the sight before her. An arched roof rose high above the canyon cut by the tracks. The white line mentioned in the announcement stood out clearly on the black-painted floor.

*Part of me feels as though the scale is a little too grand here.*

The cavernous space reminded her of the underground hangar where Solomon conducted his weapon's tests. It was quite different from any station she remembered. She furrowed her brow. What kind of train was this?

After a while of waiting alongside a uniformed staff member, a shrill tone rang out across the platform and a roaring tremor shook the platform beneath her feet. Mira couldn't see past the divider between first and premium class, but she could feel in her bones that something enormous was approaching.

A steam whistle—nearly deafening, yet strangely welcoming—could be heard from afar. Moments later, the train appeared, ushered in by the sounds of hissing steam and grinding metal.

It was a truly enormous steel beast. Wind stirred by its passing buffeted everyone on the platform. Mira's silver hair whipped in the breeze before finally falling as the train stopped.

"Are you kidding me?" she mumbled.

The thing that arrived at the platform was exceedingly tall, its black cars almost oppressive. Altogether, the vehicle *was* shaped like a steam locomotive. Black smoke poured from a chimney in the front, and wisps of steam escaped along its sides as it rested on the track. But its size...! It looked as if someone had put wheels on a three-story building.

"Counterclockwise Loop departure will be in one hour, at exactly 2 p.m. There will be no late boarding. Again..." With this announcement, the door whooshed open. A young girl jumped out and onto the platform.

"Me first!" she squealed. "What are we riding next, Gordon?"

"Yes, milady. We will be traveling by carriage from this city."

"Again?! Ugh, I'm so *over* carriages."

A gray-haired gentleman accompanied the whining girl. His distinguished wrinkles were charming in a careworn butler sort of way.

"What's with *you*?" The girl suddenly screeched at Mira as she passed by, her brow knitted in frustration. Her long blonde hair was tied into drill-like rolls on each side, and her clothes were awash with lavish frills; she was almost cliché. "Hey, I'm talking to you!"

"Hrmm? Me?" Mira side-eyed her.

"I saw you looking at me. I can't stand it when people do that. Cut it out," she spat, puffing out her chest with arms crossed.

*What is she going on about?*

Mira didn't remember paying her much mind. She tried to recall her actions since the door had opened. Suddenly, she hit upon something.

"Oh, it wasn't you," she explained. "I was looking at him. He's the model gentleman."

His monocle, his dress, his subtle accessories, and his age-appropriate clothing made for an almost perfect character study.

"Looking at me? It is quite an honor, and perhaps a little embarrassing, to hear such

praise from a lovely young lady such as yourself." Gordon smiled softly, trying to soothe his bewildered companion all the while.

"Wha... Wha...?!" The girl sputtered.

"Apologies if I've bothered the two of you. Goodbye," Mira said with a slight bow and swept by them to get on the train. In passing, she noticed Gordon's cologne, which was also perfectly fitting.

*Subtle, detectable but not too strong.*

Mira lifted her collar and tried to smell her own odor. "Hrmm... Hard to tell."

The staff within the train watched in awkward confusion as Mira continued to take whiffs of her clothing while she climbed the steps.

# CHAPTER 6

“MAY I TAKE your ticket?” A staff member gently interrupted Mira, who showed no signs of giving up her examination.

She finally looked up, realized what she was doing, and awkwardly handed over the ticket without making eye contact.

*Did I... did I look like some kind of pervert just now?*

If so, the conductor pretended not to notice. “Do you have a preference between the left or right cars?”

“Hrmm. Is there a difference?”

“Yes. The left car commands a glorious mountain view, while the right car offers a lovely view of the horizon across the plains.”

“I see, I see.” Mira imagined the map of the continent and flipped a mental coin, “I’ll go with the right car.”

“Good choice. Please allow me to guide you to your cabin.”

“Indeed.”

Mira ascended the tasteful marble stairs, guided by the smiling staff member. Now that she’d recovered from her embarrassment, she took a good look around the first-class car.

*This is quite luxurious.*

The walls were unblemished white, and intricate lamps lit the car brilliantly. Plush carpet spread over the floor, red as a bouquet of roses. It was as perfect as a royal palace.

The doorway she was led to had fine woodwork along the edge of its frame. The staff member opened it with a specialized keycard and bowed. His hand stretched out to

beckon her inside.

"Your cabin."

"Hrmm. Thank you." Mira nodded slightly and stepped into the room.

"The top floor of first class is the parlor," he informed her. "Despite the name, it includes a dining hall and more. Please call me if you need anything. Pleasant journey."

Following that polite goodbye, Mira heard the door close behind her but paid it no mind; she was too busy beaming madly at the sight before her.

"Now this is first class!"

The panoramic window commanded an elevated view of the train platform. When the train moved, it would be unreal. The inside of the room was luxuriously furnished, with a leather couch and imposing table set alongside the window.

Mira shifted her gaze sideways, where she saw another door leading to the bathroom. It had all the comforts of home.

There was a familiar-looking bell atop the table, which she could tell was there to summon staff if needed. Mira placed her coveted bento atop the table and resumed her tour of the cabin.

Several bottled beverages were lined up on the shelf, each sold separately. Unsurprisingly, they were all quite expensive. She decided that this was probably what they called "event pricing."

Apart from the drinks, there were also price lists, route maps, railroad-related documents, famous stories, and holy books on the shelves.

After wrapping up her examination, Mira sat on the couch and retrieved her lunch. But instead of opening it, she looked out the window.

*It truly is the most delicious when you're looking at moving scenery.*

Mira put her lunch back on the table, opened her System Menu, and checked how long it would be until departure.

"Still got thirty minutes, eh?" That was too long to simply wait around, so Mira opened her inventory in search of an apple au lait to calm her grumbling belly. "Oh, what's this?"

She spotted a small package placed in her inventory. Mira realized it was the item Amarette had given her as she hastily left the Towers the morning before. With little else to do until departure, she decided to investigate.

"What does she want me to do with this, exactly?"

Within the package she found panties that she could just barely see through, an all-lace camisole with cups in her size, knee-high socks, and a garter belt. She imagined herself wearing the alluring clothes for a moment, then resealed them in the package before stuffing it into the deepest corner of her Item Box.

That done, she watched the platform below while the others boarded. Soon enough, she heard the familiar chime again.

"Counterclockwise Loop will now depart. Items may shift during departure, so please grab a handrail if necessary..."

As the announcement ended, a bell tolled throughout the platform and city. The steam whistle roared—the train was departing.

The cylinders began to move in rhythm, gradually increasing in tempo as the train went from rest to motion. Mira listened to the comforting sounds as she watched the city from on high.

*For something so huge, this is building speed faster than I thought.*

Nearby objects soon passed so swiftly that Mira couldn't even get a good look at them before speeding past. Within a few minutes, Silverside was left behind, and the train sped into the countryside. The rails were well-maintained by work crews, but anything outside the railbed was the territory of animals and monsters. The train's size and sound helped startle wayward animals off the tracks.

Mira looked off at the horizon in the distance. The brilliant sun shone proudly in the azure sky, painting the earth below with color. Watching birds as they wheeled in the sky, Mira finally took her lunch in hand.

“There has never been a more perfect moment.”

Suppressing the world’s biggest smile, she opened the lid. The moment she inhaled the aroma, her stomach rumbled. Glowing with excitement, she savored both the view outside the window and the first bites of her food. She nibbled at the side dishes, munched her white rice, and reached for a drink.

Mira froze.

“Apple au lait won’t go with this!”

Apple au lait was the perfect blend of sour apple and sweet milk and honey. Mira did not usually care about drink pairings... but at times like this, she had to take a stand.

She regretted neglecting to buy tea at the station. She reached again for the apple au lait, hesitated, then left it and stood up.

*Let’s see about those overpriced drinks.*

The minibar shelf was large and well stocked, with bottles decorating it like a mosaic.

“Hrrrm...”

Mira found no tea upon a quick inspection; in fact, everything was alcoholic. After a moment of thought, she took a bottle of strong ale and an empty glass and paid the fee of one cobalt coin—1,000 ducats.

*Nothing wrong with a little day drinking every now and then.*

Mira poured the ale into the glass, raised a toast to no one in particular, and reveled in the joys of travel.



\* \* \*

"The train is now arriving at Riverfall Station. Please ensure that you do not forget any of your belongings."

"Nrh..." Awoken by the announcement, Mira picked herself up groggily from the couch.  
"Where's that voice coming from?"

Cheeks flushed, Mira looked out the window as the world spun around her for a moment. She saw her own reflection floating in midair, just barely illuminated, while everything beyond was blacker than ink.

The train was slowing down as it approached the station.

"Thank you for riding with us. The next departure is at 8 a.m. tomorrow."

Mira didn't have any luggage to speak of, so she picked up her three empty bottles and listened to the train's announcement as she looked down upon the approaching platform. Even at night, the station was so well lit that it looked like daytime. After watching the first passengers exit, Mira likewise got up to disembark.

She was greeted by a plaza even bigger than Silverside's. Countless lodgings littered the area around the station, many of which displayed rather *unique* signs in hopes of standing out among the rest.

"Where might I stay tonight?" she mused excitedly.

The deluge of people exiting the train scattered in search of places of rest. Smiling broadly, Mira joined the crowd.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes later, Mira checked into a hotel that claimed to have a theater.

Their main attraction was part of the house restaurant, which had a raised stage at one end of the dining area. The idea of dinner theater was rather appealing to Mira. Not the least because today's performance just happened to be a story about the Nine Wise Men.

Mira sat at a table near the center of the restaurant, eagerly waiting for the play to

begin.

Eventually, the tables filled until no empty seats were left. The venue began to quiet down. Food was brought to the guests, and the lights overhead dimmed as the stage lights went up. The crowd erupted in applause.

An eloquent voice boomed as the curtain rose, “This is a story from more than thirty years ago, when oppressed mages were forced to huddle together under one country’s banner. The story of the heroes who would come to be known as the Nine Wise Men will be told throughout the ages.”

One young man in a king’s garb and nine others wearing robes stood solemnly.

“So they wish to attack us! Then we will meet their charge. This battle will become the song of our nation, a cry that will resound across the continent. Mages, it is time to show them the extent of your power.” The king narrowed his sharp eyes and waved his right hand. It seemed this performance was based on the first battle of the Kingdom of Alcait, the Defense of Elderward.

“By your will, Your Majesty, it shall be done,” the nine robed mages responded in unison, putting their own right hands on their hearts to bow in the customary military salute of the Kingdom of Alcait.

*I don’t remember Solomon sounding quite so composed when he received that declaration of war.* Mira cut her meat without looking at it, eyes glued to the stage.

In actuality, Solomon had said something more along the lines of, “Ah, jeez, we’re really doing this? I know everyone’s trying their best, but we can’t man the front line with just mages. I don’t have many soldiers, either.”

*At least they got the salute right. Even if we didn’t make that up until the battle was over.*

But only someone who was actually there would have known this. Mira decided that taking a few creative liberties was part of the fun of theater and got back to enjoying the performance.

The fourth act included one of the biggest scenes: Danblf’s Holy Knights held the front line, while Luminaria rained fire upon the enemy. It was the most important part of the Defense when it came to showing off the power of mages.

*I was so cool!*

The performance, accompanied by made-for-theater magical tools and music, was captivating. The other audience members cheered. But Mira was far more focused on the actor playing Danblf. They were in early old age, and they played the role of an elder mage perfectly. Each and every action was dignified, truly befitting an experienced mage. It would be no exaggeration to say that they were more Danblf than Mira was now.

She cheered every time the actor playing Danblf did anything. He discreetly looked her way each time. The feelings of gravity and dignity were present in each glance.

Mira happily took a sip from her glass and wished she could be like Danblf when she grew up.

\* \* \*

The performance ended with thunderous applause. As the lights came back up, Mira gleefully stuffed her cheeks with cake.

Onstage, a band was playing music that sounded like smooth jazz. Their song calmed the dining hall, leaving the patrons to bask in the afterglow of the passionate final scene of the play.

The troupe who had put on the play was passing out flyers. Mira accepted one and glanced at it before letting out a satisfied “O ho ho.” It was an advertisement for another play opening next week at a large theater in the city.

They would be performing the Battle of Luzdland for the first time on a major stage.

Mira remembered the Battle of Luzdland well. It was another battle in which the Nine Wise Men had been pivotal, and the only one in which the Kingdom of Alcait had been the aggressor.

It started when a demon that had murdered the king of Luzdland assumed his form. Under the demon’s control, Luzdland became a true living hell. Given the conditions, the Kingdom of Alcait was forced to take a stand. Solomon himself led the Nine Wise Men onto the field to save Luzdland from the clutches of the foul demon. After a heated battle, they prevailed and returned peace to the land.

The Battle of Luzdland had been the outcome of a scripted questline that could be triggered for player-made kingdoms.

*I believe that was my first battle with a demon duke. Lesser Demons were spawning all around the castle; Solomon was panicking. It really was a hell of a fight. As Mira finished her cake and reminisced about the past, she suddenly remembered more recent events. Speaking of Lesser Demons, I wonder if they've learned anything about that white pillar.*

She thought back to the horde of monsters led by a Lesser Demon who had attacked the flower field with a white pillar outside Lunatic Lake. The incident seemed resolved for the moment, but it was still unclear why the demon was after that field or why the pillar was there in the first place.

*Not to mention that demon under the Ancient Temple.*

Mira had defeated it like it was nothing, but she remained confused by the fact that there was a demon there to begin with.

After all, demons never appeared without a reason. What was Soul Howl up to? What was the zombie outbreak at Karanak about? Solomon and the leader of the Karanak Mages' Guild, Leoneil, were apparently investigating it, but the details remained unclear.

*Well, I suppose I'll have to let Solomon handle that.*

Mira had plenty of questions, but she wouldn't find the answer faster than him just by thinking about it. She was simply in charge of reporting. In a way, she was delegating all the work to him.

Mira tipped her glass to her lips again and realized it was empty. She frowned and whipped out a bottle of apple au lait, which she immediately downed. Then she stared down the empty bottle of apple au lait and remembered that she was running low on them. Placing both hands on the table, she stood up and approached the dining hall's counter, where she called out to one of the chefs.

"Excuse me! I have a question. Do you sell the apple au lait in this bottle here?" Mira asked, placing her empty bottle on the counter.

A woman who had been washing dishes turned upon hearing Mira's voice and hurried

over, slightly confused. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“Hm?”

“Your face is really red. Do you have a fever?” Concerned, the woman put her palm on Mira’s forehead. She narrowed her eyes upon realizing that the poor girl felt fine.

“I’m quite healthy. Now, do you have the apple au lait or not?”

“I don’t thiink we sell apple au lait. But the sweet berry au lait is great!”

“O ho ho! Do you sell that in bottles? How much are they?” Mira held out the bottle toward the woman to demonstrate what a bottle was.

The woman realized with a slight frown: *Ah, she’s drunk.*

“We sell it, but we’ve run out for the day,” she explained. “Tomorrow morning, we can sell them for 300 ducats per bottle. I can take preorders. What do you say?” The woman spoke gently to a rather tipsy Mira.

Mira opened her inventory and checked her apple au lait stock before vigorously nodding at the woman.

“Then I shall take twenty,” she declared.

“Twenty, gotcha. Come and pick it up tomorrow.”

“That I shall!”

That done, Mira returned to her room. Tonight, her accommodations were very... simple. Not good, but not bad. She headed straight for the en suite bathroom, threw her clothes off, and took a hot bath.

A little peppier than usual due to her drink, she smiled sweetly at herself in the mirror. Having enjoyed herself for the evening, she fell into bed.

\* \* \*

Early the next morning, Mira was startled awake by the announcement that the train would depart in one hour. Sitting up stark naked, she looked delirious. Struggling

through a slight headache, she sifted through the words of the announcement that had awoken her.

“One hour, huh?” Mira mumbled to herself as she picked up her scattered clothes and took a fresh pair of underwear from her bag. Fully dressed, she descended the stairs and headed to the dining hall.

The place had become a battlefield. Almost all the rail passengers had been awoken like Mira, and they swarmed the eating area.

Mira lined up at the counter and retrieved both breakfast and her twenty bottles of sweet berry au lait at 6,000 ducats.

\* \* \*

With a mere twenty minutes left until departure, Mira weaved through waves of passengers in front of the station.

*This place is packed.*

Larger than Silverside Station, Riverfall Station was divided into multiple blocks. The area near the entrance was lined with souvenir shops. Mira elbowed her way through the crowd to find a place that sold train station bentos. Amid the clamor, she purchased a chestnut rice meal and green tea before rushing to her platform.

Unlike economy class, which was still jammed full of passengers, first class was quite peaceful. Arriving with five minutes to spare, Mira handed over a ticket to the conductor in the rail car.

“Thank you for riding with us. Do you have a preference between the left or right view?”

“Hrmm. I say let’s go with the left,” Mira answered on the fly.

“Understood. Allow me to guide you to your cabin,” the conductor said as the rest of the staff waited on other passengers with a smile.

From the left car, she saw a vast yet empty platform on the other side of the station—the Clockwise Loop’s economy-class platform. Unlike the first-class platform, it was unadorned stone, simple yet huge. It wasn’t hard to imagine that, when the time came,

it would be overflowing with people.

The rails below looked thick as logs, no doubt representative of the raw power of the trains that rode upon them.

Mira whiled away the time until her departure, enjoying the new view. Though the platform was devoid of passengers, she watched the workers go about their business.

\* \* \*

Eventually, the train departed and new scenery flowed by. The mountain views from this side of the train were glorious. The sun shone on the craggy terrain, making them look all the more vast and rugged.

*Hm? Are we slowing down?*

About three hours into her trip, the train seemed to be gradually decelerating. Just as she wondered what was going on, the train's PA system came to life.

"We will now pass over Tosenka Bridge. There are thirty spectacular views from this bridge. The train will slow to give you the opportunity to enjoy each one."

It seemed this was meant to allow passengers an opportunity to see the sights. Knowing this was a common occurrence on tourist trains, Mira immediately glued herself to the window.

After a while, the train began to climb the trestle bridge. Below it was a deep gorge carved by a magnificent river. In the distance lay the waterfall that supplied that river. Water roared forth in what seemed like slow motion to her. Though the train was a few hundred meters from the waterfall, droplets of mist rained upon the window.

*Oh ho! If there are thirty views, then can I expect twenty-nine more like this? This is unreal!*

Mira smiled, imagining the ones she had yet to see.

"Hrmm? Are those people?"

Mira spotted a group of people on a cliff between the waterfall and bridge. Were they tourists?

One figure all in black stuck out from the rest, drawing her interest. She couldn't make out their face from this distance, but she could see their figure. They wore a black suit and black trilby hat—the outfit of a businessperson. Or a *mobster*.

“No... They could be scoping the place out for a sniping attempt!”

The person looked restlessly up at the waterfall and down at the river. A hit man among tourists. As Mira let her mind run wild with fantasy, she kept her eyes locked on the man—who was laughing and joking with the others—until he was out of sight.

\* \* \*

A few hours after they'd passed the sightseeing spots, the train arrived at Veloce City Station. It would stay there for an hour—too long to sit and wait, yet too short to explore. Mira took a book from the shelf and began flipping through it.

*Ooh, a guide to station city accommodations. This might come in handy!*

When Mira went back to her couch with book in hand, there was a light rap at the door. She opened it and was greeted by the conductor who had shown her onto the train.

“Pardon the intrusion. We've just arrived at Veloce City. Do you plan to ride to the next station?”

“Yes, that is the plan... Ah. Right.” As she answered, Mira remembered. It was one ticket per station. She removed a first-class ticket from her waist pouch. “I have tickets on hand now. Do I have to leave to get the stamp?”

“No, miss, I can take care of that for you,” the employee answered kindly.

“Then I would like to ride until the next station,” she said, offering the ticket to be stamped.

“Please enjoy your trip.” The employee bowed and left.

Mira threw herself back onto the couch, opened her book, and began searching for an inn that would suit her tastes. Tomorrow night, she would arrive at the Holy Kingdom Alisfarius.

# CHAPTER 7

THE HOLY KINGDOM ALISFARIUS was a major country. It worshipped the Goddess of Benevolence, one of the three major deities of the Schmegoffe Region, which encompassed both continents of *Ark Earth Online*.

Last night, she had arrived at the station city Holy Gate and spent a night at a station-side inn. In the light of the morning sun, she now looked around the plaza, all decked out in dazzling white.

The station city here was brand new compared to the capital in terms of history, but it was packed full of people. And because this was a holy country, the shops and homes were all decorated with the cradle, a symbol of their goddess. Mira spotted several churches on her short walk from the station.

Their bell towers soared overhead; not even the station was as tall as them. Mira gazed at one and thought about Tact, who would no doubt visit this country someday in hopes of learning holy magic from one of these new churches. Alisfarius was the hub of holy magic, after all.

Wondering if she could ask the representative of the Tower of the Holy about this some time, Mira found a secluded place and summoned Pegasus.

When the winged horse appeared from the magic circle, it glanced around and rushed to nuzzle Mira's bosom. It rubbed its face against her even more than usual, and she wondered if perhaps it had been worried over her absence. She chuckled at how spoiled it was and brushed its mane with her fingers.

Pegasus ascended from the alley with Mira on its back, and they flew from the city. Grasslands spread out below, wind blowing the long stalks like waves on the sea. Far ahead, misty mountains trailed off into the horizon. Mira's destination was the Celestial Ruins, a basin beyond that mountain range.

Pegasus flew north, clearly in high spirits. Normally, it would fly aggressively, as if to ward off any approaching birds who would intrude on its time in the sky with Mira. But today, it allowed them to fly freely. Their chirps filled the air around Mira with music.

"We've built up quite the following today. Perhaps this will be a fun journey," Mira said, prompting an answering whinny from Pegasus.

Groups of many different species opened their wings wide. They flew up in a loop, then returned to glide alongside. Their flight formation was like an airshow.

"Magnificent!" Mira applauded the birds as they frolicked in the sky.

Taking this as its cue, Pegasus let its wings shine. The overflowing light shimmered off its feathers like gold dust, swelling outward with a sound akin to a bell's chime before dissolving into the air and falling upon the birds. This was a blessing of light that could be given by a holy beast, conferred upon the birds for bringing joy to its master.

"What beautiful light. You're not bad, either!"

Having never witnessed a holy beast's blessing before, Mira thought it was simply Pegasus's way of frolicking with the birds. Its mood improved further, Pegasus continued to spread its blessing, strengthening the fortune of the birds to give them peace for generations to come.

Mira would never know.

\* \* \*

As they approached the mountains and grassland turned to forest, Mira spotted monsters soaring in the sky. Pegasus bid the birds to disperse, knowing the danger ahead. Soon they were alone over the towering mountaintops.

Their ascent over the peaks was steep. Though this wasn't the proper route to the Celestial Ruins, Mira had figured that it would be no problem for Pegasus to overcome these mountains.

*We can make it... right?*

The air grew thin as the forest at the base of the mountain blurred in the distance. The higher they went, the more the cold pierced through Mira's fur coat.

The peaks obstructing their path were one of the Earth continent's four biggest mountain ranges, higher than Mira had ever flown. The mountaintop was obscured by clouds, threatening to block all passage.

The extreme cold, a growing headache, and her misty vision caused Mira to cling tightly to Pegasus.

"Pegasus... can we descend?" Mira requested as panic began to set in. Recognizing her pain, Pegasus's eyes were filled with agony. It rapidly descended into the forest.

\* \* \*

Once they had landed in a small clearing in the forest, Pegasus wrapped its wings around the girl clinging to it. A dazzling rainbow veil emanated from its feathers, illuminating the dim woods with Pegasus's strongest healing magic. The motes of light healed the wounds and ailments of surrounding wildlife as well.

There were no dramatic changes to Mira's condition, but she seemed to relax under the rainbow light.

"I'm a little better now. Sorry for worrying you, friend."

This was likely another consequence of the game becoming reality. Mira calmed herself and closed her eyes, pondering what to do next. It seemed she couldn't reach the Celestial Ruins by air. She would have to take the proper route: going through a land-based dungeon.

While Mira mentally prepared for the trip, Pegasus began jostling her with its muzzle.

"What? What's gotten into you?!" Mira glanced around, worried that there was an emergency, but only saw a dreamy forest enveloped in the lingering magical aurora. As she sat up, Pegasus looked relieved, burying its face in her chest. "Hrmm. Quite the spoiled little baby now, aren't you?"

She relaxed against Pegasus while she waited for her headache to subside.

\* \* \*

*I wonder if I'll need a permit?*

To travel to the Celestial Ruins, Mira would have to pass through a dungeon known as the Stairway to the Sky. The dungeon was managed by the Adventurers' Guild Union, so she might need to return to a city where they operated.

Pegasus's light settled, and the forest went back to its usual gloomy state. Now recovered, Mira opened her map and searched for a nearby town.

As she did, the rippling sounds of insects in the trees formed a steady tempo. Mira used her Biometric Scan and found two beings, both the size of humans.

*I can only imagine they're adventurers, Chimera, or Isuzu. Or perhaps hunters?*

Wary of the newcomers, Pegasus stepped forward to protect Mira, lightning cracking faintly across its wings. Listening carefully, Mira could hear the clear sound of footsteps in the woods. They were coming directly toward her. As she listened, the footsteps' pace quickened until the source of the disturbance was breaking through the trees just ahead.

"What have we here?" the stranger muttered to himself, coming face-to-face with Pegasus.

The man wore a full suit of samurai-style armor in black, with a blade in a blood-red scabbard hanging from his hip. A step away from being middle-aged, his face looked rough and chiseled, like a boulder with mature eyes. Oddly, Mira thought, he didn't look evil. But Pegasus wasn't taking any chances.

"Hey, don't just run up on people!" another man yelled, peeking out from behind the samurai. "Look what you've done; it thinks we're hostile." His gear seemed to emphasize lightness and mobility, with green leather armor protecting only his vitals. The feathers of arrow fletchings were visible in his hip quiver, but the arrows appeared too thick and long to be shot from an ordinary bow. He looked to be a hunter, with fierce features contrasting against wise eyes.

"My apologies."

"It still looks ready to attack. What did you do?"

"Once again, apologies. I am simply frozen in admiration of this divine beast."

"I've always heard Pegasi have mild temperaments."

Pegasus glowered threateningly, and the two men backed off slightly as they tried to size up the situation together.

Finally, Mira asked, “Can I help you?”

“Hark! Might that be the Pegasus’s voice?” The samurai man bowed reverently.

“No. It came from behind it.”

The other hunter caught sight of Mira. She’d been covered by one of Pegasus’s wings and was now peeking out from behind. The samurai bent slightly in search of the voice. When he noticed the small girl, his eyes widened with surprise.

“A heavenly maiden?!”

Even in the dim forest, Mira’s gleaming silver hair, fair skin, and staggeringly gorgeous face worked a special kind of magic.

“No, I’m Mira. An adventurer. Who are you two?” Mira demanded. Placing a reassuring hand on Pegasus’s back, she stepped forward. This seemed to bring the samurai back to reality.

“I am known as Heinrich. An adventurer like yourself.”

“The name’s Gilbert. I, uh... guess you could call me a scholar.”

Introductions complete, the three faced each other anew.

Pegasus relaxed its guard slightly, but kept its wings wrapped around Mira. Gilbert muttered to himself in understanding: the usually gentle Pegasus was protecting its charge.

“Sorry for startling you,” Gilbert said, raising both of his hands to show he had no ill intent. “We noticed light in the forest while we were traveling to our destination and came to investigate.”

Mira realized the light they saw must have been the healing magic cast by Pegasus.

“On that note, I assume it came from this creature?” Gilbert asked.

“Indeed, it did. It was trying to heal me.” Mira wrapped her arms around Pegasus’s neck in a grateful hug. The beast neighed happily.

"That sounds more like the great Pegasus of legend," Heinrich mumbled in understanding.

"It tried to heal you? Given the amount of light, you must've been badly injured. Are you okay? I don't mind sharing some of the medicine we brought."

She looked down rather guiltily. "Ah, I am unhurt. I simply attempted to cross the mountains on Pegasus and got a little sick along the way. We rushed back down so I could rest. Pegasus was just being considerate."

"You tried to fly over the mountains?" Gilbert gasped. "Ridiculous! I bet you got altitude sickness. This mountain is over five thousand meters above sea level. It's silly to try to fly over that."

"Altitude sickness? Hrmm... A poor plan after all."

Riding Pegasus meant ascending at a far faster rate than a climber, which meant going into thinner air without acclimating. Anyone was bound to feel ill doing that.

Mira had visited the Celestial Ruins many times. Usually via Floating Island. This was a new experience entirely.

There were so many factors that made previously easy things now impossible. Even Mira couldn't defy nature—especially not when she hadn't prepared for things missing from the game.

Heinrich typically left the talking to Gilbert, but seeing a solution, he proposed, "If you wish to cross the mountains, might I suggest using the tunnel connected to the holy road? The toll should be pocket change for any adventurer."

"My destination is not the other side; it is the Celestial Ruins," Mira explained. "Flying would have been faster... but looks like I'll have to take the usual route. Would you two happen to know from which city I can procure a permit to the Stairway to the Sky?" Mira asked.

"The closest Adventurers' Guild Union branch would be the one at Lorwyn, off to the east. But it requires a rank of B. Will you be able to satisfy that?"

"R-really...?" Mira was dumbfounded. Her current rank was C. She had only gotten the certification for the sake of dungeon access, so she hadn't done any of the work

necessary to raise her rank again. Even Solomon's authority was limited to getting her to C. Just as ascending from D-Rank to C-Rank was difficult, ascending from C-Rank to B-Rank required its own set of trials. It was no easy feat.

She drooped slightly, like a wilted flower.

Gilbert, presuming that her rank was too low, noticed the User's Bangle on her arm. "Are you C-rank, Mira?" he probed.

"Yes, I am." Mira looked up slightly and nodded.

Gilbert pointed at Heinrich and said, "I'm a C-Rank too, but Hank here is an A-Rank. We were planning to go to the Stairway to the Sky, and we've even got a permit already. Would you like to join us?"

What a stroke of luck!

"I certainly would appreciate it, but are you sure?" Mira was ecstatic, but she politely gave him the opportunity to take it back.

"Of course. You can probably tell, but we're both classed as warriors. Even with an A-Rank on board, I'd felt a little iffy about going to a B-Rank dungeon. But you look like a mage, and C-Rank, at that. You ought to be a huge boon for us."

"Hrmm, I see." All this seemed a little too good to be true, but Mira was convinced by Gilbert's logic. And as she had no other plan, agreeing was certainly an option.

"By the way, what kind of mage?" Gilbert looked to Mira expectantly. "A sorcerer or priest would be fantastic."

She proudly puffed out her chest and declared, "A summoner!"

A cicada's cry filled the silence.

"Oh. You must've done a lot of work to reach C-Rank, then... Is that Pegasus a summon?" Gilbert pointed to the beast snuggling up to Mira. Pegasus had power rivaling that of an A-Rank adventurer.

"Indeed, it is." She ran her fingers through Pegasus's mane. The creature fluttered its wings joyfully, as if to emphasize her point.

Relief was clear on Gilbert's face as he looked at the creature. "Hokay, phew. I was worried for a sec, but I don't think we'll have any problems at all."

"Summoning Pegasus is a remarkable feat." Heinrich locked eyes with Pegasus, straightened up, and bowed to it.

"You can protect yourself, then," Gilbert confirmed.

"A needless worry. How about I protect the both of you, too?" Mira offered with a confident smirk.

"You go right ahead," he mumbled, looking at his map and marking a spot to calculate the distance to the dungeon. "Let's get going, then. The Stairway to the Sky should be around thirty minutes' walk from here."

"Hrmm. A trifling distance," Mira said, holding out her hand toward Pegasus to dismiss it. However, it pushed her hand back in refusal. "Hrmm. What's gotten into you?"

Each time she held out her hand, Pegasus circled left or right and nuzzled Mira's face.

"My, you *are* spoiled," she grumbled. "The three of us cannot ride you at once."

Yet Pegasus shook its head, as if to say she was wrong.

"Perhaps Pegasus still doubts the two of us?" Heinrich suggested, meeting Pegasus's glance with another respectful bow. "It seems the type to worry for its master."

Pegasus stared into Mira's eyes, as if confirming his surmise. Its eyes were not those of a spoiled pet; they were filled with profound concern.

"Is that so?" Mira asked. Pegasus nodded gravely.

Gilbert crossed his arms and leaned against a tree. "Well, that is fair. A girl in the woods with two men she doesn't know? Anyone would think that's a little fishy. Hell, even I do."

"Hrmm, is that why? Don't worry about it. I'm not about to fall victim to these two, now, am I?" Mira insisted, putting a hand on Pegasus's brow.

"No worries in that regard!" Gilbert chuckled, laughing off the implied insult.

But as a man with the dignity of a samurai, Heinrich could not stay silent. “I cannot let that comment pass. Pegasus does indeed look powerful, but I’m confident in my strength. I believe I can handle a child.”

“Oh, good grief,” Gilbert groaned. “You’d never try in the first place, so does it matter? Also, we’re burning daylight here.”

Heinrich couldn’t stand when someone looked down on his strength, even in jest. Even as Heinrich’s boulder-like face grew yet more stern, however, he continued to bow whenever he and Pegasus made eye contact.

Mira checked Heinrich’s stat values; they were all above average. Now that she knew he was as strong as he said, she jokingly retorted, “Hrmm. Indeed, you seem skilled. But what would you do with me if you *could* best me?”

“Well, erm, I...” Heinrich began gesticulating wildly.

“She’s pulling your leg, Hank.” Gilbert sighed before his friend could embarrass himself any further.

Those words snapped Heinrich back to reality. He saw Mira smirking devilishly at him, satisfied with her victory. His mouth hung open in disbelief.

*Now he seems like a man who’s fun to tease!*

As Heinrich fumed in indignation, Gilbert chuckled.

Mira pointed at the two and whispered to Pegasus, “See? They’re not up to anything bad. Be at ease.”

Pegasus sized up the two men, nodded reluctantly, and allowed itself to be dismissed.

“Anyway, don’t worry about it,” Gilbert smiled. “I’m not about to do anything that stupid.”

“And neither am I!” Heinrich piped up in agreement. “Miss Mira, I was simply expressing my dismay at being—”

“I know, I know. You samurai are all uptight, anyway.” Mira interrupted Heinrich as he tried to make excuses for himself.

"I'm glad you understand. I swear on my sword that I will keep you safe!" He declared happily, one hand on his sword's sheath.

Thus, Mira gained two companions and a ticket to the Celestial Ruins.

# CHAPTER 8

SPOILED BY THE EASE of riding Pegasus, Mira traced the path on her map and looked up to the sky. The distant clouds were a hazy blue, and the birds disappearing into her periphery made her long for flight.

“Seems like we’ve made up our minds. Let’s get going,” Gilbert suggested.

“Right, Heinrich answered shortly.

Mira looked back to survey the other two. After some careful thinking, she began her summoning work.

## *[Evocation: Garuda]*

A magic circle floated up between the two men, becoming a pillar of light that stretched upwards. The pillar shattered, its fragments dancing in the air as a warm current ran through the area like a spring breeze.

Gilbert and Heinrich looked up in confusion. Before them was an enormous bird with iridescent feathers, changing color depending on the angle of the observer.

“Is this... a monster?!” Heinrich put a hand on his sword.

“No. Those wings...” Gilbert put his hand on Heinrich’s pommel to stay his sword and narrowed his eyes imperceptibly, looking the beast up and down. “Hank, this is one of Mira’s summons.”

“What?!”

“Isn’t that right?” Gilbert asked, shooting Mira a glance. After a pause, Heinrich turned as well.

Mira smirked and replied, “That it is.”

“Truly?” Heinrich gasped. “I had no idea that summoning could be done so... instantaneously. I’m astonished.”

"Looks like Garuda," Gilbert noted. "What's the plan?"

Mira had surprised them, but she was quite satisfied by how their reactions differed from before—especially how Gilbert had so quickly figured it out. She puffed out her chest as if awaiting applause.

"I thought flying might make the trip faster." Mira sauntered in front of Garuda, looking up at the bird standing an entire story taller than the surrounding trees. "It's been a while, friend," she addressed it. "Are you doing well?"

Garuda looked down at her in silence with the sharp eyes of a hawk. Its presence was intense, teetering on the edge of oppressive. A gust of wind emphasized the deep silence.

*Has it...forgotten about me?!*

Mira had a moment of panic, but she continued, "R-right... I was hoping to have you carry the three of us. Umm, but you don't have to agree to it. I can't force you..." She stared at the evocation stiffly.

The massive bird stooped down to the ground and hung its neck before Mira. It flicked its eyes for her to climb onto its back, seemingly willing to carry them. Mira sighed in relief and turned to the men.

"There you have it. Let us go by sky!"

*Thank goodness,* thought Mira. Thirty years was easily long enough to forget, but Garuda had not forgotten; it was simply silent by nature.

Mira had summoned mostly affectionate creatures since her return, so she'd unconsciously expected some sort of big reaction upon their reunion. What she failed to realize was that, as a creature who controlled wind, that warm breeze emanating from Garuda was its own special way of showing its joy.

\* \* \*

"Thank you, friend," Mira said as she climbed Garuda's neck, pushing rainbow feathers aside to clamber up.

"This will be my first time flying," Heinrich said, letting his boulder-like face crack into

a smile as he solemnly approached.

"I'm all for saving time," Gilbert added. He reached out his hand to board Garuda, but the creature immediately lifted its neck away from him.

"Hm. Miss Mira, how will we travel with you?" Heinrich asked, straining his neck to look up.

"I'm unsure. Garuda, what are you doing?"

While Mira sat at the base of Garuda's neck and tried to command it to let the other two on, the enormous bird suddenly lurched as it lifted a log-sized leg and snatched up both Gilbert and Heinrich with one set of dexterous claws.

"Gaaah?! What's going on?!" Heinrich screamed in confusion.

"Huh. Guess Garuda won't let anyone but its master ride on its back," Gilbert surmised, far calmer than he should have been. Standing on one leg, Garuda spread its vast wings and leapt into the sky, rocking every nearby tree in the process. "This is quite the sight. Even if it is a bit unsettling..."

Heinrich looked upon the scenery, having never seen the green forest stretching in all directions from above. The wind beat against him, but in a way it was strangely comforting. Unfortunately, he could not quite ignore the fact that he was dangling from a massive bird's claws, perilously close to death.

As Garuda circled through the sky, the sunlight on its wings reflected in every hue of the rainbow, forming a colorful halo of light.

Riding Garuda was a different experience than Pegasus. Its feathers were as soft as dandelion down, but they were sturdy enough not to tear when clenched. Mira held the feathers like reins and pointed toward their destination with her free hand.

"There it is. The Stairway to the Sky is that way," she directed. On her orders, Garuda shifted from circling to a direct path and accelerated.

"I feel like a captured mouse," Gilbert muttered, gazing vacantly down at the trees as the wind battered him to and fro.

\* \* \*

A few moments later, they arrived at a cavern that looked like a hole gouged out of the rock. This mode of travel might have been faster than walking, but Mira felt compelled to apologize to the two men once Garuda had been dismissed.

"Oh, we're fine. Just messed up my hair a little," Gilbert replied, running his fingers through his wind-buffeted mane.

Heinrich didn't seem bothered, either; he simply called it a rare experience and began inspecting his gear to prepare for the dungeon ahead.

Behind them was a small clearing in the deep forest, and before them was an insurmountable precipice. The mountain was too steep to be scaled, but the cavern yawned wide, seeming to beckon them in. The endless darkness within echoed with indistinct growls.

"Well, let's get going," Gilbert called.

Heinrich finished his inspection and stood up. With the stern samurai in the lead, they stepped into the cavern. The chilly path within was blanketed in a darkness that neither lanterns nor magic could fully penetrate. The walls, ceiling, and floor reflected dim gray in the party's faint lights.

"And you're certain we can leave all the work to him?" Mira asked.

"He doesn't mind," Gilbert answered. "We haven't even gotten to the dungeon proper yet, so Hank can take care of it. We'll save my arrows and your mana for now. When the real action starts, we can jump in."

"Indeed," confirmed Heinrich, "I am enough for this."

The group was now thirty minutes into their excursion. Any monsters that approached had been cut down by a single stroke of Heinrich's katana.

Heinrich had claimed to be A-Rank, and his skill certainly backed it up. He seemed to have sharp hearing, as he reacted to every enemy as soon as they entered striking range. The man was a true samurai, and Mira watched him in awe.

They continued down the path without issue for a while until the light was wholly swallowed up by darkness. It seemed they'd entered a chamber. The light reached no further than a few steps in front of them, where they clearly saw something man-

made: a stone gate that had collapsed.

The gate seemingly fused with the bedrock and was closed on one side. The other side had crumbled to rubble. Nearby, Mira spotted a familiar barrier crystal.

"Are we fully prepared?" Heinrich asked, producing his permit.

"Yep," Gilbert assented.

"Ready any time," Mira answered confidently.

As they stood before the barrier, Heinrich pressed his permit against it. The soap-bubble-thin barrier quivered as if wind had blown against it. Mira entered first, followed by Gilbert, then Heinrich.

When they stepped inside, the air was palpably different from the cavern they had just left. Wind blew at them head-on, as if trying to repel them. The Stairway to the Sky was the one path to the Celestial Ruins, cut deep within the mountains. It was an extremely long and dangerous dungeon, spanning ten floors.

The small space of the entrance was lit with flickering flames, spaced at regular intervals in the darkness. The stairs ahead seemed carved directly out of the rock. It was hard to tell if it was descending to the depths of the planet or rising into the heavens.

*Ah, right. Now I remember this place.*

Recalling how this worked in the formal route in the game, Mira sighed in exasperation.

"Now, here's where the real trek begins," Gilbert announced. "I hear this is a long one, so let me know if you two get tired. I'll do the same, of course. Monsters don't appear on staircases, but I hear they're near infinite on each floor. If we arrive at a floor exhausted, we might end up dead."

"Indeed," Heinrich agreed. "I will take that into consideration."

"Understood," Mira sighed.

Heinrich must have had the stamina his class build suggested, as he'd never even broken a sweat on the way here. He didn't so much as flinch at the sprawling staircase

before him. Gilbert grinned wryly, as if this was more than he'd bargained for. Even Mira was getting cold feet.

\* \* \*

An hour or so into the climb—the whole trek an endless cacophony of dull armored footsteps on the stairs—Gilbert sat down. “Whew... We should reach the first floor soon, so let's take a break for now.”

“Right.” Heinrich removed the katana hanging from his hip and slowly followed. A chilly wind blew upon them, but as Gilbert and Heinrich were drenched in sweat, it was quite welcome.

“Hrmm, it is indeed long and very *annoying*,” Mira grumbled and hopped down from the shoulder of her silent porter: a Dark Knight.

Though Mira's physical stamina was inferior to that of the men, she had ways to level the playing field. The Dark Knight was strong enough to do the work for both of them. She had clambered atop its shoulder and ordered it to walk—her endless stair-climbing machine.

She had offered them a ride as well, but when they saw her sitting on the Knight's shoulder, they quickly shook their heads. No matter how bulky the knight was, only someone as small as her could fit on its shoulder. They would have to ride piggyback, carried like a princess, or sling themselves across the Knight's arms. Even with the Knight doing the walking, that wouldn't have been a restful ride.

“By the way, what brings you two to the Celestial Ruins?” Mira asked as they took a few bites of their rations and drank water to soothe their fatigue.

Gilbert washed down his dried meat with a swallow of water and answered, “Like I said before, I'm a scholar. I specialize in botany, so I'm here to study the vast forest at the Celestial Ruins. Hank is here to keep me alive, basically.”

“Hrmm, I see.”

The forest that Gilbert referred to extended beyond the Celestial Ruins. Its ecosystem was isolated from the rest of the world, and it was full of flora and fauna that had evolved in unique ways.

"More specifically, I'm studying strange occurrences in the forest. Speaking of, I have a question of my own: from what I've seen of your summoning, you must fly often, right?" Gilbert cupped his hands in the shape of a bowl. "If so, have you ever seen any stretches of forest where it seemed as though they had a hole scooped out of them with a spoon?"

If such a hole in the forest existed, it would be easy to spot from the sky. But Mira had no recollection of seeing such a thing. Then again, most of her attention was on clouds as she searched their shapes for the castle in the sky Cyril had told her about.

"I do fly often, but... I haven't seen any. Is that related to your strange occurrences?"

"Yeah, it is. We call the phenomenon the Earth Eater. If you haven't seen it, then that's fine; I'll explain." Gilbert shrugged and a sly grin crept onto his face, like that of a predator who'd found its prey. As he began expounding on his subject, Heinrich muttered his condolences and suddenly became very busy maintaining his weapon.

"It all started twenty-five years ago. Part of a forest to the north of Grimsdale disappeared overnight, leaving nothing but the crater-like hollow I mentioned. It was about... five hundred meters in diameter, I'd say. It happened just where they'd successfully cultivated honey apples. There was an uproar. People thought it was the spirits going crazy, some god's trick, or even an invasion from another world. But it didn't end there. The same thing started happening all over the continent. Parts of Ozstein Valley's forest, the sweet berry fields east of Alisfarius, the Forest of the Devout at the north of the continent, and plenty of other forests and plains disappeared overnight. I'm investigating the mystery."

"Earth Eater, hrmm? Quite the mysterious phenomenon." Mira mused.

Gilbert's grin widened. "Yeah. Isn't it exciting? Just the other day, I learned that the forest next to the Celestial Ruins fell victim to the Earth Eater. I happened to be nearby, so I wanted to be first on the scene. And that brings us to now."

Gilbert prattled on and pulled out his research notebook. It was scribbled full of endless notes with no apparent method of organization—a work only readable by the person who had penned it. As he nearly forced the notes into Mira's hands, he talked on about his observations, expectations, goals, and more.

Realizing that she had blundered into an academic lion's den, Mira was subjected to

the metaphorical mauling that was Gilbert's lecture.

"As a result of my research, I've proposed a hypothesis: everything started a year *before* what happened in the forest north of Grimsdale. Do you know what transpired then?"

"Er, I do not—"

"Then allow me to inform you!"

"Oh, really, that's not necessary..."

"It all began on a floating archipelago in the south of this continent—"

This was just too much for Mira. "I've had enough!" she screamed, clambering up her Dark Knight again to escape.

"I was just getting to the good part." Gilbert crossed his arms, dissatisfied.

Once Heinrich was sure that the lecture was over, he finished maintaining his weapon and stood up. "Let us continue."

"Why can't either of you be interested *at all?*"

"Perhaps because your explanation is too in-depth. Gil, never be a teacher."

"Hmph."

They trudged up the stairs to catch up with Mira.

\* \* \*

Meeting again after a short while, they continued up the dim stairway. Gilbert tried to continue his lecture, but Mira seized every opportunity to change the subject. They continued in peace until they arrived at a wide landing that extended off into the gloom.

The first floor was a long upward slope with forts of piled rocks scattered throughout. Red lights like bonfires shone here and there, but they weren't enough to illuminate the whole floor. Hidden eyes seemed to be sizing up the party.

*Near infinite* was an exaggeration, but that didn't mean there weren't many monsters. With one Biometric Scan alone, Mira found at least thirty, and their only path was forward.

"Time to take out the trash," Mira said, hopping down from the Knight's shoulder.

"Yes, let's," Heinrich said, unsheathing his sword. "We arrived quickly thanks to Garuda, but the road ahead remains long. Gil's lecture took up time, as well. Let's be about it."

He looked to Gilbert.

"Hey, knowledge is power. But as usual, I'll strike first. Mira, just watch for a little while," Gilbert ordered as he grabbed an arrow from his hip quiver. Strangely, Gilbert had no bow, nor did he seem to be taking one from his User's Bangle.

The arrow he held was thick. Holding it in his right hand, he stepped back with his right leg and held the arrow beside his head, slightly behind his ear.

Mira watched in disbelief as his muscles seemed to expand for a moment as he launched the projectile. The arrow cut through the air, and in the distance there was a fountain-like spray of blood.

Gilbert fired a second and third arrow. Each one whistled through the wind like peregrine falcons seizing their prey.

Perfect accuracy. No arrow faltered in the slightest. They cut through monster brows and necks, mercifully ending their lives in a single instantaneous blow. As their comrades fell, other monsters roared, shaking the air with their rage. But in the next instant, their own heads were pierced, and they were abruptly silenced.

Simple, yet effective.

"Quite incredible, indeed," Mira murmured in awe as Gilbert mowed down monsters.

Meanwhile, Heinrich's own fighting spirit was stoked.

"They know we're here now," Gilbert said. "All yours, Hank."

"I've got this!"

After losing ten of their number, the monsters finally screamed and rushed for the three adventurers. Even from afar, their malice saturated the air as they came.

Heinrich plunged into the fray. An agile, tiger-like monster swung at him, but he sliced the creature's arm clean off a mere instant after he passed by it. Heinrich used the momentum of that swing to cut down the monsters behind it. With his katana at his side, he bent his knees slightly and channeled his fighting spirit.

As he released his next attack, every flash left by his sword became a blade of its own that attacked foes. It was like a small tornado, and anything caught in the vortex was turned into chunks of meat totally unrecognizable from their original form.

"Oho. A fundamental technique, but well practiced," Mira said to herself as she watched Heinrich's swordplay.

Just as there was specialized magic for each kind of mage, the warrior class had many fighting styles that one improved at with use. Heinrich had proven his power with one blow.

"I'd better contribute, too!" Mira ran forward, fully motivated by the performance. She was about to draw on her sage skill when she stopped abruptly.

*Whew, that was close. I almost gave Meilin free advertising!*

Having learned that lesson many times by now, Mira instead gave an order to her motionless Dark Knight.

"Exterminate them!" she called in a dignified voice.

The darkness enveloping the Knight grew deeper. Like flickering flames, its crimson eyes burned with bloodlust, and it sped into the fray like a bullet.

A death rattle rang out in the distance. The monster wasn't cut down by the Knight's sword; it was crushed by a body slam. The Dark Knight didn't stop to gloat—it moved from foe to foe, massacring any living monsters left.

"You're much more vicious than you look," Gilbert noted with a chuckle as he sat back and watched the bloodshed.

"What horror..." Heinrich cried, running to join the fray. "Leave some for me!"

In just a few minutes, one man and one monster had cleared the room.

# CHAPTER 9

“WELL, I GUESS you can’t expect much from the first floor,” Gilbert sighed, collecting his fallen arrows. “The monsters

will get stronger as we go. Don’t let your guard down just yet.”

“No worries. Whatever may come, I will cut it down,” Heinrich declared.

Monsters grew stronger as adventurers climbed the Stairway to the Sky. The first floor could be beaten by C- or D-Ranks, but the top floor housed monsters equal to B-Rank.

“You’re stronger than I expected, Mira. I think we’ll have an easy time in this dungeon. Summoning sure is incredible,” Gilbert mused as he wiped the blood off an arrow and put it back in his quiver. He’d simply spoken his mind, but Mira stiffened up as if she’d been struck by lightning. She blinked a few times and literally leapt at Gilbert.

“Again! Say it again, please!” She looked up at him with wide, expectant eyes, as if she was seeing a Ferris wheel for the first time.

Gilbert recoiled in confusion and tried to repeat what he’d just said. “Eh...? Um, you’re stronger than I expected?”

“No, the last part! Say it again!”

“Hmm, you mean about how summoning is incredible?”

“There you go!” Mira burst into a bigger smile than before and continued, elated. “Yes. Yes, it is!”

This was the moment she had been waiting for: the moment in which someone acknowledged the power of summoning.

“I don’t know what you’re so excited about, but let’s hurry on. We’re making good time thanks to the flight here, but our original plan had us near the second floor by now.”

Gilbert started ascending the slope, not acknowledging that his lecture had cost them

quite a bit of time. The others decided to keep that thought to themselves as well. Crossing the first floor, they found another staircase carved into the bedrock, creating an optical illusion in which they seemed to descend upward.

The group heaved a collective sigh and began to climb.

Mira dismissed her blood-soaked Dark Knight and resummoned a clean one to ride.

\* \* \*

For once, Mira wasn't the only strong fighter; Gilbert and Heinrich were more than capable. The party had no trouble clearing the second and third floors. Even the giant bovine monster waiting on the fourth floor had its raised arm pierced by Gilbert, its leg severed clean off by Heinrich, and its roaring throat stabbed by a Dark Knight. It died before it knew what hit it.

Climbing the stairs ended up taking much more time and energy than fighting.

After helping Heinrich dissect the monster they'd just killed, Gilbert checked the time and announced, "That wraps up the fourth floor. I'd say we're back on schedule. Let's clear the fifth floor and set up camp as planned."

As the dungeon was only lit from within, there was no way to tell if it was day or night.

Mira opened her System Menu and mused, "Goodness, eight o' clock already?"

"The meat here *is* rather appetizing," Heinrich noted.

"The ribs, huh? I do like the color of them," Gilbert agreed.

Most of the monsters they'd massacred so far were small, so the adventurers hadn't bothered cutting them apart. They wouldn't have made for very useful materials, and it saved time to leave them behind. But large monsters were different; the abundant, sturdy materials would be useful and thus sell for a good price.

Case in point: this minotaur-like monster had more than just hide and horns. Its meat was a coveted food for adventurers, too. Mira recognized the pair as real survivalists—rugged and pragmatic—when Gilbert set about taking cuts of meat from the carcass.

"Welp, let's get going." Gilbert packed the monster's meat in a big cloth and stored it

inside his User Bangle's Item Box. Only a few bones and a pool of blood were left on the floor, like the remains of a grisly crime scene.

The perpetrators never looked back as they headed for the stairs to the next level.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later, the group arrived at their destination. It was quite a bit narrower than the previous floors, and in the center stood a rock pillar crowned with a gleaming red flame. The otherworldly flame was warm, as if it were a campfire to welcome travelers. The whole floor was painted orange by its light, leaving no place for monsters to hide. If one listened closely, they could hear the whisper of running water.

The fifth floor of the Stairway to the Sky was simply a rest area.

"Here we are. Time to take a break." Gilbert sat next to the stone pillar and produced a set of camping tools from his item box. They were mostly cookware.

"That was quite the effort. Never have I climbed so many stairs in one day." Even Heinrich was tired. He removed his sword from his hip, plopped down, and immediately lay on the ground.

"Bah, I'm only suffering some butt pain." Mira smirked slightly and hopped down from her Dark Knight's shoulder.

Heinrich began to protest, but he clammed up when Mira's skirt billowed up on her descent. Pale skin and a brief glimpse of her panties were all he saw in the moment before she touched the ground.

The words in his mind were vaporized by the sight and never found their way to his lips.



As she dismissed the Dark Knight, Mira cocked her head at Heinrich, who suddenly sat uncomfortably straight. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing!" Heinrich looked everywhere but at her, as if chasing an invisible fly. Finally, he sputtered out, "I'll go help Gilbert."

A few minutes later, Heinrich was carrying water back and forth from the nearby spring.

"You're acting rather strange." Mira walked over and sat cross-legged in front of Heinrich. She looked at him with a glare and demanded, "Have I done something wrong? If so, I won't know until you tell me."

Heinrich hung his head woefully and confessed the truth. "I am sorry, Miss Mira. When you alighted from your Black Knight, I... Erm, I... saw your underwear. Forgive me!" He prostrated himself before her. His perfect stance despite the stiff armor and helmet made it clear that he was a master of the art.

Dumbfounded, Mira leaned over and flipped up the hem of her skirt to check for herself. Finally, she understood and laughed.

"Is that what happened? Well, don't mind it. It doesn't hurt me just because you've seen it, so who cares?" Mira patted her belly. Her demeanor prompted Heinrich to change his angle of attack slightly.

"No, Miss Mira. A young woman of marriageable age is the taboo of all taboos. In my opinion, such revealing clothes are scandalous. But... it is not my place to tell you what to do. All I can do is ask that you take care of yourself."

"Ah, hrmm... Right. I will bear that in mind."

Mira had never felt much shame about her underwear being seen. She also had no concept of womanliness, which only exacerbated her indifference. Even now, Mira didn't think it too important to be as concerned as Heinrich wanted her to be.

"Sorry about him, Mira. Hank's as square as they come," Gilbert said, approaching the other two. He smiled broadly; clearly, he was enjoying the sight of Heinrich embarrassing himself in front of a woman.

"How dare you? Given Miss Mira's beauty, there's no doubt that many men would have

untoward thoughts about her. Best that I warn her before anything happens.”

“But you saw her. She’s a top-class fighter. She can take care of herself just fine.”

“Nrgh... Yes, that is true.”

In the battles from the first to fourth floors, Mira had proven her strength as a summoner. The ferocity of her summoned Dark Knights had roused Heinrich’s competitive spirit. Neither of the men could easily imagine someone who could stand up against her.

“Anyway, it’s almost dinner time.” Gilbert changed the subject and pointed at the stove next to the stone pillar.

There was a tube with a small plate atop it, much like a shichirin charcoal grill. The heat rising from the fire seared the skewered meat that sat atop it. When grease dripped from the meat into the flame, it flared up and sizzled.

On closer inspection, it was indeed ready. In the light of the woodstove, the color of the meat was just the right shade. Mira sprang up, drawn by the scent.

“Oho! Now this looks delicious!” she squealed. When her skirt entered Heinrich’s line of sight, he rushed to stand up. He sighed, his stern face turning a shade sterner.

\* \* \*

The meat of the bovine monster was quite tough, but wonderfully flavorful. It went well with Gilbert’s vegetable soup.

Once the three cleaned their plates, they chatted as they shared Mira’s sweet berry au laits in lieu of dessert. Gilbert and Heinrich’s adventures were the main topic of conversation, but Mira’s summoning magic also came up.

“Still, it’s pretty crazy,” Gilbert mused. “You’d think that a summoner like you would be famous in this day and age. But the only rumors I’ve heard of summoners lately involve some pupil of Danblf’s.” He glanced at Mira suspiciously.

“Danblf was one of the Nine Wise Men, no?” Heinrich asked. “Would they not be another impostor?”

"That's the thing. Again, this is all rumors... but they say *this* one seems like the real deal. I also happened to hear that this pupil is a lovely young lady."

Many people showed up over the years calling themselves pupils of the Wise Men. However, none could back the claim with any skill, and each faded into obscurity. But Gilbert's sources said this time was different. This time, the Écarlate Carillon, King Solomon of Alcait, and acting Wise Man Cleos were all somehow involved.

"Is that so? Wait... a lovely little lady?" Heinrich's eyes turned to Mira.

"Rumors spread fast, don't they? Indeed, they refer to me." Mira puffed out her chest a little out of pride.

Heinrich's jaw and eyes alike hung wide open. He reflexively looked Mira up and down, but stopped when he spotted her captivating thighs peeking out from under her skirt. Gilbert simply chuckled to himself at Heinrich's panicked reaction.

"I have to wonder what someone so famous is doing here, but I won't be nosy," Gilbert said, moving to clean up the wooden dishes. "Either way, it's clear that you'll make our travels a lot easier. I'll do my best not to displease you."

"A true pupil of a Wise Man? Incredible. Now that I've seen the power of your Knight, it is already clear that you're nothing like the impostors," Heinrich said, keeping his gaze aimed in a safe direction.

Between what he had heard in rumors and what he had personally seen, those who had professed themselves pupils before were good mages... but not *great* mages. Yet fighting alongside Mira had shown Heinrich that her summoning had unlimited power.

Mid-conversation, Mira began to squirm at the unavoidable sensation creeping into her bladder.

"So, is there a bathroom nearby? Or are we forced to do our business in the corner?" she muttered to herself, frantically searching around.

Heinrich fell unnaturally silent. Gilbert pointed to a corner of the floor and said, "There's a stream over there. It'll wash away." With that, he turned away from said corner.

"Aha, then I shall. No peeking."

Mira's words, though directed toward nobody in particular, prompted a rather high-pitched yelp from Heinrich. "I-I would never do such a thing!"

He covered his face with both hands and turned away like Gilbert, who snickered at his discomfort.

*Heh. He really is fun to tease!*

When Mira returned, the two men went to the stream for their own business, and Gilbert began washing the dishes upstream.

Heinrich returned and started preparing for bed, clearing away pebbles while occasionally glancing at Mira, who relaxed with both legs outstretched. Before long, Gilbert returned with clean dishes.

"I slept first last time," Heinrich said quietly. "Shall we omit Miss Mira from this duty?"

"Yeah. You and I can just take turns as planned. I doubt you can bear to make her stay up for you anyway, right?" Gilbert answered, currently in the process of boiling water on the small stove. A cup and a container of ground coffee beans stood nearby.

"That is correct. I suppose it's decided."

Overhearing her name, Mira chimed in. "Say, what are you two talking about?"

"We're talking about who keeps watch. Don't worry about it, Mira."

"I will be the one to do it tonight," Henrich said, sternly.

*Keeps watch. Never used to worry about that, but it would be necessary now, wouldn't it?*

Mira knew that she might have to camp often in the future. Who would take lookout duty when she was alone? As the question came to mind, she quickly hit upon a possible answer.

"I say we try letting one of my men do it," she declared.

A magic circle appeared next to Mira, and a suit of armor appeared, lit by the orange light of the fire. It was a Holy Knight. The Knight stood passively next to her, wielding a gigantic tower shield symbolic of its purpose.

Unlike summons like Pegasus, weapon spirits came with a time limit. The mana allotted during their summoning was used to maintain their form. It was consumed when they were destroyed and reconstituted until it reached zero, at which point the summons disappeared. They would also disappear when the summoner dismissed them, or when their time limit ran out.

“I’ve given it a long time limit, so it should easily last until morning.”

“Hm, interesting. This one seems rather different from the black one. Is this Knight strong, too?” From Heinrich’s perspective, a Holy Knight meant to protect would be lacking in offense.

Gilbert, meanwhile, looked in satisfaction at the shield it held. He had heard in stories that the larger a Holy Knight’s shield, the more power it wielded.

“How about we test his strength now?” Gilbert proposed.

“Indeed, let’s. That sounds fun.” Mira readily accepted.

Heinrich smirked with something akin to samurai spirit. After walking away from the center of the floor, he whipped out his sword. “I accept the challenge! To a fair fight!”

\* \* \*

Once both fighters were in their positions, Gilbert signaled for the match to begin.

Heinrich’s sword strokes against the Holy Knight were powerful and precise, but it was like fighting an immovable wall. No matter how he tried, he couldn’t break through its defenses.

“Is this the power of the pupil of a Wise Man?” Heinrich sat down, disappointed at how easily his prided swordplay had been nullified. One could hardly blame him; he’d failed to land a single blow.

However, it looked quite different to Mira. Though the Holy Knight had capable offensive techniques, it was an iron wall specialized in defense. Heinrich’s ferocious

assault had kept it on guard the entire time.

"Don't lose heart. You fought a one-sided offensive battle against my own Holy Knight. A fantastic feat," Mira said kindly, laying a hand on the deflated man's shoulder.

"I-is that so?" Heinrich asked. Even through his sturdy armor, the warmth of Mira's hand on his shoulder caused his boulder-like demeanor to melt.

"Indeed. You have wonderful skill with the sword."

"Truly? But of course!" He roared to the ceiling, his confidence restored.

Gilbert smirked at his friend, who apparently didn't mind being consoled by a little girl.

"If it could fend off my sword so well, then surely it can protect us through the night." Heinrich looked up to the Holy Knight proudly. His dejection from before was all gone; now, he simply had a brazen grin on his face.

"Now that we've got that figured out, let's get to bed. I want to reach those ruins before sundown tomorrow." Gilbert removed his leather armor and set down his quiver. Producing a sleeping bag, he spread it on the ground. Next to him, Heinrich likewise removed his armor, helmet, and katana, before spreading out his own sleeping bag.

*It looks like it's going to come in handy already!*

Mindful of its rather unwieldy size, Mira whipped out the sleeping bag at a slight distance. When the bulky bedding fell to the ground, it puffed a current of wind at the men. Gilbert and Heinrich turned toward the source of the disturbance and found a bizarre object. They looked at Mira.

"Miss Mira, what is this thing?" Heinrich stepped closer and looked upon it with great interest.

The sleeping bag lay sprawled on the floor, its generous top covered in a blue cloth. Just as Mira had, they had trouble figuring out what it was at first glance.

"This is my sleeping bag. Though, it will be my first time using it."

"Good lord, a sleeping bag? It doesn't look the part." Heinrich touched the top.

"I thought so at first, too. A man named... I forget, actually. Anyhow, he said he dealt in adventurer goods, and he gave it to me. According to... er, whatever his name was, he plans to sell these soon." Mira spoke rather proudly.

Gilbert thought for a moment. "Hm. A man dealing in adventurer goods, eh? Would that be Denoir Trading?"

"Aha, yes! That is the one." Mira finally remembered. Dredging up the rest of the encounter from her foggy recollection, Mira reached for the business card in her waist pouch.

Gilbert looked at it in disbelief. "Cedric Denoir, son of the man himself, huh? You sure know some interesting people. I guess that makes this a prototype."

"I'm quite envious." Heinrich seemed captivated by anything that led to good sleep. "Would you be willing to show us how it works?"

"Sure, I don't mind." Mira smiled, charmed by how Heinrich was acting so unlike his usual samurai self.

With her consent, Heinrich turned the sleeping bag around, rubbed the top, and gave it a good look-over. It was a rare opportunity to experience a product before it was placed on store shelves.

"The surface is surprisingly smooth," he noted. "It feels lovely. And the bag is shockingly light, too."

"Isn't it? It is cutting-edge, after all."

"How does it feel inside?" He looked to Mira for permission.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. S-so... how *does* it work?" Heinrich asked with a frown. It was clear from touching it that it was bag-shaped, but he had no idea how to open it.

Mira turned it slightly and pointed at an opening in the bag. "It opens from that slit. Try it out."

"Oh, here? Let's see." Heinrich put a finger in the seam as directed, where he found a

projection, grasped it, and slid it down. The blue cloth folded back, revealing the sleeping bag's true form. "Ho ho! So that's how it works. The inside is quite soft and warm. This seems very comfortable, indeed."

As Heinrich enjoyed himself, Mira suppressed an evil grin.

"Doesn't it? Ah, but it's never been used, so be gentle."

"Of course; I won't be too rough. Oh, look how deep it is! Even I could fit inside."

"My, how forceful you are. Don't spread it open too much," Mira said, eyes glowing with impish delight as Heinrich spread open the top and looked inside.

Watching them, Gilbert let out a sigh and cut in, "Mira, cut him some slack. He's as dense as they come, so he won't figure it out."

"Hrmm. Fine, I've had my fun," Mira said.

Heinrich noticed her gaze and looked up. "Hm? Is something wrong?"

"Yeah. You've been saying some dangerous things to our little friend here," Gilbert warned him, somewhat exasperated.

Heinrich went silent for a moment, and Mira could only flash him an innocent smile.

He asked her to let him know how she slept the next morning and climbed into his own sleeping bag. Mira stripped her coat and placed it next to her pillow before slipping under her blanket. The fabric enveloping her was as comforting as a mother's hug.

As Mira and Heinrich slipped into the rhythmic breathing of sleep, Gilbert looked up to the Holy Knight as if to confirm its trustworthiness, then finally closed his eyes.

# CHAPTER 10

THE MORNING AFTER her first night in the Stairway to the Sky, Mira woke up just after 8 a.m. and greeted Gilbert, who had already awoken and sleepily prepared for the day before getting breakfast. Their breakfast was the same meat from last night, but it went down without any issue.

*Meat for breakfast. How luxurious.*

Mira looked down and patted her belly, thinking back on her eating habits over the last few weeks. Being a Celestial Being had benefits other than not aging, it seemed.

Not long after, Heinrich woke up like a bear coming out of hibernation and slowly began eating his meal.

“Breakfast is the most important meal of the day,” he muttered. By the time he’d finished, he was fully awake and back to his usual self.

After taking a few minutes to clean up their campsite, the three stood before the staircase leading to the sixth floor.

“Now, our objective today is to get to the ruins before sunset,” Gilbert announced. “From here on out, it’s B-Rank territory. Let’s move with caution.”

“My blade hungers,” Heinrich added.

Cold air crept down from the upper floors. The wind whistled eerily down the staircase, but the three ignored it as they began their trek.

\* \* \*

About an hour later, they had cleared the monsters in the sixth chamber and climbed the stairs yet again. From the sixth to ninth floors, the monsters became more diverse and began to cooperate with one another in their attacks.

Still, none could stand up to the Dark Knight’s sword. Every time Heinrich swung his katana, heads flew. Every time Gilbert loosed an arrow, another voice was silenced.

A calm hunter cutting away at their numbers, a samurai with a honed blade, and a Wise Man standing at the pinnacle of her magic. B-Rank fighting power would not stop the three of them together; it couldn't even stop Mira by herself.

About six hours had passed when they arrived at the tenth floor of the Stairway to the Sky. There were no monsters in sight as they stepped into the narrow space.

The cold light of this floor flickered like a half-dead fluorescent bulb, occasionally illuminating isolated pieces of the room. It was a puzzle that one couldn't see the entirety of.

Even in areas where these erratic lights were placed in regular intervals along the walls, the light they cast failed to reach the center of the floor. It only ever drew a vague silhouette of *something* out in the dimness.

"The time has come," Gilbert announced, sitting at the edge of the staircase. "Let's strategize. By the way, Mira, do you know this boss?"

"Indeed, I do." Mira hopped off her Dark Knight's shoulder and sat as well. She didn't just know this boss; she had conquered it countless times.

"That makes this easier. Nothing affects this boss until it starts moving. Once it does, it flies around and throws lightning at you. We'll need to keep moving and stay on the defensive. When it glides in to attack, we smack it down. Got it?"

"I rather dislike this strategy, but I won't object," Heinrich sighed.

Gilbert's outlined plan was the ideal strategy for fighting the boss of the Stairway to the Sky. The lightning it shot was fast, but if you kept on moving, you could evade it. Once it missed with a set number of lightning bolts, it would come in for a gliding attack. That was one's best chance to counter. But this time, they had the perfect person to shake things up.

"I think I can speed things along. I'll go up to it and smack it down myself. You two stay prepared down below," Mira said with perfect calm as she sipped one of her new sweet berry au laits. The wonderfully sweet-tart taste brought a smile to her face.

Gilbert recalled Mira's Pegasus and Garuda summons. She had already shown her abilities well enough that he could easily believe that she had a way of fighting the boss in midair.

"Right," he agreed. "That works for me. Good luck."

"Indeed. Leave it to me."

With their meeting complete and after a short rest, Heinrich led the three to the center of the floor.

One, two, three steps. As they stepped closer, the flickering lights seemed to become brighter and steadier.

Though the ominous silhouette was intermittent before, it gradually took form in the stronger light. The thing standing in the darkness was not white, nor black—it was a dim gray.

As they crept closer, its size became apparent. It was easily three times as tall as Mira.

Stepping steadily forward, they approached until the constant flashing of the light was abruptly extinguished, leaving only a flickering afterimage behind their eyelids.

Sudden darkness. A voiceless sound moaned through the gloom, followed by the slight grinding of metal. There was something there—perhaps dead or dormant—but no doubt there nonetheless.

It is human instinct to fear darkness. Had dozens of seconds passed? Several minutes? Or merely two or three breaths? Just as the room sank completely into blackness, the floor suddenly swelled with a brilliant, pale light.

It assaulted their dilated pupils, causing immediate pain. Heinrich narrowed his eyes and looked straight ahead. Gilbert shaded his eyes with a hand at his brow and reached for his quiver. Mira slowly opened her closed eyes and beheld the gatekeeper to the Celestial Ruins.

It looked like a haggard goat mixed with a decrepit old woman, ugly with age. The creature held a stone spear and shield in its hands, with bird-like wings on its back. A silent stone statue.

"Brace yourselves!" Gilbert commanded, backing up a few paces.

A sound like a house creaking in the night rose from the statue. The entire statue shivered, shook, and shuddered until fine cracks ran across its surface and shards

went flying.

One after another, countless pieces flew off, soon creating a hail of stone. A shard the size of a plank fell from the creature's face and smashed into the ground. In the next instant, it opened its blue eyes wide and shrieked. Its voice rattled even veteran adventurers' nerves.

As the stone armor covering the other half of its body slid and shattered, the Gargoyle Keeper, guardian of the Stairway to the Sky, took flight.

"All yours, Mira."

"Indeed. Be prepared, fellows."

Gilbert tracked the Gargoyle Keeper with his eyes as he held an arrow and watched its angle of flight. Heinrich gripped the hilt of his katana with both hands, always keeping the sharp tip pointed toward the enemy.

The boss flapped its wings and glided through the air. As soon as it moved the hand that held its lightning-clad spear, Mira leapt upward.

"Wha?!" Shocked, Gilbert's eyes widened. Mira hadn't sent Pegasus or Garuda up to spring at the Gargoyle Keeper; she had done it herself. Even Heinrich couldn't stop his mouth from falling agape.

Mira did not notice their shock as she ran through the air, eyes fixed on the monster. Each step brought her higher and closer. The monster turned its focus to the incoming aggressor, pointing its spear at her.

There was a flash like that of a camera, accompanied by a roar that made the whole floor rumble.

Heinrich braced himself, ears ringing from the sound of the lightning strike. Gilbert frowned and searched for Mira. A lightning bolt like that would not bode well, even for her. He regretted not asking for more details about her strategy.

However, he was mistaken.

A great white shield floated before Mira. Gilbert blinked. It seemed like a hallucination, but lightning was clearly being deflected from its center. Now he understood: the

shield had protected Mira. The dull reverberation of the lightning strikes hitting the shield spread throughout the room, the compounding echoes extending the moment on and on—as if they had fallen out of time itself.

Gilbert, Heinrich, and even the Gargoyle Keeper were frozen, processing the aftermath of the lightning. Only one person was making their next move.

Mira vaulted up, spreading her legs without a care for her fluttering skirt, and clung to the top edge of the shield. She didn't have long until her partial summon of the Holy Knight's shield would wear off.

Then she disappeared, as if reality had dropped frames.

It was [Immortal Arts Movement: Shrinking Earth]. To use it, she needed a foothold—the shield—and she was now in striking range of the Gargoyle Keeper. Without hesitation, she pushed out her palm to strike and unleashed the raging winds of [Immortal Arts Earth: Enveloping Gale].

Its stone spear out of position, the Gargoyle Keeper couldn't unleash its lightning fast enough. It could only thrust its shield forward in a haphazard defense.

The surface of the Gargoyle's shield began to disintegrate under the onslaught of Mira's blades of wind, as if ground down by an electric planer. Sacrificing its stone shield, the Gargoyle Keeper beat its wings frantically and narrowly succeeded in escaping upward.

Yet it didn't get far before it was forced to hit the brakes to avoid slamming into the ceiling. That mere instant it took to catch itself would prove fatal. Gleaming black in the pale light, six greatswords surrounded the Gargoyle Keeper and fell upon it like lightning.

The creature raised its arms to block the lethal blades and there were six shrill clangs, as if metal had struck metal. The weapons dug into black hide, bearing down on the fiend with tremendous force, as if gravity had suddenly doubled.

Somehow, the Gargoyle Keeper managed to survive the swords' assault in exchange for the use of an arm.

The monster glared odiously at Mira with blue eyes, its now-useless arm hanging limp by its side. It wasn't just trying to intimidate her; those eyes held its trump card,

heavenly lightning, within. The Gargoyle Keeper turned its full focus on Mira.

But in the next instant, it lurched over and fell to the ground like an exhausted bird. Another black sword had cut off one of the Gargoyle Keeper's wings.

"Here it comes!" Gilbert spotted the boss falling and ran over.

"Our time to strike!" Heinrich stretched his neck and made a mad dash after him.

The black beast smashed into the ground with a thud. The impact must have been damaging, yet it immediately turned to look up. Its eyes wandered above in search of the blasted intruder who had grounded it.

It didn't care for the two men. All it saw was the one who had punched it with a wind-wrapped fist and sliced it with heavy black swords—one little girl, with silver hair and proud, piercing eyes.

Mira's presence had drawn the Gargoyle Keeper's full attention. Taking advantage of its distraction, Gilbert and Heinrich easily unleashed their most powerful attacks. Gilbert took three arrows in hand, breathed for a moment, and then fired them. They flew straight like rays of light, stabbing into both legs and the arm that held the shield.

The sudden impact from an unexpected angle brought the Gargoyle Keeper to its knees. Then came Heinrich, holding his katana aloft like an executioner. He brought down the blade.

His perfect arc stopped just as the tip of the blade grazed the floor. He felt the powerful resistance of slicing through a living monster—its torso was cut clean in half.

Cracks ran through the corpse, and it turned a pale white and finally collapsed into a pile of dust. Its eyes, still gleaming, tumbled out. They focused now on nothing, having witnessed the beast's own demise.

Thus, the battle of the Stairway to the Sky came to an end.

\* \* \*

"Where's Miss Mira?" Relaxing his guard, Heinrich looked up in search of the star of today's fight and found her descending from the ceiling.

Mira landed gently without a sound, accompanied by the scent of sweet berry au lait. "It seems you've finished it off," she said. "Well done."

Gilbert smirked to himself as he watched Heinrich staring at her in stunned silence. "You made things a whole lot easier for us. Anyway, the way you ran through the air. Was that an Immortal Art?"

"Mhm, that's right."

"And what about the shield that appeared out of thin air?"

"That was a summon."

"Wow. You really are Danblf's pupil." This was indeed what it meant to be trained under the continent's greatest summoner.

Gilbert lifted the stone spear and a blue stone from the pile of white dust.

"Here's your cut, Mira." He lobbed the blue stone over to Mira, which landed right in her hand. Static electricity could be seen crackling inside. The Gargoyle Keeper's eyes were jewels aptly called pearls of lightning. They were often used for crafting, so it would be quite useful for Mira.

"Are you certain?" she asked.

"It's the least we could give you, considering the work you put in. The spear is enough for us," Gilbert said, nudging Heinrich with the butt of the Gargoyle Keeper's weapon to bring him back to reality. Heinrich nodded and looked away to cover his blushing face.

With that, the three looked solemnly up at the closed door. "We're finally here," Gilbert said.

The door stretched up to the ceiling, details stained from years of decay. An observer could tell little more than that the design vaguely resembled a person.

Still, it was imposing enough to be worthy of protecting the ancient city now known as the Celestial Ruins. Next to it was a rather out-of-place hunk of metal. Gilbert stood before it and pushed the stone lance into a hole in the middle of it.

There was a mechanical noise from within, and the entire box rumbled. A tremor spread through the floor.

When activated via the stone spear, light from within the box spread like a peacock tail on the wall, creeping in all directions. Then, just as it seemed to disappear behind the door, the image of a person faded and was replaced by that of a wolf looking up to the moon. Then the moon began to shine as if it were real. A ray of light cut through it vertically. The door split in two and opened.

The cold light pouring in through the doorway shone upon the floor. Mira narrowed her eyes in the uncomfortable brightness.

"Well, let's get going," Gilbert said, and walked through the opening door. Heinrich grunted in agreement and followed. Lastly, Mira walked from the dim dungeon into the outside world overflowing with light.

The exit of the Stairway to the Sky was situated on a plateau with a long, wide stone staircase leading below. Mira turned back, noting that the gate looked to be gouged from the cliff face. With a grinding noise, it closed.

From their position atop the staircase, Gilbert and Heinrich gasped in wonder at the scenery before them. Up ahead was a city that looked like a cluster of fossilized mushrooms. There were no signs of people, or even of life at all. It was a strange place—a long time had passed without human intervention, yet it never returned to nature.

"Still daytime, eh?" Gilbert mused. "We made it faster than planned."

"That would be thanks to Miss Mira helping us finish that battle quickly," Heinrich added.

"Yeah. I'm definitely thankful for that." Gilbert squinted, noting the angle of the setting sun and orienting himself with the help of his map.

*This place is just the same as last time.*

Mira gazed at the familiar abandoned buildings and looked off into the distance toward their destination: the Crystal Shrine.

"Still, best not to start the real research until the morning," Gilbert said. "Let's set up a

base first, and then we can do a preliminary check of the location.”

“Hrmm, very well.”

Gilbert used the map to pinpoint places that would work well as base camp. He abruptly turned to Mira.

“By the way, Mira, what will you do next? We’re here at the Celestial Ruins. Are you leaving for your destination?”

“Hrmm, good question.” Mira thought for a moment.

She had come here to find the shavings of the Elder Tree’s roots ostensibly left by Soul Howl at the Crystal Shrine—much easier work than the trek up the Stairway to the Sky. If she went by Pegasus, she could have had her work done in thirty minutes. A rather anticlimactic conclusion, given the journey to get here.

As for Gilbert and Heinrich, their work was only just beginning. They were to investigate the disappearing forests. This wasn’t an in-game event. It was real, and it mattered. Mira hadn’t been in this world for long, but her interest had been piqued by such new realities.

However, that wasn’t all that interested her. The line between normal and abnormal was vague in a fantasy world. But having giant swaths of land scooped out of the ground was certainly the latter. The abnormality of it made Mira uncomfortable. When there were unnatural phenomena afoot, demons were often behind them.

Sometimes demons attacked directly, but there were some that were more subtle.

And the subtle ones were the most annoying.

They worked from afar, taking actions seemingly unrelated to the issue at hand while angling toward their evil goals. If you could see demons behind the curtain and there *wasn’t* a catastrophe yet, that was simply because they were still in the middle of their plan. Only a demon who had run out of other options worked out in the open. The first rule of demon prevention was looking into anything that seemed even a little bit fishy.

Gilbert hadn’t said anything, but this Earth Eater phenomenon could very likely be a demon’s doing.

"We came all this way, and I'm interested in seeing this phenomenon you're investigating," Mira said. "Do you mind if I join in?"

"Yeah, of course you can. Are you curious about the Earth Eater too? If so... how about I tell you everything I know about it?!"

Heinrich interrupted, "We still need to find a camp before sundown."

"That's fair. Mira, we'll chat more later."

"I'd rather avoid such technical conversations..."

Wind in their faces, they trudged down the stone staircase and entered the city of the Celestial Ruins.

# CHAPTER 11

AMONG THE RUINS lay a scattering of dingy white crystals—remnants of the sunlight crystals that had freed this metropolis from the dark of night.

Long ago, the Celestial Ruins had been called the City of the Sun. It was full of sunlight throughout day and night, shining eternally upon its residents. The symbol of the city, sunlight crystals, banished dark and evil alike, and marked the city as a holy land. These crystals amplified and stored sunlight during the day, releasing it in darkness. But now, the place retained none of its past glory. The crystals that had once been used as street lamps had lost all their light.

The history of this place had been pieced together by scholars who had read the countless documents left behind by this fallen city.

\* \* \*

“It’s close to the forest, too. Shall we use it as a camp?”

The large white structure seemed to fit the bill.

It boasted a steeple taller than all the other buildings, with fallen statues of four-legged creatures and orbs lying about. From the outside, it had no apparent structural damage. Gilbert was right; it seemed up to the task.

The three stepped inside to find a large nave with marble pews. Beyond them were the idols of this temple, lined up as if in prayer. They were large statues made of crystal. Even surrounded by weathered gray furniture and discolored walls, the statues shone with their original colors.

*Hmm. Is this the Crystal Shrine?*

Stopping in front of a statue holding a large crystal ball, Mira checked her map. Indeed, she realized, this was the Crystal Shrine she had been searching for. Perhaps it was natural that a place of worship would be sturdily constructed. There were other temples in the Celestial Ruins, but this was the only one with crystal statues.

Mira considered doing her work now, but if they planned to use her target as a base, then she was in no rush. She could gather what she needed and be in another city within a day any time she chose. Considering that her butt was still sore from six hours of climbing steps on the shoulder of a Dark Knight, she had no inclination to sit on Pegasus's back for the rest of the day.

Besides, she was more interested in what was happening in the forest.

\* \* \*

Gilbert finished searching random spots around the temple.

"Now, we've found our base camp. Let's confirm the scene of the crime!" Even if the true investigation would start tomorrow, he couldn't contain his excitement from being the first to witness this phenomenon here. Heinrich had already finished preparing and was currently standing by.

"Leaving already?" As for Mira, she sat on a nearby pew with sweet berry au lait in hand, taking a breather to recover from her fatigue.

"Just a quick look around, so we'll be back around sunset. I'd like to avoid going into the woods at night."

"Hmm, they're rather far. Shall we ride Garuda again? It would be faster."

A shadow passed over Gilbert and Heinrich's faces.

"Uhhh... No," Gilbert stammered. "This place has a different ecosystem, so I think I'd prefer to go on foot to check it out." He was not lying; the Celestial Ruins were cut off from the outside world by a mountain range, leading to a unique evolutionary environment within. There were many materials that could only be gathered here.

"A shame," Mira reluctantly assented. She finished her sweet berry au lait and stood from the pew.

Gilbert and Heinrich both heaved a sigh of relief.

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes after leaving the Crystal Shrine, they had reached the edge of the ghost

town and were approaching the forest. The serene breeze blowing through the forest caressed their faces with cool air, making leaves rustle like gossipy neighbors whispering to each other.

"There shouldn't be any dangerous monsters here; even the carnivores are small. But keep an eye out anyway, because occasionally dragons will appear," Gilbert explained as he led the way into the wood.

Sunlight filtering through the canopy reflected off leaves that sparkled like fish scales. Animals occasionally piped up, though they never showed themselves. There were no signs of human activity as Mira and her companions pushed through the trailless forest.

Unaffected by the solemnity of the forest, Gilbert gleefully skipped around, as if his personality had completely transformed.

"Is this salt-crystal grass? I've heard of it, but it's incredible to see it. Ooh, look at this! It's a spirott tree, and its fruit is nice and ripe. Incredible. You know, these fruits are almost never at markets. Let's pick some to take home with us."

Gilbert clearly hadn't lied when he refused Garuda's ride for the joy of walking.

"When he said we would be back by sundown, he did take this detour into consideration, yes?" Mira asked.

"I'm afraid not," Heinrich sighed. "When he gets like this, things never go quite to plan."

Feeling as though they'd been left behind, the two watched as Gilbert climbed trees like a monkey.

A bit over an hour into their excursion, they saw an opening in the forest canopy.

"I see it. It's right there!" Gilbert sprinted toward the site, and Mira and Heinrich jogged to catch up.

\* \* \*

In the very center of the forest, the natural brush abruptly came to an end, replaced with a clearly unnatural crater.

"Oho, so this is the Earth Eater's work! It's worse than I expected."

There was a huge, incongruous hole. It truly did look as if someone had scooped it out with a giant spoon. The strata of the earth were laid bare, and mud seemed to be settling at the bottom. The crater stretched about five hundred meters across, the other side already disappearing in the evening fog.

There were no signs that anyone else had contaminated or otherwise disturbed the pristine site. Gilbert was right; it must have been a very recent incident.

"I'm so glad we came! A fresh-made hole is truly a sight to see. We won't start investigating until tomorrow, but I'll take some samples back to our camp. Wait there!" Gilbert jumped into the crater before anyone could so much as respond.

"Saaay..." Mira began. "When he mentioned returning by sundown... he *did* take this sample-collecting into consideration, right?"

"Of course not."

The two watched Gilbert running around, vials in hand, and let out a combined sigh.

They both sat down to wait. Mira tried to make small talk with the nervous samurai. They each offered a little about themselves. Mira jabbered on at length about her made-up backstory as the pupil of a Wise Man, while Heinrich expounded proudly on his war stories.

Mira recalled the technique that Heinrich had used in the Stairway to the Sky. She'd recognized those grand sword motions that mowed down enemies in one stroke.

"By the way, you use a katana, no?" she noted. "Where did you learn that?"

"Indeed, I do. I trained at a dojo in the Kingdom of Yamato."

"A dojo in Yamato, hmm? Do you happen to know a man named Yamabuki?"

"Of course I know him! You must be referring to Yamabuki, master of the Mountain-Breaking Snow Style. He was my master. If even a mage such as yourself knows him, then he must be famous indeed."

*Ha! I can't believe I've met a pupil of his here. Fate works in mysterious ways.* Mira smiled

as she recalled her old friend.

Yamabuki was a self-styled traveling warrior who basically did challenge runs: fighting through dungeons with no equipment and only one katana. Mira had met him in a dungeon, where he'd challenged himself to fight one of Mira's Dark Knights one-on-one. They'd been friends ever since. The two had even competed to see how many bosses they could beat.

"I wonder how he's doing now," Mira murmured, looking off into the distance.

Heinrich, watching her, thought her eyes contained a deep nostalgia. He sat quietly, unable to look away from her thoughtful profile.

Gilbert chose that moment to return from gathering his samples with all the joy of a child cradling a new toy. "Sorry for making you guys wait. Let's get back to camp before the sun sets."

Heinrich panicked, tearing his eyes away from Mira. He jumped to his feet and stretched lightly.

"I suppose scholars and researchers are quite alike, regardless of their field," Mira mused.

"Really, I'm sorry. I tried to contain myself, but this was the best I could do." Though Gilbert apologized profusely, he showed no signs of actual remorse.

"It's fine. Nobody forced me to tag along. Besides, I don't mind the two of you," Mira said with a smile.

"So you say, Miss Mira, but he should be more attentive to his surroundings. I'm not sure we can make it back before sunset," Heinrich said, looking to the sky.

The others glanced up to see the blue sky dyed with vermillion, and clouds illuminated by the evening sun. The reddened dome of the sky appeared to Mira like the crater-scarred surface of Mars.

"At this rate, the sun will certainly set before we get back," Mira mused. It was almost time already. She glanced at the silent Gilbert from the corner of her eye and concocted a plan. "Let us call Garuda—"

"If we hurry, it'll be no problem," Heinrich interrupted. "We wouldn't want to trouble you, Miss Mira."

"That's right," Gilbert insisted. "I remember the way back, so it won't take too long if we go straight there."

They wouldn't die if they were late. Another trip via Garuda's talons, however...

"It's really no trouble at all..." Mira grumbled, reluctantly trudging behind them.

The party marched back through the forest with Gilbert at the fore. He used his botany skills well, recognizing the way back via what looked like totally indistinguishable flora. There were no detours like last time, though occasionally he would snap up some grass along the path and stuff it in his bag, or throw a pebble into the trees to knock fruit down for him to catch.

"Dinner tonight is gonna be heavenly." Gilbert continued harvesting without breaking stride.

With that news, Mira forgave his transgressions saying, "I am certainly look forward to it."

They did not make it back before sunset.

The men hung lanterns at their hips, and Mira raised a ball of light into the air as the trio continued to make their way through the night. Yet Gilbert never hesitated in his steps, and they finally escaped the dark, silent wood.

The buildings of the Celestial Ruins appeared different in the black of night. The shadowy, sunken ruins looked tired. Moonlight only barely outlined their silhouettes. When the party looked up, however, the sky was full of stars like scattered beads.

"The sky seems so different from up here," Mira said.

They glittered like faraway city lights, as if the prosperous city of the past had ascended to the heavens and now reflected its glory days down from above.

When they arrived at their camp in the Crystal Shrine, they found dim light trickling from the entrance. It was fleeting, yet warm, and just bright enough to guide them in the dark.

The source of the light was the large statue within, the temple's idol. It was made of sunlight crystal, the last vestige of a civilization once abundant with light.

"First things first—let's eat. I'll get dinner ready right away, so hang tight," Gilbert said upon their arrival. He lined up the many plants he'd harvested, along with the leftover meat from the day before, and readied his cooking gear.

Heinrich busied himself with maintaining his weapon.

Left with nothing much to do, Mira lounged on a nearby pew with chin in hand. Just as she heaved a sigh and closed her eyes to relax, she heard a sound like rain.

The sky had been clear and starry just a few minutes ago. Mira stood and looked outside. Dry air rustled her hair. She looked at the men. Gilbert was in the middle of chopping wild herbs, and Heinrich was polishing his katana with a cloth. Neither was the source of the noise.

"Do you two hear water?" she asked.

Gilbert stopped and listened in. "It must be a fountain. I saw one over that way when I was looking around." He pointed with his knife to a hallway leading to another floor.

"Oho, a fountain?"

Gilbert's words brought something to the surface of Mira's mind. She had been here once during an event that required her to fetch water purified by the Crystal Shrine's light. She'd nearly forgotten about it, but now that Gilbert had mentioned it, she remembered well. Mira looked down at her body.

Her black coat had been dyed gray from dirt and dust, while her feet were covered in mud. It was only natural that she'd be dirty after two days in the Stairway to the Sky, let alone the trek through the forest.

*Come to think of it, I haven't had a bath either.*

She wasn't exactly a clean freak, but she couldn't truly relax in this state.

"Hrmm, I'll be back," Mira said, and turned in the direction Gilbert pointed.

"Eh? Where are you going this late at night?" Heinrich, too focused on his sword to

have heard the whole conversation, responded only to Mira's last few words.

"I'm told there's an active fountain over that way."

"A fountain? I wonder if it's drinkable?"

"Yeah, it's potable. I've already checked the quality," Gilbert answered Heinrich.

"Then it ought to be usable in cooking. Shall I fetch some now?" Heinrich offered.

"Ooh. Yes, please." Gilbert tossed him an empty pot.

It flew not at an arc, but directly at him; Heinrich easily caught it by the handle. Mira was impressed by the stunt. It was clear proof of the depth of their relationship.

The light of the statue reached only a short way outside the nave of the shrine. Mira used her Ethereal Arts to create another ball of light that illuminated her way down the serpentine passage in the direction of the water.

At the end of the hallway, she passed through the remains of a doorway and saw the fountain. It was circular, about five meters across. At the center was a pyramid-shaped sculpture etched with complex symbols and inset with a red jewel. Whatever enchantment was on it seemed to allow water to flow forth from the top eternally. After spilling out, the water ran down grooves in the structure and trickled from small holes, making bubbling noises all the while.

The fountain shone as if made of light itself. Ripples occasionally spread across it like the flickering of a projector.

"Quite the strange place this is," Mira mused.

"Indeed," Heinrich agreed. The two watched the play of light and water within the chamber. It was like looking up at the sun from the sea floor. "Ah, well. I'd best get what I came for."

Heinrich got to work collecting the water flowing from the fountain. He filled the pot two-thirds full and turned around.

"That ought to do it." Heinrich dropped the pot and gasped, unable to squeak out any words for a moment. "Wh-wh-wha?! Why are you stripping?!"

Heinrich picked up the pot and held it over his face.

"What do you mean why? I came to bathe. How can I bathe without stripping?" Mira answered, having removed her coat and shoes. She was just getting to her dress.

"Could you not warn me beforehand?!" Heinrich howled, imagining what he might've seen a few seconds later. Blushing madly, he fled from the room.

"Hrmm. Perhaps I should have waited," Mira grumbled and finished removing her outfit. With an innocent—yet strangely bewitching—smile, she watched him leave.

Naked, Mira stepped into the just-warm-enough bath and used the toiletries she had "borrowed" from the ryokan inn to clean herself. She also submerged her technomancy robes in the fountain and gave them a good scrub.

\* \* \*

After indulging in a much-needed bath, Mira donned her underwear and dress and returned with her coat in hand. She'd dried her clothes and hair using Ethereal Arts. They were still warm to the touch.

Gilbert had been cooking monster meat and wild herbs. Their scents combined to create a mouthwatering aroma that made Mira's stomach rumble.

"Now this is a lovely smell." She sniffed and hummed in delight.

"There are lots of aromatic wild plants, but you can take them to the next level with the right cooking methods and combinations. When you cook pecot leaf with meat, for example, the fragrance really intensifies. It helps with digestion, too," Gilbert rattled off.

In Mira's case, she could only bake, boil, and fry—the most basic cooking methods that a normal man would know. To her, Gilbert's knowledge was truly worthy of respect.

As for Heinrich, he stole a glance at Mira and jolted up as if he'd just remembered something. "I'll go get that water now!" He blurted as he ran past Mira back to the fountain.

*Hrmm. That may have been too much for him.*

Mira reached into her Item Box as if nothing had happened. She threw her sleeping bag on the floor and lay atop it without getting inside.

She figured it was springy enough to be used as a mattress. And indeed, it was just as comfortable as lying in her own bed.

*What a fantastic gift this was. Cedric, was it? I'll have to thank him if I ever see him again,* Mira thought to herself, switching totally into leisure mode. She lay down, cracked open a manga volume she'd picked up at Silverside Station, and enjoyed some lazy relaxation until dinner.

When Heinrich returned, he was once again startled by the state of Mira's skirt. Gilbert chuckled at him.

"Dinner's ready!" Gilbert called out to them a short time later, having used the fountain water Heinrich finally managed to fetch to complete his soup.

"Quite the feast we have here." Heinrich finished cleaning his katanas and stood up.

"It's a fantastic sight." Mira put her open book down.

The two went to the table where Gilbert set out dinner, and the three spent the night chatting around the table like a family.

# CHAPTER 12

THE NEXT DAY dawned on the Crystal Shrine of the Celestial Ruins, morning sun gradually dyeing the world orange.

Gilbert and Heinrich would begin their investigation in earnest today, so they spent the morning preparing to head back to the site. Mira planned to retrieve what she needed from the depths of the Shrine and then go home.

It was time to say goodbye.

“You’ve been a big help, friends,” Mira announced and held out her hand.

Having finished checking his investigation equipment, Gilbert grasped her hand firmly. “Same to you. Without you, we would’ve had a lot more trouble during our climb. I certainly appreciate going under budget on medicine.”

“Hm, well... you’ve taught me much. I am fortunate to have met you too, Miss Mira.” Though a blush colored his cheeks, Heinrich’s words were sincere. He looked Mira in the eye and returned her handshake as well.

“Well, take care of yourselves.”

“Yeah. You too, Mira.”

“I pray for your good health.”

With that, Gilbert and Heinrich left the Crystal Shrine and headed for the forest. They hadn’t known each other long, but Mira considered them a pleasant pair. She smiled as she saw them off and then turned back into the temple.

From there, she descended the stairs.

\* \* \*

Mira’s artificial light fell upon the weathered stone walls. Each step on the stone stairs echoed over and over in the deep darkness. The third underground floor at the very

depths of the Crystal Shrine was Mira's destination. She now stood in the Chamber of Purification, just outside the Lustrous Crystal Chamber.

At the center of the Chamber of Purification, cloaked in stifling darkness, was an altar. It was carved out of a pillar, and it contained a single dirty crystal ball. Relying only on her ball of light, Mira approached and pressed the ball into the altar.

Immediately, the device started up. Muffled noise came from all directions, creeping up the walls and finally converging on a single point. It sounded like someone dragging a heavy leather bag. A breeze blew through the chamber.

Backing away from the altar, she moved toward the back of the room. As she did, a gap opened up in the stone wall. It was just big enough for an adult to fit through, and warm air flowed from inside. A mossy, grassy scent wafted up to her nose. It smelled like a thicket in summer.

The passage behind the hole was about the same width, continuing deeper and deeper. Mira pressed on without hesitation until she spotted light seeping in from ahead.

"This really is farther than it looks," she complained as she stepped into the source of the light.

It was clear how the Lustrous Crystal Chamber got its name. A square room with walls about ten meters long, its ceiling was covered in crystal. At its center was a chunk of crystal about the size of a curled-up child. A pillar of white light extended from the ceiling down to this crystal, which refracted it like a prism, shooting light in all directions to form bright spots throughout the chamber.

"Now, where would they be?" Mira walked toward the chunk in the middle of the room, with its many crisscrossing beams of light. Patches of moss sprouted here and there, and water occasionally dripped from the ceiling.

Just for fun, she reached into the pillar of light, which was as warm as a ray of sunlight. This light turned black crystals into white crystals. If Soul Howl's aim was efficiency, it was probable that he had done his work next to this very light.

Mira drew her hand back from the light and squatted down. There she started rummaging around on the floor of gravel, dirt, and moss.

After she'd taken a single lap around the room in search of the shavings, Mira rested

her elbows on the crystal and put a hand to her chin. “Hrmm...” she hummed, frowning.

She hadn’t found anything that fit the description. However, an unnatural heap of moss drew her eye.

Pushing aside the top layer of vegetation, she found a pile of surprisingly fresh wood shavings. It smelled just like the Forest of the Devout—no doubt these were the shavings of the Elder Tree she’d been searching for.

*Is it possible to date these?*

The plan was to figure out when Soul Howl had visited based on these shavings. However, the shavings lying in crisp curls on the floor looked as if they’d been carved within only the past few days. Perhaps her doubt was natural.

Mira saw the moss spreading over the shavings as proof that it had not been so recent, and she thought for a moment.

*Well, this is outside of my field of expertise. I should just do what I need to.*

Mira picked up the whole pile, moss and all, and shoved it into the leather pouch she had brought for the job.

She searched the rest of the mossy ground, found another pile, and collected it too. With that, she left the Lustrous Crystal Chamber and returned to the Crystal Shrine without looking back.

\* \* \*

“All that trouble to get here just for that.”

Now that she’d recovered the shavings, Mira’s job here was complete. She mounted Pegasus and headed toward the entrance of the Celestial Ruins, looking down upon the tomb-like buildings. She planned to use the secret one-way exit nearby.

She hopped down from Pegasus just before the stairs and stepped over to the right side. As she did, a dark hole came into view, hidden from the main staircase. Mira soon arrived at a dome-shaped chamber with a magic circle engraved in the middle.

She stepped into it without hesitation. After a few moments, the magic circle began to

glow. With a lightness that felt as though the gravity had been halved, the floor sunk down with Mira in tow. She reached the bottom floor in ten minutes.

From the chamber that contained the magic circle, she stepped into a hallway echoing with only her footsteps and the sounds of a babbling brook. She soon found herself in front of a familiar broken stone gate, and exited into a large cavern.

Mira summoned a Dark Knight. It could handle any monsters between here and the forest beyond.

\* \* \*

When she entered the woods, warm air enveloped Mira's cold body. The scent of greenery was almost overpowering, but the spring air soothed her as she breathed in. When she exhaled, it blew through the trees and scattered off in all directions. Mira once again mounted Pegasus, who quickly rose above the abundant green canopy.

The forest at the edge of the mountains thinned beneath her, and Mira flew over open plains for a while. She pondered her future plans: should she head to the station and begin the journey home, or should she go see how one of the three strongest countries on the continent had evolved—in other words, do a spot of sightseeing?

"What to do?" she muttered to herself thoughtfully. But when she checked how much money she had left in her waist pouch, she swiftly made up her mind. "Everyone needs a day off once in a while. I came all this way, so let's call this a fact-finding mission."

Satisfied with this excuse, Mira turned Pegasus toward Ridel, the capital city of Alisfarius.

\* \* \*

Once she figured out how to read manga while riding Pegasus, she did so for nearly two hours. When the Holy City of Ridel appeared like a mirage in the distance, Mira realized that it was nothing like what she remembered.

"Hm. This is... the right place, isn't it?" After confirming on her map that this was indeed the capital, Mira suppressed a grin and let excitement bloom in her heart. Nostalgia was fine, but new discovery was even better.

The wide road heading into the capital was a sea of people, a reminder that this was

one of the Three Great Kingdoms. Even just looking down on it from above, there was certainly no shortage of traffic. Each and every intersection added to the numbers approaching the capital. The crowds were so loud that Mira almost thought she could hear snatches of conversation from her lofty perch.

Once she was close enough, she landed in a nearby field and joined up with the crowd flooding in. They were packed shoulder to shoulder as the traffic reached the main gate.

*It's so strange to see it in person.*

The gate at the entrance of the city was white, with perfectly uniform stones forming the outer arch. The gleaming silver doors were currently open. A few bespectacled gatekeepers stood beside them and watched the traffic.

Mira's eyes, however, weren't on the gate. If one shifted their gaze just slightly upward, they would spy a curtain of light encircling the city like a wall, continuing upward as far as the eye could see.

This was the most obvious change from the Ridel she knew. The stone castle walls that once protected the city were now behind the curtain. As the city had expanded beyond its previous walls, this curtain of light made with modern technology had inherited their job, expanding outward with the city.

The magical barrier swayed slightly in the summer wind. It emitted the full spectrum of the rainbow, looking about as sturdy as a bubble. Yet Mira knew the Three Great Kingdoms to be impenetrable.

Back when players fought rival factions constantly, the strongest player country declared war on one of the three—the Grimsdale Empire—and got thoroughly trounced. Ever since then, no country had declared war on any of the three.

Mira had seen their power firsthand on Alisfarius-based quests. Thus she was deeply interested in the curtain before her as another of the Three Great Kingdoms' accomplishments.

Before she passed through the gate, Mira broke away from the flood of people to speak with one of the men guarding the gate. “Say, you there. May I ask you a question?”

“What is it, little miss?” His voice was clear and calm. He looked down at Mira with a

kind smile.

"What is that wall of light stretching over this gate? Is that a castle wall of sorts?"

"Yes! They call it the Rampart Barrier. Only the bigshots know the details, but I hear it's an application of technomancy and exorcism."

The man looked through the gate at the physical walls which had once protected the capital. Mira followed his gaze and took in the sight of the new parts of the city. All the buildings were white, and trees rising here and there proudly spread their leaves.

"I see. Technomancy certainly is a broad subject."

"They've got flying ships these days, too, you know." The gatekeeper looked back to Mira and flashed her an affable smile.

She glanced up at the sky and replied, "Indeed," just as a bird flew by like a black dot under the sun.

\* \* \*

Mira strolled through the city, taking in all the new construction since her last visit. The change was overwhelming. As a very religious country, Alisfarius used the color white everywhere. A quick glance around revealed a sea of white stone and pale lumber.

Unlike before, there seemed to be a trend toward public gardens. The city had planted latifward trees here and there. Latifwards were sacred trees in the Holy Kingdom Alisfarius, especially known for their beautiful purple flowers in the summer.

But the reason it was a holy tree was not its *purple* flowers. Once every ten years, the trees blossomed with white leaves and white flowers. When harvested, the blooms could be used as a panacea to humans and a toxin to monsters. Legend had it that once upon a time, an ancient hero known as Forsetia had used the medicine to survive certain death.

*As I recall, Forsetia's descendants are all kings of the Three Great Kingdoms.* Mira thought back to the stories of a friend who loved uncovering the world's lore as she gazed upon the many latifwards.

The Ridel of the past had trees planted in parks and along streets, but now, there were half as many trees as there were houses. Green seemed more plentiful than white at this point.

Mira cut away from the main street and enjoyed some sightseeing. In a residential area, gaggles of children played gleefully. Boys climbed the holy trees next to their homes and jumped down as tests of courage. Girls holding dolls formed groups to play together. Not long after, the boys were talking and laughing on benches, and the girls were running around together.

Housewives gossiped in the shade, and carpenters diligently carried out their work. The people casually passing by seemed so interesting to Mira. She was entranced with how *real* everything seemed.

Before she realized it, she'd passed through the neighborhood and arrived at a shopping district. The place was still mostly dominated by white, but the people's clothes and the shops' interiors came in all colors. Children ran around, weaving between adults. She noticed many women with baskets, yet men and adventurers seemed sparse.

This shopping district was for the locals. Unlike the shops lining the main boulevard, which catered to travelers and adventurers, this street was filled with products that would be used in the home. Mira walked through, peeking into butchers' shops and greengrocers until she couldn't resist the scents anymore. She stuffed herself with skewered meat and small snacks until the beast within was sated.

After more aimless wandering, Mira stopped in front of a shop. Its door was wide open, and the clientele running in and out were mostly children.

"What is this place?" she murmured to herself, peering into the white, warehouse-like structure.

Mira saw what looked to be a counter. Behind it, a woman in an apron accepted money from a boy, handing him something angular, about the size of a fist.

The walls were lined with cases and displays. She took a few steps back and glanced around the shopping district again. This was the only shop serving a vast number of children.

Curious, she wandered inside. The interior was the ubiquitous white, lending an air of

brightness and cleanliness. Further inside, many tables and chairs were set up. Children faced each other across each table, as if performing some sort of ritual.

Each table also had a group of spectators clustered around it, with shouts occasionally erupting from one group or another. Mira felt a pang of nostalgia—she remembered a time when she, too, had been happy just to hang out with friends.

As she looked on, Mira noticed an adult woman sitting alone at one of the tables.

*Someone's mother, maybe?*

Mira paid the woman little mind. Drawn in by children's enthusiasm, curiosity finally spurred her to approach one of the tables.

The kids there were excited. So excited, in fact, that they didn't budge to allow her inside the circle. Mira stood outside, stretching her neck in vain to see what was going on within. She gave up, realizing that there were plenty of tables a little less packed. She peeked at another table.

*Could it be?*

The two boys at the table faced each other, each holding his cards in a fan shape. On the table were piles of cards, and a large sheet spread across the surface marked with boxes and diagrams. There were cards placed atop the diagrams.

It was a trading card game. Back in Mira's Japan, trading cards had all been converted to augmented reality, but kids still loved to play. Mira had never seen the original tabletop form as they played it now. She found herself gripped with nostalgia.

She was so taken with the game that she didn't realize the boy opposite her had stopped playing, distracted by the appearance of such a pretty girl.

"Eh, what's this?" Mira's eyebrows shot up.

Her eyes focused on a particular card on the table. The boy sat in silent confusion until, after looking at Mira and back to the table several times, he suddenly remembered that he was playing, and refocused on the cards in his hand. Oblivious, Mira continued to examine the card that caught her attention, which had a name and artwork on it.

It was Heinrich the Avalanche... the very samurai who she had been with until this

morning.

*That really must be him. They've portrayed him quite heroically.*

Mira checked the other cards and saw some featuring monsters such as goblins and ghouls. What other cards might they have? Curious, Mira circled the table—not realizing that she was gathering quite a lot of attention—and saw other names she knew well. Leoneil from the Karanak Mages' Guild, Emella of Écarlate Carillon, and Garrett of Alcait's Mobile Armored Division all had cards of their own.

But the most notable of all of them was Kenoh Kojiro the Fist, a player who had been famous in Danblf's era.

Mira lifted her head and looked around. Finally, she had a clear picture of the whole situation.

The display behind a group of kids—who nervously looked away when she glanced at them—was full of valuable cards, carefully placed and preserved. At the counter, they sold packs of five random cards each.

Of course! This mysterious building was a card shop.

*If such games are popular here... would this be the work of former players, too?*

Elated by the feeling of essentially jumping back in time, she started looking around the display for a certain card... *her* card.

Amidst the most expensive cards was a very familiar name.

“Hello, Cleos.”

Mira searched carefully, yet no Danblf could be found. In fact, she found no card based on any of the Wise Men.

# CHAPTER 13

SURELY THE NINE WISE MEN had cards, right? Mira turned away from the display, disheartened. She headed to a nearby shelf to find sealed packs. Each colorful pack had a two-hundred-ducat price tag attached.

“Oho. Now we’re talking...” Bewitched, she took a pack in hand. It had illustrations of the Three Great Kingdoms’ generals on it. In large text, the name of the game read LEGENDS OF ASTERIA. Below it was the subtitle THREE DIVINE HEROES.

The shelf was full of *Legends of Asteria* expansions. Each booster pack bore different subtitles, and she grinned as she read them.

*They seem quite popular, too.*

She turned over the pack and saw a basic description: BECOME A GOD AND CREATE YOUR OWN LEGEND WITH THE HEROES OF THIS WORLD! A touch bombastic, to be sure. It also noted that there were five card rarity levels. Mira put the pack back on the shelf as the expansion immediately next to it caught her eye: NOVA OF SORCERY. Crimson hair, a striking bosom, and provocative red eyes.

*That’s Luminaria, I know it! Then does that mean... there’s a card for me?!*

Hope rekindled, Mira took the pack to the counter and asked the employee, “Excuse me! Do you have a moment? I’d like to ask a question.”

The counter was covered in deck boxes and playmats. A woman sat and flipped lazily through a book, her long, graying hair and beautiful features rather muddied by her sleepy eyes. She looked like she’d just pulled a double shift.

“Yes?” The woman slotted a bookmark into her book and gazed straight at Mira. Her sleepy expression didn’t change much, but from the faint smile plastered on her face, it was clear that she was at least trying.

“Does this expansion have a Danblf card?” Mira asked, setting a booster pack on the counter.

"Danblf? He's one of the Nine Wise Men, isn't he? Yeah, he'd be in that one. Maybe in a couple of these others, too. Oh, but he's really rare in all of them." The clerk appeared to know her stuff. She grabbed two more booster packs and laid them next to the one Mira had brought up. Their subtitles were ROARING WINDS and HOUR OF TUMULT.

"Okay. Can I get fifty packs of each?" Mira asked, and began fishing around in her waist pouch.

The woman was shocked. Fifty packs of three expansions, at 200 ducats each—30,000 ducats in total. The only people she knew who shopped this extravagantly were adults addicted to card games or grandparents trying to spoil their grandkids.

Still, she replied with a professional, "One moment," took the packs from the shelf, and counted them out as she placed them on the counter. As long as Mira paid, the clerk wasn't going to argue.

One hundred and fifty packs. The veritable mountain of boosters piled on the counter was a bizarre sight, even in a shop for kids' games. Several people playing at the tables peered over at the counter with wide eyes. She may have been a little girl, but Mira was a big spender.

"That'll be 30,000 ducats," the cashier said.

A murmur went through the crowd, but Mira didn't even notice; to her, it was just the usual background noise of children playing. She nodded to the clerk and slid a gold coin across the counter—50,000 ducats.

The clerk squinted at Mira, as if this small girl was too dazzling to look at. Deciding that she must be some rich little miss, the clerk sighed before returning two mithril coins. "Ah. Um... Your change comes out to 20,000 ducats. Thank you very much."

Cradling her bulging bag, the tiny mage looked around the room and scurried over to a table that had just opened up.

"Holy craaap..." someone said as the kids looked on with jealousy and curiosity. Preening a bit at their reaction, Mira plopped her bag onto the table and sat down.

*Now, will I find myself in here?*

Butterflies filled her stomach—a mixture of the desperate desire to pray and the total

confidence that she was about to score—a flurry of emotion she hadn't felt since childhood.

As the crowd gathered around, Mira pulled a pack from the bag at random, as if drawing lottery numbers. She unsealed it and looked at the cards...

\* \* \*

Thirty minutes later...

*Hrmm. Not what I expected.*

Mira had neatly organized all seven hundred and fifty cards in order of rarity atop the table. On the far-right end was the single rarest card she had pulled.

*Fuzzy Dice? I've never even heard of this guy.*

It was a triple rare, the third highest. She hadn't pulled Danblf, any of the other Nine Wise Men, or even their acting deputies.

"All duds..." Mira cried at her results and flopped face-first onto the table.

Yet it remained a mountain of treasure to the kids. Given the sheer volume, the right appraiser could find some decent cards in the pile. Some cards might be uncommon among their rarity bracket, or some low-rarity cards might have some competitive use.

A path opened up through the crowd and a boy stepped out. From the way the others made way for him, he seemed to have some clout among the regulars here.

"E-excuse me, Miss? Was there a specific card you wanted? Maybe I could trade with you, depending on what it is." His small voice sounded bold amid the crowd, but his words were kind.

Mira looked up and saw a boy with black hair in a bowl cut under a knit cap. He looked a little older than Tact, the boy she'd met in Karanak. He blushed nervously as he waited for her answer.

*Hm, trading? Perhaps I could with so many cards... But really, I just wanted to see it.*

"Do you have a Danblf?" Mira asked.

The boy frowned and shrugged, perhaps disappointed that he didn't get to show off his collection to a cute girl.

"Danblf is a Wise Man, right?" He asked. The boy checked the cards on Mira's table and shook his head. "Even if I had him, all of those cards combined wouldn't be worth as much as him."

"Oho. Are the Nine Wise Men so rare?"

"Duh. They're *legendary* rare. I haven't seen someone buy this many packs in a long time, but you still don't have anywhere near enough." The boy plucked one of the empty wrappers scattered about the table. It landed face side-down and perfectly displayed the rarity contents on the back. Among them, the rarest were indeed the legendary cards. "The legendary cards only come one in every thousand packs."

Other kids muttered in agreement.

"Yeah, I gave up on 'em."

"Anyone who can pull a legendary is legendary himself."

"A thousand?!" Mira gasped. "What sort of cheap bastard made that decision? Now I want to see it even more!" At that rate, Mira realized she could buy every pack in the store and still come out with nothing.

Mira stuck her lip out and pouted, holding an empty pack in her hand.

"If you just wanna see one," the boy ventured, "I can show you. I don't have Danblf, but I do have a Wise Man." The pride in his voice was clear, even under his nervousness.

"Ho ho! Now that's fantastic. May I see it?" Mira gazed up at the boy with round, expectant eyes. It was almost too much for his young heart to handle. What youth wouldn't go the extra mile?

The boy almost forgot to breathe for a moment. Recovering, he shouted, "Sure!" to cover up his intense blushing. He pursed his lips as he took a fist-sized box from his waist pouch. It was bright red, with the words *Legends of Asteria* written in golden script.

"Get ready. *This* is a legendary card." He flipped through his case to gingerly pinch a single card. With this dramatic lead-in, he whipped it out and slammed it down on the table like a master shogi player placing his piece. The other kids gasped in amazement.

The legendary card had a gold border, gleaming as if to declare its superiority over the triple rare already on the table.

The card's face depicted a man wrapped entirely in black with only his eyes visible, like some sort of black mummy. Above the art, in gold text, was written "WISE MAN WALLENSTEIN THE SHADOW."

"Ho ho! Wallenstein, eh? They've portrayed him as a real badass here." The card reminded her of the man himself. Mira smiled distantly, overcome with nostalgia.

In front of her, the boy found himself unable to look away as a sudden air of maturity descended upon her features. He stood with mouth agape, grappling with the vague fluttering of first love.

*So my card should be similar, right? A shame that I couldn't see, but this will do for now.*

"Thank you," Mira said. "I appreciate you showing me this."

"Y-Yeah. It was nothing, y'know."



Mira handed the card back to him, and the boy forced his scattered brain back together. But as he took it back, he accidentally brushed Mira's hand in his panic. The warmth of the touch ran through the boy's body like an electric shock. Face burning, he slid the legendary card back into his case with trembling fingers.

*Hrmm... Wallenstein, eh? I wonder if he knows anything about the white pillar or Nebrapolis.*

Wallenstein was the Wise Man of Exorcism. He'd be the one with knowledge of all monsters, fiends, demons, and other things. He was also an ace at puzzling out cryptic books.

But Mira had no way to find him. The trading card certainly offered no clues to his whereabouts.

Wallenstein wasn't her goal, but now that she'd seen a card with a Wise Man on it, she turned her attention back to the table and her seven hundred fifty cards. She was more of a collector than a player. Now that she'd bought the cards, she wasn't especially interested in playing the game.

*What should I do with these, then?*

She looked at the kids gathered around and made up her mind. She sorted through the stacks, taking one of each card and leaving the dupes behind. Then she put her new collection into her bag.

"You're free to take anything you'd like." She gestured toward the hundreds of cards left on the table.

The kids were shaken and refused to reach for any of the cards at first. They looked at each other and whispered frantically.

Finally, the boy who had shown her his Wallenstein card said, "Wait, are you serious? You can't build a deck with the cards you kept... Just this card here goes three to almost every deck! And you can never have enough of this one." He gestured toward cards in the magic and weapon categories. His blush was gone; he now spoke seriously, as an expert in his field.

"Eh, I don't even know the rules. Come on, guys, if you need any of this, take it. Just don't fight over them."

The kids began to clamor, finally realizing they would receive her spoils. Their excitement mounted as they surrounded the table.

"Hey, people *are* gonna fight over these," the boy broke in again, exasperated. "There's a whole lot of really good cards here."

"Hrmm, is that so?" She raised a rare card up over her head for the kids to see and asked, "Do any of you wish to have this card?"

All their voices stopped at once. One child raised his hand and answered, "Me!" Immediately after, others followed suit.

*Hmm... First come first served is definitely out of the question.*

"Then let's play rock-paper-scissors. Whoever wins gets it." As soon as she said it, Mira wondered if rock-paper-scissors even existed in this world.

Evidently it did. The children whipped around toward each other and brought their fists down as they cried, "Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!" Before long, the activity in the card shop—now more of a rock-paper-scissors tournament—conlcuded with rare cards distributed in the least violent manner.

There was little demand for the more common cards, so people were free to take them without it turning into a brawl. Either satisfied or exhausted, the kids thanked Mira and left her alone. Only the boy who spoke to her before remained.

As Mira wondered how she'd deal with the remaining cards, the boy gestured toward a black box in the corner. "If you don't want 'em, you can throw 'em in that box," he said. "People can take whatever they want from it." It was akin to a recycling bin.

"Oho, nice." Mira picked up her cards and peeked inside the box. Indeed, it held nearly a hundred cards free for the taking. That done, Mira turned, smiled, and tousled the boy's hair. "Thank you for teaching me, young man."

Shocked by the sudden contact, the boy's jaw dropped. For several moments, he stood still, experiencing the world in slow-motion, until his brain seemed to catch up to the normal flow of time.

"N-no prob!" He looked Mira straight in the eye as his cheeks flushed anew. Then he lost his nerve and looked away. Too much, too fast.

Mira paid his actions little mind, treating him as she would any child. "Goodbye, now. Make sure you get home before dark."

Mira headed for the exit. She seemed to the boy to grow exponentially further with every step.

Screwing up his courage, the boy called out to her. "Wait!" he said, with a cracking voice that came out so quietly he wasn't sure she'd hear him at all.

She stopped and turned around. "What? Is something wrong?"

Her silver hair swished gently across her back. Mira's gaze, like a cold spring day, made the boy's heart flutter—yet he managed to get himself under control.

"My name is Marian. What about you...?"

"Ah. Right, I didn't introduce myself. Call me Mira."

"Huh. Mira..." The boy seemed to take a moment to commit that to memory. "Are you coming back tomorrow, Mira?"

Mira mentally ran through her itinerary.

From here, she would go to the station city of Holy Gate and stay the night. She would leave around noon for the Kingdom of Alcait based on the railroad timetable. Until her departure, she would wander around the station city and perhaps buy some souvenirs for Solomon and the others. In other words...

"No."

"Oh."

Marian looked down and sighed. He gathered his determination, pulled his card case out of his waist pouch, and yanked a card out. "Here... you can have this! So..."

*Don't forget me,* he almost said.

Mira cocked her head in confusion. Was this boy offering to give her an extremely rare card out of nowhere? She was satisfied just to have seen it; she couldn't take something so valuable from a child.

"What are you talking about? I don't—" It finally dawned on her. Marian was acting nervous. His face was so red, it looked sunburned. And most of all, he was trying to give his most treasured possession to a girl.

Marian had a crush.

*I get it. I guess this was inevitable.*

"You care about that card, don't you? I can't take it. But I accept your feelings," Mira said, placing her hand gently on his.

This contact, even more sudden and deliberate than the last, caused Marian to stare at Mira's hand and flap his mouth rapidly like a fish out of water. The warmth of her hand left him almost speechless. Eventually, he mustered an "Okay..."

"Be well, Marian. Listen to your parents and treasure your friends," Mira warned with a mischievous grin.

"Jeez, you sound like my grandpa." Marian responded sadly, knowing she would soon be gone.

"Farewell."

"Come back any time. I'm always around!"

"Perhaps, if I have the chance."

Marian stared at Mira for as long as he could after she waved to him and departed, in hopes of keeping the sight of her in his eyes forever.

\* \* \*

"I'm a heartbreaker now," Mira murmured to herself as she mounted Pegasus and flew away from the Holy City Ridel.

# CHAPTER 14

AFTER STAYING THE NIGHT at Holy Gate, Mira rose early and looked around the station for souvenirs as she waited for her noon departure.

Even the station maintained the signature look of Alisfarius—everything was pure white, with furniture reminiscent of a temple. Yet the station was just as bustling as any other. It overflowed with passengers even in the early morning.

The shrill sound of a bell filled the air, followed by an announcement about the train schedule. It was a Counterclockwise Loop announcement. Mira had taken the Counterclockwise Loop before, but to head back towards Grimdart, she'd need to find the platforms for Clockwise Loop.

Mira listened to the musical trio of the ground rumbling, the bell, and the steam whistle as she watched a wave of passengers roll through the station to catch the Counterclockwise train.

Once they'd departed, things were much quieter. Mira took the opportunity to continue searching the shops. The souvenir store here was quite unlike the one in Silverside. It was full of holy books, holy symbols, and holy everything else.

"Can you even call this a souvenir?" Mira muttered, picking up a statue modeled after the Alisfarian goddess.

The figurine had long pink hair spilling over layered angelic robes. It wore a benevolent smile. Mira could see it was intricately made, with the artisan's skill plain in many places. A wonderful figure, indeed.

"This is... I see. Now this makes sense," Mira muttered as she saw the artist's name engraved on the goddess's robes. It was Tomoki—the former player she'd met in the Forest of the Devout. He'd mentioned that he carved religious figures, but Mira was amazed by the quality. Before putting it back, she tilted the figure up just slightly and muttered, "White, huh?" before heading towards the food displays.

Snow-white peaches were a famous specialty of this country, so the stores here had plenty of peach-flavored candies and drinks to choose from.

## *What should I buy?*

Mira thought of the people who'd worked to make her technomancy robes and bought all kinds of white peach cookies, jam, and juices for them. She also picked out souvenirs for Mariana, Cleos, Luna, Solomon, Luminaria, and herself. 80,000 ducats of damage.

Having fulfilled her obligations, Mira indulged in some personal shopping. She looked into the bookstores and reached up to the highest shelves when people weren't looking. She bought the next volumes of all the manga she enjoyed and made the most of her time waiting.

\* \* \*

More passengers came in as Mira shopped, and soon there was an announcement that the Clockwise Loop train would arrive in an hour. Taking that as her signal, Mira headed to the section bustling with restaurants.

"Very... white."

It seemed the Alisfarian aesthetic extended even to food. Mira bought a fresh spring roll bento and 300 ducats worth of tea.

Prepared for her journey, she made for the platform. Then she stopped in her tracks. She'd been so focused on choosing souvenirs that she'd forgotten to buy tickets.

"Right, right. Tickets."

After opening her System Menu and checking the time, Mira searched for the ticket counter. She queued up at a window manned by a kind-looking lady. When her turn came, she opened her pouch as she spoke to the woman.

"I'd like to buy tickets." Mira peeked over the counter. She must have resembled a child on an errand, and the woman looked at her sweetly.

"We have tickets for economy, premium, and first class. Which would you like today?"

"I would like first—" Mira began to reach for 100,000 ducats, but her hand froze in place. Her funds were... *lacking*.

*Argh. I splurged too much!*

She pursed her lip in frustration as she looked into her depleted wallet. First-class travel, trading cards, and souvenirs ran through her mind.

“Ehh... Five *economy* tickets, please.”

“Certainly, young lady. That will be 15,000 ducats.”

Best to take the cheap seats now and be able to afford a room at an inn when she arrived at her destination.

\* \* \*

“Continental railroad service status announcement. The Clockwise Loop train will soon arrive at the station. It will depart one hour after its arrival. Again...”

The crowds within the station began to flow onto the platform. Mira slipped into the crowd and was swept along towards her train.

*So, this is economy class?*

It was entirely different from first class. The layout was clearly designed to handle the flood of people, making the process nearly automated. People formed queues, and deeper in, dozens of pillars divided the crowd before allowing them onto the platform proper.

The platform was much larger than the first-class platform, if nowhere near as posh. Its walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in white stone tiles. Unsure where to stand, Mira found herself herded into one of the naturally forming lines. People crowded around on all sides, and she could barely see a few meters in any direction.

Mira walked on uncertainly, feeling like a new student in her first-period class, waiting for the teacher. After ten or so minutes of waiting in line, she spotted passengers feeding their tickets into ticket gates. Grasping the process, she breathed a sigh of relief and retrieved a ticket from her waist pouch.

*It's just like a turnstile.*

The automation reminded her of her old world—so much so that she realized it had

to have been designed with that in mind.

The line moved and Mira's turn finally came. She simply did what she saw the others doing. Feeding her ticket through the slightly-too-high-for-her slot, the machine lit up and a pattern like a magic circle was stamped on the ticket.

*Hm. I wonder what this means?*

She looked at the ticket, glowing faintly with mana, before being almost pushed onto the platform by the flood behind her.

The economy platform was made from exposed stone and was nearly four hundred meters long—far, far longer than the first class platform. Employees held a rope in place to divide the platform in two, almost perfectly cutting across the white queue lines.

How lively.

Between the ropes was a large space next to the tracks where several thousand people could fit at once. No doubt this was a traffic control measure for when the train arrived.

The station staff shouted instructions to the crowd, and Mira obediently lined up inside the white lines, stifling under the body heat of the people all around her. After a short while, the crowd could hear the steam whistle approaching. First, it was like the buzz of tinnitus—but each whistle grew louder than the last until the air itself shook with the sound.

The steam engine appeared before them like a manifestation of raw power. As it decelerated, the shrill grinding of its brakes echoed through the platform, fanfare for a returning steel king.

Passenger cars followed, their black forms rising intimidatingly from the tracks. Though they seemed to move sluggishly, they stirred powerful winds that whipped through the hair and clothes of people who stood too close. As the train came to a stop, the swirling air around it seemed to whisper hoarsely.

“It’s... huge,” Mira muttered to herself, astounded by the never-ending train. It was like mobile castle walls.

There were ten cars in total. The first was first class, the next two were premium, the

next five were economy, and the final two were for luggage.

Soon passengers flooded out of the train and onto the platform. With the floor divided by the ropes like two ocean currents, the people leaving the train streamed through the ticket gates. With so many people aboard, disembarking took over twenty minutes. The crowd was overwhelming, but Mira certainly preferred this noise to the shrill grind of the train's brakes.

Finally, an employee called, "Please follow the attendants' directions. Walk—don't run!—onto the train!" The place had the energy of an event venue as Mira and the others followed the shouted instructions.

The two doors on each of the economy cars were wide enough to fit three people at once with ease. Mira found herself flowing with the crowd into the first door of the fifth car.

Welcomed by a warm scent of wood and steel, Mira found a staircase right in front of the entrance. It seemed the economy cars were split into four levels. Assuming the higher levels would have a better view, she ascended like rising smoke to the fourth level.

There she found window seats that sat two people each, with three-person benches in the center. Hallways split off to the sides here and there. The layout was reminiscent of a passenger plane, but the mix of wood, leather, and metal finishes gave it the look and feel of an old-timey train.

The seats were already filling on this level, but Mira managed to slip in and secure a window seat for herself.

\* \* \*

Ten to twenty minutes passed. As the seats filled, Mira sat with her chin in hand and watched the flow of people. She started slightly when a blonde woman stood in her periphery and asked, "May I sit next to you?"

She looked to be around twenty, and wore a blue-and-white pinafore dress with a white cape atop it. Mira thought she looked as though she ought to be following a white rabbit around.

"Sure. Feel free." She leaned against the window, making a bit more space for the girl—

though there was already plenty.

"Thanks!" She looked at Mira with bright eyes and gently lowered herself into the seat next to her. As she did, a sweet, almost fruity scent rose from her clothes.

"You're really cute!" the woman said. With a big, friendly smile, she peeked over at Mira.

"Thanks, I know." Confident in her masterpiece, Mira grinned broadly back.

She found herself drawn in by the woman's eyes, which glittered like jewels in the light from the window. Her golden hair seemed to have sunlight woven into it.

"Ah ha ha! Funny, too. My name's Theresa, what's yours?"

"Mira."

"Mira, huh? Oh, can I snap a pic?" Theresa grinned innocently and grabbed a boxy black object from her shoulder bag. It had a protrusion in the center. When Theresa removed the cap from it, Mira saw that it had a lens.

"Ah! Is that a camera?"

"Yep! Whaddya say?"

"Well, I don't mind," Mira agreed. She had seen photographs earlier on her journey, but now she finally got a look at a camera in this world.

"Say cheese!"

Mira struck a refined pose, as she did during her days as Danblf.

"Oh, umm, just pose normal." Theresa frowned slightly.

"Nrgh..." Mira ended up with a rather grumpy look on her face.

"This is a great picture. Thanks!" Theresa beamed, as if she was truly happy to have taken it. "Y'see, I'm doing publicity work for the Magical Knights. We have an exhibition soon, so you should totally come!"

After putting the camera back in her bag, Theresa set the bag on her lap and grinned at Mira with a slight cock of the head.

"Magical Knights? Strange. That seems vaguely familiar...?" Mira muttered as she looked back out the window, sifting through her memories.

"Well, we sell clothes like this—magical girl style," Theresa explained, opening her arms to show off her outfit. "We're the most popular clothing boutique on the continent right now."

Mira looked at it, and indeed, it was a design that she had seen many times in her travels.

*I see. So this is where they come from?*

Though she still wasn't about the boutique's name, she had to admit that she was impressed.

"Your outfit is super similar, right? Is it original? When I saw it, I was just drawn to you!"

"Yes, it is actually." It seems the maids were on the cutting edge of fashion.

The two chatted, and eventually, a bell chimed, followed by a departure announcement.

"Clockwise Loop will now depart. Please hold on to a handrail if necessary. Again..."

Unlike first class, economy was noisy and full of adventurers. Many cheered as the train started moving, as if it was their first time riding. The acceleration pressed Mira back slightly in her seat as she listened to the commotion.

The two continued to talk about fashion as the train started moving. Or rather, Theresa talked endlessly while eating a station-purchased bento of her own. The conversation was surprisingly engaging, since Mira knew nothing of how magical girl style had evolved in this world.

Once Theresa ran out of steam, Mira whipped out her lunch.

"That looks tasty." Theresa eyed the food greedily.

"It's mine." Mira angled her small body away to hide the food and started stuffing her mouth.

Theresa poked at the corner of her empty box dejectedly. Mira could practically see her drooping ears; she looked for all the world like a puppy licking its empty plate.

"Good grief. Here, take this." Mira offered one of the muscat cookies she'd bought earlier on her journey.

"Thank yooou!" Theresa joyfully accepted the cookie, like a little dog that finally got its treat.

\* \* \*

*How serene.*

The window commanded a view of endless green forests. In contrast, the inside of the train was in an uproar, and it now stunk of alcohol.

"Did you hear? Fuzzy Dice showed up in Grimdart!"

Mira caught a familiar name amid the cacophony of voices. Thinking, she reached into her pouch and produced the Fuzzy Dice card.

"By the way, do you know this man?" Mira asked, showing Theresa the card as the latter munched on her cookie.

Theresa nodded, still chewing, and began to fish around in her bag. She swallowed. "Of course I do! Fuzzy Dice is super popular. Actually, he hosted a big event a while back."

She took out an album to show Mira a photo. A group of ten men and women wearing the same clothes and holding masquerade masks stood together. They looked like a cosplay group.

"Now this is... interesting?" The woman looking out from the middle of the group was unmistakably Theresa. Mira furrowed her brow and stared at the group. "Well, er, I see. But who is he, exactly?"

"You really don't know, Mira?"

Theresa began to explain. Fuzzy Dice was simultaneously a household name and a man of mystery. That was part of his popularity. Though Teresa's stories were full of guesses and fantasies, Mira gathered that Fuzzy Dice was some sort of chivalrous thief.

"Robs from the rich and gives to the poor, hrmm? Quite the whimsical fellow."

"I hear he donates to orphanages. Isn't that great?!" Theresa fidgeted and swung her legs like a little girl. Mira side-eyed her companion and went back to staring at the card.

The train continued on as the two chatted about nothing in particular. As the sun set and darkness crept into the train, they arrived at the Eastballad.

Mira said her goodbyes to Theresa and fished into her wallet to check her remaining funds. Her budget for an inn this evening would be 10,000 ducats. She'd have to slum it.

Thankfully, she was used to searching for lodgings by now, and soon found herself at the Driftsong Inn. While she ate in the restaurant downstairs, she listened to a minstrel's ballad before turning in for the night.

\* \* \*

An hour before the train's departure the next morning, Mira wandered among the station stalls in search of breakfast. Her cheap inn hadn't offered any.

Many inns crowding the front of the station were low-priced lodgings for adventurers. Typically, they offered communal cooking areas instead of meals, since most adventurers had ingredients on hand.

Mira had none.

The station stalls were fast food for ill-stocked adventurers like Mira and passengers who simply wanted something quick and convenient.

"Ooh! Lots of good options!" she chirped happily. Mira surveyed the stalls and gravitated toward one in particular. Her stomach growled at the savory aroma of broth, and she noted the contents of the specially shaped pot in the small kitchen. She had found the coveted oden stall.

A man wearing a deep-green tabard cut in front of her just as she stepped up to the stall, handing over five copper coins and saying, “I’ll have the 500-ducat special.”

“Thank you very much,” the shopkeeper responded.

Feeling a strange sense of defeat at having been beaten to the counter, Mira gazed restlessly at the noodles cooking and the ingredients being stirred.

“Okay, here you are. Thanks for waiting!” The bowl full of stewed oden passed through Mira’s line of sight as the shopkeeper handed it over.

Without bothering to watch the man leave, Mira immediately turned back to the stand and held out her hand clenched around five copper coins. “Shopkeeper! I would like the 500-ducat special, too!”

“You sound like you know what’s good, Missy. Thanks!” The shopkeeper accepted her coins, grinned, and began dishing up her oden.

Mira listened to the conversation behind her.

“Oden again, Captain? How about we trade: your eggs for my fried fish?”

“As if. Try again when you’ve got muscat beef, at least.”

Mira turned around and saw the man in the green tabard with a group of similarly attired people. They all had the same swords hanging from their hips, too. Matching clothes, matching weapons... such a unified group must either be a guild or a group of knights.

As Mira observed them curiously, the man at the stall asked, “What’s the matter, Missy?”

“It’s nothing... I was just wondering who that group is.” She said, turning back to gesture at the green-clad gang.

“Oh? Those guys are the Monster Investigation Team,” the shopkeeper said, as if everyone had heard of them.

When Mira replied that she certainly hadn’t, he filled her in. They were an organization who investigated monster and fiend distribution, trends, and habitats all over the known world.

The results of their investigations were used to predict monster outbreaks, defend nature from invasive species, adjust caravan routes, and much more. There were apparently twenty such teams, and the team commanded by the oden-devouring man was one of them.

“How interesting,” Mira murmured in admiration.

The shopkeeper furrowed his brow. “Still, it’s a little weird...”

Each region was usually investigated once every six months, and the results of the survey published at the Mages’ Guild. This team’s investigation should have ended a month ago. Rumor had it that *other* investigation teams were arriving in the area as well.

“It’s been four years since something like this happened. Back then, some merchant was talking about how he’d seen monsters. In the end, it was a subspecies of Dead Emperor. Maybe they’re tracking another new subspecies this time.” The shopkeeper smiled and added, “But who knows?”

\* \* \*

“Ho ho. Is this a monster distribution map? Incredible.”

After thoroughly enjoying her 500 ducats of oden, Mira wandered over the Mages’ Guild to satisfy her curiosity. She stood admiring the survey board until the warning bell sounded a final boarding call for her train.

She ran back to the station in a panic.

# CHAPTER 15

DESPITE HER LATE START, Mira's Immortal Arts-enhanced mobility allowed her to reach the platform before most other passengers, and she secured another fourth-level window seat. She couldn't help feeling a little smug when she saw it was the last one available. Before long, more passengers boarded, and the peace of morning was replaced by the commotion of a trainload of rowdy adventurers.

*Oh, to be young,* she thought philosophically, gazing down on the empty Counterclockwise Loop platform as she waited.

"Do you mind if we sit here?" A melodious voice cut through the commotion, interrupting her thoughts.

She looked away from the window and turned to find a man holding a lute and a woman with a hat pulled down low over her eyes. The seat she'd taken was a booth with two double seats facing each other. The man gestured to the seats opposite her.

He wore a russet surcoat, and his face was affable enough, with lips that seemed to naturally widen into a smile. Perfectly round eyes tilted down slightly at the corners, softening his features. His expression was open and guileless as he looked at Mira.

The woman wore a white hat in the shape of cat ears. Her jet-black hair flowed from under it, so fine a breath might be enough to make it flutter. Her eyes though... They seemed to stare vacantly into the middle distance. Though her features were delicate, she gave off the gloomy impression of a cloudy spring night.

Peeking up at the odd pair, Mira pulled her extended legs in to make space for them. "I don't mind," she said.

She looked around, assuming that the car must be packed if they were asking her to share. Despite the ever-increasing clamor, she saw several empty booths.

Mira's habit was always to choose an empty booth if it was available. She had to wonder why they chose the seats next to her. Noticing her confusion, the man plucked a single string of his lute and explained himself.

"I'm sure you can tell, but I happen to be a bard. My name is Emilio, and I'm searching for stories of fellow travelers. And now you may guess that I'd like to hear yours. There isn't much that I can offer in return, but I can play a little music to pass the time. What do you say?"

With little reason to refuse, and rather bored by the prospect of spending five hours staring out the window and reading manga, Mira readily agreed.

"I don't have many fun stories, but if you want to listen, then why not?"

"Thank you so much! I'll take anything you can share." Emilio's smile widened. He took the woman's hand and guided her over to a seat.

"Thanks," she said, quiet as a whisper. The woman gave Emilio a fleeting smile, so quick Mira might have missed it if she blinked.

"This is Lianna," he offered with a gesture towards his companion. "We've been friends since childhood, and now we travel together."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Lianna said. She put her hands softly in her lap and bowed. Her eyes didn't meet Mira's; they looked instead toward the empty seat.

"Likewise. My name is Mira."

Not long after, the departure announcement rang out and the train began to move. Mira excitedly looked out the window, waiting for the moment when the sluggish train began to accelerate. Emilio and Lianna gently held hands and watched as well.

Emilio narrated all that he saw. "The weather's great today. It's so clear you can see all the way to the horizon. We're getting close to the rainy season, but it doesn't feel like it. One white cloud is floating alone in the sky like a lost sheep. I hope it finds its friends soon. And the earth is just as vibrant as the sky. It's as if they're competing to see who can be more alive."

Thus began Mira's short trip with the bard.

\* \* \*

"So, what would you like to hear?" Mira asked.

"Anything is fine. Things you've experienced, stories you've heard, things you've seen, even simple small talk. Whatever you're willing to tell, I'm glad to hear."

"Hrmm, right."

As the train sped along, Mira turned her attention to Emilio. He said that he wanted stories, but she had no idea what to say to a bard. It seemed that what he wanted was human drama—not epic tales of heroism that all could enjoy, but more intimate tales.

So Mira told trifling stories. After all, anything was fine. Leaving out her mission and secrets, she talked about how she'd met Écarlate Carillon, how Heinrich was fun to tease, and how she'd bought a useless pile of cards on a whim. For a few hours, she let herself babble about anything that came to mind.

Emilio listened with sincere interest, occasionally flashing a toothy grin as he plucked his lute. Every once in a while, Lianna also smiled fondly as Mira spun her tales.

"Thank you, Mira," Emilio said during a pause. "This was a fantastically productive conversation. And now, I'll take any questions you might have. Anything you want to know, I don't mind; you'll know everything I know."

He explained that they had traveled across the continent for almost a year and could tell her about many things happening across the land. He had gleaned from Mira's stories that she was journeying in search of something. Any information that might aid in her search would be hers. Still, Emilio did most of the talking; Lianna rarely interjected.

"In that case," Mira took out the letter from Solomon and checked the numbers within. "Could you tell me of any events or rumors, big or small, that happened around a few dates?"

"Okay. I'd be glad to."

"Here goes... September 20, 2117. June 18, 2132. January 14, 2138."

Emilio repeated each of them and began idly tapping at the body of his lute as he thought.

The activity in the car had calmed slightly since the train had started moving, but economy remained boisterous. The clacking of the rails occasionally rose in the gaps

between people's voices before fading. After a moment of thought, Emilio plucked a string of his lute.

"I've no idea about the first two." Another lute pluck.

"Oho. Then it seems you do have an idea about the third?"

"If you're fine with even the smallest of rumors... January 14, 2138—one day before the first anniversary of the peace treaty. An orphanage was opened to harbor over a hundred children orphaned by the war. I believe it was in a mountain village, northeast of Grimdart."

The hint of reverence in Emilio's voice as he laid out the tale made Mira think he had told this story before—perhaps many times. Normally, something like this would be a small, forgettable occurrence. After all, it had happened in a tiny village deep in the mountains, but Emilio remembered the story immediately.

"An orphanage, you say?" Mira repeated and checked her letter again. The matching note was *A2138, 1, 4*. The A was an initial, and there was only one Wise Man whose name started with an A.

*Artesia, eh? It does sound plausible.*

Elder of the Tower of the Holy, Artesia of Dissonance. Perhaps due to her own inability to bear children, she had a deep love of them. Mira remembered her as someone who would gladly build an orphanage if she found homeless children. Moreover, she was equipped with the power of a Wise Man. Caring for ten, twenty, or even a hundred children would be easy for her.

"Goodness me," Mira murmured. "You've told me just what I needed to hear."

"Really? I'm glad I could help."

Mira thanked him for the useful information. Emilio plucked the strings of his lute. His fingers gradually flowed into a song, its joyful tune filling the train car.

Mira relaxed and listened to the pleasant melody. Leaning back in her seat, her gaze shifted again to Lianna. The gloomy cloud that hung over her was still there, but the smile spreading over her lips was as rare and beautiful as a blooming flower of the night. Perhaps her love of Emilio's song was the metaphorical moonlight that shone

upon her.

Lianna's hands tapped a rhythm in her lap. Mira thought the two seemed like a couple who had been together a long time.

As Mira listened to the song, she noticed Lianna's gaze. It was still vacant. Her eyes stared at nothing, looking without actually seeing.

*Wait a second. Is she...?*

Mira stared searchingly at Lianna's eyes and waved a hand to gauge her reaction. There was none.

Lianna remained entranced by the lute's music. Feeling that something was off, Mira shifted her gaze to Emilio. He noticed her questioning eyes and nodded.

He gradually wrapped up his song and responded, "Yes. Lianna is blind." Emilio gently took Lianna's hand. She returned the gesture and leaned against him. "It's the result of an illness. A rare disease... She survived the treatment, but the price was her sight."

"I had guessed. That's rough..."

The gloom that hung over the young woman now made sense to Mira.

\* \* \*

Lianna had lost her sight to a rare disease. The doctors saved her life, but in exchange, her world had been plunged into darkness. Back then, Lianna sank into depression even though everyone tried to cheer her. But Emilio tried a different approach.

Emilio had been following in his father's footsteps to become a bard. He played his lute for his childhood friend and sung tales of adventure for her day after day. As time went by, she gradually began to react.

"You're off-key," she'd say. "Your playing is abominable." Each biting criticism spurred Emilio to improve.

Once he'd sung every song he knew, he finally declared, "I want to write new songs. My own songs. I'm planning to go on a journey."

Lianna turned her face from him. “You can do whatever you want.”

“I want you to come with me. You’ve been listening to my crappy music all this time, and you’ve given me good advice. My songs won’t be complete without you.”

She’d shaken her head in refusal at first, but Emilio insisted until he wore her down. Since then, they’d traveled around by train, singing all the way until they met Mira.

\* \* \*

“The blindness does mean I get to touch her more, though,” Emilio joked and reached for her shoulder. He ran his hand over her skin until she swatted him away.

“Ow!” Emilio yelped as she threw in a painful pinch. With his other hand, he plucked out an ending to his current song in surrender, as if bringing an end to a husband-wife comedy routine.

“You brought it on yourself,” Mira chuckled.

“Anyway... how about I play a song to commemorate our meeting?” He plucked his lute again as if nothing had happened, then took Lianna’s hand. This contact wasn’t like his joke from before; it seemed more of a ritual to the pair.

The lute slowly swelled with a new melody, and Emilio’s pleasant voice was raised in harmony. His song spun a bittersweet yarn of a boy and girl’s first meeting and their hopes for the future. The story of Emilio and Lianna’s childhood—a song of adventure from the time before she was sick, when they saw the same world.

As the poignant song ended, the sound of the lute gradually faded until he plucked the final note. Mira applauded along with others who had listened in.

“That’s a lovely song,” she said. “It reminds me of my own childhood.”

“Umm... thank you,” Emilio said, a bit perplexed at her phrasing.

“Say, what’s wrong with Lianna?” Mira noticed her looking down sullenly in her periphery. Her shoulders trembled, as if wracked with pain.

Shortly after, a drop fell upon one of the fists clenched in her lap. Her tears fell one after another onto her hands. Emilio put his own larger hand over her small ones to

cover them.

"Lianna? What's the matter? Was I that off-key?" he whispered, gently wrapping an arm around her. Mira too was bewildered by the sudden tears.

"I've changed," Lianna said. "I can't see the world like you do anymore. I'm nothing but a burden. If not for me, you could see so much more of the world. I don't want to hold you back anymore..." Her confession spilled out. In their year of traveling, Emilio had guided her the whole way. She knew what pains he went through to care for her.

Emilio's dream had always been to wander the entire world, composing a masterpiece capturing its wonders. As long as he looked after her, Lianna knew, he couldn't travel the way he wanted. Emilio would never abandon her, but the guilt of that knowledge pooled like mud in the depths of her heart.

Now, it overflowed.

"I... I can't do anything without you," she continued. "But sometimes, I've found myself hating you for talking on and on about a world I can't see anymore. I know it's not fair; it's wrong. And the longer I stay, the more I'll wrong you. So... just forget about me." Lianna confessed one word after another, squeezing her eyes tightly to accept the scorn she was certain she'd earned.

As she stiffened in preparation for the worst, she instead heard the lute's clear tones. Each chord gradually became more complex than the last, leading into Emilio's singing.

The song was about the days he had spent with Lianna. The lyrics were corny—even embarrassing—but he sang that he loved every uneventful day with her, and that he felt best when by her side.

\* \* \*

As the last notes of the outro hung in the air, Emilio whispered beneath the music, "I never used to *get* love songs, but now I do. That's thanks to you, Lianna; you've expanded my world."

The dam broke, and tears poured from Lianna's eyes. Emilio pulled her closer and held her hand tightly.

*I was worried there... but it looks like it turned out all right.*

Mira was relieved to see them hug. Lianna was still a flood of tears, but there was clearly a different emotion behind them now.

"It's no use trying. You're too sweet, so you'd never abandon me. That's why I have to stop taking advantage of you now." Lianna pushed Emilio away. Her arms trembled. She was conflicted, still stuck between guilt and the fear of being abandoned.

"I've never thought of you as a burden. Besides, I'd like you to take advantage of me! You don't have to worry about a thing," Emilio protested.

Unexpectedly, the argument flared up again. As someone who wasn't exactly a love expert herself, Mira was unsure what to do. Nothing would make her feel more guilty than watching in silence as they broke up.

She had no idea how to fix such a unique relationship. But maybe she knew someone who did.

Mira cast a Bound Arcana on the empty seat next to her. The dim glow of the magic circle drew Emilio's attention as the Bound Arcana morphed into a rosary-shaped summoning circle. Mira's rhythmic voice chanted:

If you can hear my voice, feel my thoughts,

Perhaps, will they wake you?

How I long to hear your words, to listen to you sing.

Echoing like a bell, right here in this moment.

### **[Evocation: Diva]**

When her voice reached the summoning circle, scattered sunlight heralded the appearance of the greater spirit Leticia—governess of song and melody.

"It's been so long, Master!" Leticia dimpled adorably.

Emilio gazed on in utter shock, and Lianna was disoriented by the voice appearing so suddenly nearby. Surrounding passengers gawked at the appearance of the scantily

clad spirit.

"M-Mira? Who is this?" Emilio asked as he stared at Leticia, having totally forgotten the argument seconds before.

"This is Leticia, a Diva. Surely a bard such as yourself ought to know the Spirit of Song?" Mira declared, quickly requesting a song from the spirit. Mira asked for *Lovers' Nocturne*, a melancholy ballad about two lovers parted.

"I love requests!"

Mingling melodies flowed from Leticia's spread wings, accompanied by her soft yet clear voice. The sudden solo concert silenced the rest of the train car as all passengers listened, entranced.

"So this is the Queen of Melodies herself..." The Spirit of Song was holy among bards. Emilio had been suspicious of Mira's claim... but as the rich notes of Leticia's song reverberated through the depths of his soul, a tear rolled down his cheek.

"The Spirit of Song? Her singing is beautiful." Lianna couldn't see Leticia, but the light of her song warmed the woman's heart.

*It seems they've put that argument behind them.*

Lianna listened attentively, tapping out the rhythm in her lap. Emilio had whipped out pen and paper and was in the process of writing something. His expression was serious, yet oddly bashful; when he glanced at Lianna, he looked happy.

\* \* \*

Once Leticia's solo ended, the train erupted in applause. Some people climbed up from lower floors to see what was going on.

"Thank you, thank yooou!" The scantily clad spirit waved to her audience with a brilliant smile on her face. This only served to confuse newcomers more.

"There. It's done!" Emilio raised his sheet of paper proudly as the car rang with cheers for Leticia.

Even in the chaos of sound, Lianna heard Emilio's voice clearly. She took his hand.

"What's done?"

"Our song. For now and forever," he said emphatically, looking Lianna in the eyes. He then released her hand and began strumming his lute.

It began with the lute alone before Emilio raised his own voice. His clear baritone cut through the din of the rail car.

His song of love for Lianna flowed forth until the melody was accompanied by another: Leticia had joined in. Each new element created a perfect harmony that allowed Emilio's voice to stand out even more.

The lyrics included the sights that he'd seen on his trip and the emotions that came with each. It was so vivid that one could see the places they'd been, as if the listener was there in person.

\* \* \*

The song reached its finale and ended. This time, applause was directed toward Emilio. He bowed bashfully.

"Your songs are always wonderful, Emilio," Lianna said.

Leticia exclaimed, "They really are!"

"Indeed. I'm glad to have heard it," added Mira.

Happy to hear Lianna's praise, honored by Leticia's, and embarrassed by Mira's, Emilio thanked them all and plucked a string on his lute.

"I could only write this song because of you," he said, taking Lianna's palm in his and placing his other hand on her shoulder. Though her eyes no longer held light, he still looked deeply into them. "A world I could only see because you were here. No matter how beautiful the world is, Lianna, everything loses color without you. I want to be with you forever."

Emilio had felt that way for a long time now, even before their journey began. Finally, he was able to say it.

"But what about your dream? I can't rely on your kindness if it means you miss out on

that, so...!" Lianna protested and pulled her hand away. Her face was gripped by fear—of holding him back and of being abandoned.

But Emilio was resolved. He strengthened his grip on her trembling shoulder and smiled.

"I can't know the pain of losing your eyesight, nor do I know your deepest fears. I can't understand all your feelings, but listen to mine: I want to be with you, and I'll say it as many times as it takes. I want to be with you forever. If you can't see, then I'll sing for everything you've missed. Don't cover your ears, Lianna. I want you to hear every word of my song."

Emilio began strumming, leading into another song. It was a cliché, a sickeningly sweet love song about marriage.

Leticia joined in, integrating her harmonies with his and weaving in a common wedding march. It shouldn't have complemented Emilio's impromptu song at all, but her power mysteriously brought the two songs together in warm harmony, coiling about each other like a double helix.

# CHAPTER 16

ONCE THE SONG ENDED, the car turned silent. The message of the lyrics was so plain that listeners blushed. Nobody said a word. Their eyes were turned on one blind girl, waiting for what was coming next.

Lianna's quiet, strained voice finally emerged. "I..." she managed to get out before trailing off.

"Lianna, I love you. Will you marry me?" Emilio said it outright.

"I... want to be with you, too. I do!" She shouted the words, as if banishing all of her insecurities, pent-up frustrations, and feelings of powerlessness at once.

Emilio pulled her into a hug. Like magnets drawn together, the boundary between them broke, and their lips finally brushed. Blessings and applause filled the train car.

Realizing that they'd gained a much larger audience, Lianna blushed and looked down. Emilio took her hand firmly, yet gently, and yelled his thanks to the crowd.

\* \* \*

"The train will arrive at Rockfield Station in thirty minutes. Please make sure you have all your belongings."

The announcement echoed through the car. Taking that as their signal, everyone left the couple with some words of encouragement and dispersed. Many blessed them, and many were envious. All of them seemed to have enjoyed the show.

"Well, now. Thank you for your aid."

As Mira tried to dismiss Leticia after a job well done, the songstress kicked her legs in protest.

"Master, no! I have *so many more* songs for you!"

"There's no time now! Perhaps later."

"Aww. You'd better let me next time!" Leticia puffed out her cheeks as light enveloped her. As she was dismissed, several people—mostly men—sighed in disappointment.

Emilio finally found a moment to breathe and turned to Mira. "By the way, Mira... You must be a practitioner of summoning?"

Among bards, the Spirit of Song was equal to a god. Mira realized that this was a good opportunity. She leaned back against the window and leaned an arm on it, then rested her chin on her hand. She opened her legs shoulder-width apart and put her other hand in her lap. She narrowed her eyes in a solemn expression to complete the pose.

"Indeed."

"And you summoned the Spirit of Song... a *greater* spirit? That's incredible!" Emilio recalled Leticia's perfect melodies as he praised Mira.

Smugness rolled off Mira in waves. Summoning, she was certain, was one step closer to its glorious resurgence.

"There was more music alongside your lute, wasn't there?" Lianna asked. "It was beautiful, though I still prefer your lute."

"Lianna... Thank you. I love you, too."

The two took each other's hands. Emilio gazed at Lianna, and Lianna turned her unseeing eyes toward him. They were lost in their own world.

Mira deflated. Unwilling to interrupt their loving moment, she maintained her silly pose and sipped at some sweet berry au lait.

*Kids these days! Public displays of affection?! Disgraceful! Shameless!*

She couldn't deny being a tiny bit envious as she watched them wrapped up in each other completely.

\* \* \*

Eventually, Emilio and Lianna managed to return to the real world. From there, the trio chatted about what foods they enjoyed, the best inns, and other such topics common to travelers.

"Excuse us. We'll need to check your tickets."

Three crew members appeared in the passenger car and began making the rounds. Tickets were stamped with a unique station symbol each trip, so if passengers wanted to continue riding, they would either have to produce a new ticket or pay a fee.

The crew handled their work with great efficiency. Before long, one of them arrived at Mira's booth. "May I check your tickets, please?" the man requested with a smile.

Emilio first offered his and Lianna's tickets and declared, "We'll get off at the next stop." The crew member thanked him and accepted the tickets before looking over to Mira.

"I'll keep riding." Mira imitated the other passengers she'd seen and handed over both her old, stamped ticket and a fresh one.

"Thank you. Please enjoy the rest of your journey," the crew member replied. He stamped Mira's fresh ticket and returned it to her before continuing on to the next passenger.

"Mira, where will you be going?" Emilio asked, keeping the conversation aloft.

"I'm headed to Silverside." Mira compared the pattern of the new stamp to her previous one and placed the ticket in her waist pouch. It seemed these tickets were made to prevent scamming for free rides. "You two are disembarking, then?"

"That we are. And with more sorrow than usual this time." He was used to saying goodbye even after he'd become invested in people's lives, but it was bittersweet to leave a new friend who had given them such a precious gift.

"Perhaps we will meet again," Mira said placatingly, trying to cheer up Emilio.

Lianna turned to face her. Her unseeing eyes seemed to be searching for something in Mira's face as she nodded. "For some reason, I feel like we will, Mira." She smiled gently.

"I think so, too. Someday, we will," Emilio finally agreed. He gazed at Mira, as if to memorize her appearance for a future reunion. As he did, his fingers naturally strummed his lute. The tune that spilled forth was a little lonely, but tinged with hope.

After a while, the train gradually slowed. They had arrived at the border of Alisfarius,

Rockfield Station.

"Thank you for everything, Mira. Your Spirit gave me the courage to do what I'd always dreamed of doing."

"I'm just glad I could help. But really, you did it yourself through everything you've been through together. Treasure your love."

"Of course."

"Thanks, Mira."

The two began to alight. As he descended the stairs, Emilio's face glowed with sheer joy. Lianna looked different now, too; the gloomy clouds had been driven away by a truly radiant smile.

*Things have changed a lot in only a few hours.*

The two held hands as they went. No doubt they would mark today as an anniversary in the future. Mira watched them go, all the while thinking some rather wicked thoughts about how they might be on their way to an inn right now.

Upon returning to her now-much-quieter seat, Mira stared vacantly out the window. Emilio's confession, the moment in which the two were finally joined by love, played again in her mind. Truth could be more dramatic than fiction, it seemed. Thinking back, she considered that reality was simply a story strung together by all living beings. Mira looked at her small hands.

She realized: she was alive. This world and the people in it were truly real.

As the time for departure approached, an influx of new passengers entered the car, and new people shared the booth with her. One was a veteran adventurer, the other a newbie. The newbie tittered excitedly about the lofty view from the window, but the other chastised him.

"Sorry about him," the veteran apologized.

"No need to worry," Mira replied before making some small talk with the pair.

The train began moving, and scenery again flowed by. Green plains stretched into the

distance, melting into blue sky at the horizon. At the point where they met, Mira could see a rainbow stretching into the sky.

# CHAPTER 17

THE NEXT MORNING, Mira left her inn early to tour the station on foot. She indulged once again in her new hobby: picking out a station bento. The cultural influences of former players were deep and vast; in the massive market inside the station, there were all sorts of cuisines available.

*Oho, salmon rice bowls! Or maybe chunky meat stew... Oooh, steak sandwiches are always exciting. But how can one overlook the mapo tofu rice bowls and gyoza?*

Mira bounced around the restaurants, examining each and every one. In the end, she purchased the “Forest’s Bounty” lunch. It was rather expensive, stuffed with mushrooms and edible plants from the forest at the base of the mountains layered generously with various local meats.

The voice overhead announced that the train would depart in thirty minutes. Mira made for the platform with a satisfied grin.

\* \* \*

It seemed other passengers used the thirty-minute warning as their signal as well. People flooded onto the platform, and Mira once again used her small figure and Immortal Arts to slip into the train ahead of the crowd.

*Hrmm? That man...*

As she secured her window seat, her eyes came to rest on a person sitting alone in the corner.

*He looks just like that hit man I saw.*

The man was dressed exactly like the mysterious person she’d seen at a sightseeing spot on the first half of her journey. A white shirt under a well-fitted black suit.

Then again, maybe that was a popular fashion now...?

She wasn’t sure enough to swear it was the same person. Mira had seen people

wearing black suits at inns and Guild Unions. They weren't common, but they weren't suspicious either.

What really drew Mira's eye was the short-brimmed black trilby, worn low over his face, and the sunglasses peeking out below. The man looked like some sort of secret agent from a movie.

*A hat and sunglasses inside a train? I can only imagine he's hiding his identity. Could he actually be a secret agent...? Let's call him... Agent Smith.*

He was certainly more suspicious than not. Agent Smith sat completely still. His face was hard to make out through the hat and sunglasses, but based on his lips, Mira thought he was young.

On closer inspection, there was another man to his left sitting with arms crossed and face tilted down. He looked to be... sleeping? Maybe he was tired. To Smith's right was a tall man sitting stiffly upright. Wearing a surcoat and taking big bites out of his lunch, he looked like a knight on his day off.

Just then, another throng of passengers entered the train car.

Eventually, almost every seat filled, and the train began to move. Mira listened to the pleasant sound of the wheels and gazed at the scenery outside the window, forgetting all about Agent Smith.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, the train emerged from a tunnel that took it from the open plains into the middle of a small forest. As it did, it gradually slowed, approaching an enormous waterfall and river. Before long, there was an announcement that the train would once again slow down to pass over the Tosenka Bridge.

Viewing it from the corner of the window, she has a moment of regret at not picking a window seat on the other side from last time. Still, it was quite impressive. Mira was awed by the overpowering rush of water in the distance.

Suddenly, she lurched forward.

*Hm? Have we stopped? I thought the train was just supposed to slow down.*

Confused, Mira turned away from the waterfall. The other passengers clamored louder and louder, apparently as confused as she was.

“What’s going on?”

“Hey, did we hit something?!”

An announcement boomed over the commotion. It seemed there was a problem with the engine, and they were currently investigating it. A new wave of fear arose among the passengers.

*So something is wrong!*

The noise in the car redoubled, and tension began to spread. Mira found herself fidgeting with excitement. Some other adventurers seemed to share in her glee. Despite the problems, they felt like spectators at a fire.

Something drew her eye...

It was Agent Smith. That the man next to him remained sleeping through the pandemonium in the train car was... odd, but Smith remained in his seat with arms crossed, totally silent, as if nothing was wrong. His calmness was conspicuous.

*What’s with this guy?*

She couldn’t read Smith’s expression under the sunglasses, but he did adjust his arms and take sips of his drink, so he couldn’t be sleeping. The off-duty knight to his right was looking out the window with great interest.

As Mira was monitoring Agent Smith, she heard one voice carrying over the many.

“Is it just me, or does the flow of mana feel weird right now?”

*Hrmm, the flow of mana...?* The words tugged at her mind. She tried focusing to test the hypothesis.

Mana was something akin to magic itself—a mysterious element both indispensable to casting spells and usable as energy to power magical devices. It was called the “universal element” among researchers, but much about its nature was still unknown.

A disruption in the flow of mana could cause miracles or natural disasters. If something about it was “weird,” Mira could not overlook it.

Mira had an ability known as Mana Perception: the ability to feel mana around oneself.

Mana Perception allowed a player to feel mana vaguely, as if it were the presence of a ghost. It was amorphous... hard to pin down. Some players, in extremely rare cases, could sense it as easily as they breathed, as if they had ESP.

Mira was not one of them. She was a master of many skills—but not this one. Her ability was middling, at best. Mira and the other former players had come from a world without mana, after all. It was easy to see or hear, because those were senses they had lived with for their entire lives. Sensing mana was something she had little practice at.

Still, she could feel it to some extent if she focused hard enough, thanks to some extra training with Wise Man Flonne.

She tried to recall the sensation as she stretched her perception around her. *There!* She could indeed sense some unusual mana.

*My senses are sharp as a tack today!*

Mira turned her attention toward the powerful mana reaction below—likely coming from the train’s magic engine—and found another source of mana that seemed to coil around it. It didn’t stop there; tendrils extended to every car, and their source was none other than Agent Smith.

*He must have manipulated mana to interfere with the engines and stop the train. I doubt it’s simply because he wants to admire the view.*

The train car was full of people shouting at the conductor who had come to explain the situation, yet Smith remained silent and still. Nothing would change unless she acted, so Mira strolled over with the attitude of a police officer investigating a case.

“Are you the reason the train stopped?” she asked, confident yet cautious.

Her words must have traveled, because many of the passengers near her quieted down and turned. Smith maintained his immobile silence. In fact, he seemed not even to notice Mira.

"I feel the presence of strange mana here," Mira continued, certain that he couldn't escape her interrogation. Yet he still refused to respond.

"She's right!" A nearby mage confirmed her findings. Many passengers turned suspicious eyes on the man in black.

"D-damn it! I was so close!"

Unable to take anymore, a figure stood and morphed from a human to a bat-like demon with spread wings, a black body, and twisted horns. The mood changed instantly as screams broke out in the train car.

Everyone knew demons were mankind's worst enemy. Everyone knew they were *extinct*. And yet... here stood a demon.

The crowd in the train car roiled as some passengers fled for their lives, while others stepped forward, steeling themselves for a life-or-death battle.

With a swing of one powerful arm, the demon destroyed the rows of seats in front of it. It stepped forward and glared down at Mira.

"Oh, hell..." Mira was amazed by this turn of events. Not because a demon had assumed human form—she'd expected something like that. But because the human that had transformed *wasn't* Agent Smith!

It was the man who had been sleeping *next* to him. She stared in confusion.

*Either way, I'm faced with a demon. It's about time I deal with it.* Mira shook off her shock and readied herself for a fight. *A viscount, huh?*

Her status check revealed a noble title. These demons often had much more annoying abilities than those without. She glanced around and saw that all the passengers who couldn't fight had thankfully fled to other cars. Those willing to face the demon watched the situation warily from a distance.

"Hey, it's dangerous! Get out of there!" someone warned. Mira dismissed them with a wave of her hand.

She stared back at the demon and—partially to cover her earlier mistake—shouted, "What are you plotting?!"

The demon did not answer. It simply curled its inhuman lips into a grin and surveyed the crowd, as if to intimidate them. A few adventurers shrunk back under the pressure of its gaze.

*Hmph. If you won't speak, then I'll just have to crush you before you can do anything.*

Without warning, she stepped in front of the demon and unleashed an [Immortal Arts Heaven: Pulse]. She simultaneously used a partial summons to conjure black swords that attacked the demon from two sides.

Before the swords could complete their swing, they were enveloped in pale flame and turned to dust. Mira's approaching fist—the manifestation of condensed destructive power—was stopped by a single open palm.

“You!” As the vibrations from her attack shook their surroundings, Mira glared at Agent Smith, who stood before her.



She now faced two formidable foes. Mira jumped away and righted her stance. An explosive sound tore through the air and the demon began to run.

"Get back here!" Mira roared.

Just as she moved to stop it, the man in black blocked her path once more. Their impact caused a shock wave like a cannonball strike as the train car groaned around them.

It didn't stop there. Mira opened her fist and seized the enemy's arm to unleash [Immortal Arts Earth: Violet Spark], a spell that emitted deadly high-voltage electricity. She was thrown back before the spell could activate. With a flick of his wrist, Smith tossed her away.

Mira flipped in midair, skirt fluttering, and landed on a seat's headrest. She kept her eyes fixed on the mystery man.

Right as she wondered what sort of foe he was, he spoke: "You know what to do, Faust!""

The off-duty knight stepped up to the plate.

*Nrgh. Him, too?!*

Taken aback by the appearance of a third opponent, Mira put some distance between them and watched both men warily. But the knight ignored her completely, replying, "Got it," before breaking the window and leaping outside.

"What?!" Mira was confused, but at least she didn't have *another* enemy to contend with.

They had only traded a few blows now, but she knew she was in trouble. After all, Smith had dispelled or avoided each and every one of her attacks. The only one who could do that would be someone of equal or greater ability to herself.

The two stared each other down. The adventurers watching from further down the car were speechless at the raw power they saw from both sides in this short fight. What could they do? It was clear that they would get slaughtered if they carelessly intervened.

The battle raged on. Neither combatant yielded a single step, yet neither could get a

clean strike on their opponent.

# CHAPTER 18

ONLY MOMENTS HAD PASSED since the battle between Mira and Agent Smith began, but they had already exchanged countless blows.

“Damn! You play dirty, huh?” he exclaimed and backed off, panic clear on his face.

“Play dirty? How dare you insult me?!”

Mira knew an opening when she saw one, yet she stopped short, enraged by his insult. She had fought him fair and square! His claim was outrageous.

“You heard me! Why are you jumping around in that short skirt?! It’s distracting!” he roared back, at his wits’ end. Throughout the fight, he had been subjected to the continual assault of flashes of Mira’s panties.

“What, that’s your issue? Have the eyes behind those sunglasses been creeping on me the whole time? You’re one hell of a pervert!” Mira smirked devilishly now that she’d uncovered this unexpected weakness.

“Wha—?! Shut up! I just caught a glimpse! I wasn’t looking on purpose!!” He frantically defended himself, adjusting his sunglasses.

What happened to his stoic attitude on the ride here? Despite his secret agent outfit, he was clearly shaken.

“Too late. The cat’s out of the bag now.” Mira smirked, a touch more smug now that she had revealed his dirty little secret.

*Hang on. Have I met this guy somewhere before?*

Suddenly he seemed... familiar. Like someone she knew.

Mira searched his face; his features were too difficult to make out behind the hat and sunglasses.

“Good grief. As a girl, you should have some modesty,” he complained petulantly.

Eyes still on her enemy, Mira asked, “If you’re so bothered by panties, then you must not be a demon in disguise. Or are demons into cute girls’ underwear, too?”

He frowned at the taunt, but he quickly schooled his expression and replied, “I’m not a demon. I’m human.”

“Then why did you protect that demon? Are you some sort of cultist?” she pressed him further.

He thought carefully before replying, his attitude changing. He looked Mira dead in the eye and said quietly, yet sincerely, “Demons aren’t *always* the enemy.”

“What?”

How could humanity’s worst enemy *not* be an enemy? What did that even mean?

A strange memory arose in Mira’s mind.

“Demons and angels... *Devils*?” The memory was fleeting, like a hazy dream—mysterious, nostalgic, and blurry all at once.

As the words left Mira’s mouth, shock crept across Agent Smith’s face. “What did you just say?”

The surprise left him open to attack and this time, Mira didn’t hesitate. She shook off the blurry memories, leapt forward, and used Shrinking Earth to close the distance between them. In an instant, she was in striking range.

“I’ve got you now!” Careless of her flapping skirt, she thrust a fist forward, her hair fluttering with the motion.

“Wha?!” He recovered from his surprise and tried to square off, but Mira was right before his eyes. He caught a whiff of her sweet scent, and his eyes were drawn to the bewitching neckline of her dress. His cheeks colored.

He couldn’t help but take notice. His honed senses were his undoing.

Mira’s glorious punch landed perfectly.

Buffeted by the shockwaves of [Immortal Arts Heaven: Pulse], he was launched away

from Mira, his sunglasses and hat flying off in another direction.

"Another dirty move!" Smith stood up, face red with rage and embarrassment—perhaps a bit more of the latter. Onlookers exclaimed as he stood up, seemingly unharmed, after taking such a blow.

Mira stared at the man. "Wait a second... *I do know you!*"

"Hm? Dammit!" Smith grabbed his sunglasses and hat and shoved them back on. Mira's eyes remained fixed on him as she strode forward. "Wh-what? What are you doing now?!"

She was totally open to counterattack and her fighting spirit had evaporated, but he braced himself for another dirty trick. Mira came closer and closer until she was within arm's reach.

What was she up to? Mira was even cuter up close, causing his heart to beat double time. He blushed and stood ready for whatever attack might come.

As Mira watched his conflicted expression, she parted her small lips and whispered, "You're Wallenstein."

"Huh?!" He was clearly shocked by the claim.

"I know who you are. Do you know who I am?" Mira summoned Cat Sith at her feet.

"Time for me-ow to take action!" Cat Sith appeared, clad in a red bodysuit and striking a sentai pose like some sort of mighty ranger. The placard in hand read, "EVIL WILL NOT GO UNPUNISHED!"

"Summoning magic... Cat Sith? But wait, weren't you using Immortal Arts before?" he muttered to himself. "Wait."

It wasn't too rare for someone to use two types of magic. But whether using one's main or secondary discipline, her abilities in each should have been lower quality than someone who specialized in a single school. It should have been impossible for her weaker Immortal Arts to be a match for him.

There was only one person he knew could accomplish this...

"I-is that you, Danblf?" he asked quietly, astonished.

"Yes! I thought I recognized you."

As Cat Sith struck another bombastic pose, Mira dismissed him and smiled at Agent Smi—no!—Wallenstein. Swallowed by the light, Cat Sith cried, "What about meeow?!" His sign clattered to the floor, flashing the words "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED."

\* \* \*

Wise Man Wallenstein the Shadow.

Mira was surprised, but Wallenstein was *flummoxed*. He looked her up and down a few times before finally sighing, "Vanity Case, huh? But why...? Oh. Wait a second."

He glanced around the train car and threw down a vial of holy water.

As the vial shattered on the floor, Wallenstein activated exorcist magic. It formed a blue barrier that enveloped them. The confused shouts of the other adventurers immediately quieted.

"There. They shouldn't be able to hear us now. So, Danblf, what brings a girl like you to a place like this?" Wallenstein asked politely. Apparently still uncomfortable with the situation, he glanced down at Mira's skirt and grinned wryly.

"As for what *I'm* doing," Mira began, "I'm on my way back to our home country. My mission is to find you slackers and drag you back. Solomon needs us." Mira glared at Wallenstein.

"Urk... Sorry about that. I've been dealing with a *situation*," Wallenstein answered with some trepidation.

"What situation? I assume it has something to do with that demon?" Mira only glared at him harder, unhappy with what could only be more work for her chore list.

"Umm..." Wallenstein looked nervous. "Look, you mentioned Devils a minute ago, didn't you?"

"Devils, hrmm? Did I?" Mira thought to herself, cocking her head.

"The memories are still hazy, I take it...?"

Mira shook her head. If she couldn't remember, she couldn't remember. She asked again, "So? What about this situation of yours?"

Wallenstein gazed at Mira thoughtfully. "Fine. I'll tell you everything."

First, he explained that he and his friends were traveling about trying to seal demons' abilities. Not to annihilate them, but to make them remember their *original* mission.

"Their original mission?" Mira asked.

"Yeah. Long ago, demons were much different creatures."

\* \* \*

In ancient times, the original mission of the demons had been corrupted by their limitless powers. That's when they became the enemy to humanity they were today.

After many years of research, it was discovered that sealing off a demon's abilities could awaken them to their true purpose. Once they had recovered, Wallenstein emphasized, they would never be a threat to humans again. The methods differed somewhat between individuals, but their goal was to work for a better future.

"The demon I was tracking was bad to the bone. But if the seal works, he should be able to coexist with us someday."

The process of sealing had to be split into several steps to avoid overwhelming the demons. And if they were treated violently, their power would become unstable. Forcing the sealing process in that state would risk damaging their memories.

In other words, Wallenstein had to work diplomatically.

The demon from before *had* been 80 percent sealed. However, it had recently shown signs of plotting evil schemes, so Wallenstein was keeping a close eye on it today.

"Interesting," Mira commented. "I see why you protected the demon, then. But what about the demon's plans?"

Mira looked in the direction in which the demon had run off.

Wallenstein answered, “We think the demon is plotting to feed on power from lost lives to replenish the power it lost from the seal. I doubt choosing to stop the train right here was a coincidence.”

When a state life was converted to a state death, enormous power was emitted. Demons could absorb and use that power. This ability was part of how the demons had become corrupted in the first place. In simple terms, they gained experience points and leveled up this way. A convenient method for those who desired strength.

“They become stronger by devouring life, hm? That power could indeed be abused. Hrmm... Could it be trying to throw the train into the valley and kill the passengers?”

“Sounds like a demonic scheme to me.”

Mira frowned in worry. “If that’s the case, should we get the passengers off the train just to be safe?” she suggested.

Wallenstein pointed to the window behind them. “My buddies in the other cars are already on it.”

Mira turned around. Outside of the soundproof barrier, everyone had already disappeared. Looking out the window, she saw lines of passengers evacuating.

“You work fast,” she mused.

“We do, but given the amount of people, more than half still remain.”

As Wallenstein finished speaking, the knight who’d jumped out the window before came flying back in and pounded on the barrier. Mira noticed a pair of demonic-looking wings on his back.

“Say, Wallenstein? Is that man...?”

“Yep, he’s a demon who remembered his purpose,” Wallenstein answered matter-of-factly. “Anyway, we should probably get this under control,” he added, and released the barrier.

The knight immediately spoke up, panic clear in his voice. “Sorry to interrupt your chat, but this is urgent. Come outside.”

"Show me." Wallenstein promptly jumped out alongside him.

Mira was the only one left inside the train car.

She gazed at the hole in the wall they'd made and thought for a moment. Did all the original demons look like that man? If not for the wings on his back, he would've looked like a normal human. Just what were demons, really? And what *was* their original mission?

As she thought to herself, the commotion outside reached her ears. The word *urgent* flashed through her mind.

"I'd better go have a look, too," Mira muttered to herself, following Wallenstein out of the train.

# CHAPTER 19

THE BRIDGE BENEATH the train connected two cliffs and was built to accommodate tracks in both directions. A vast river flowed through the valley below, fed by the distant and impossibly high waterfall.

The sky was clear, but the bridge was wet with mist from the waterfall. Mira ran over to the reformed demon and looked up.

“Urgent was right,” she mused.

Above the bridge, over a hundred Lesser Demons had gathered, along with a few higher ranked ones. Some were descending to land on the rails and fight with Wallenstein. Mira could see dozens had already been defeated. It looked like Wallenstein was handling it for the moment.

Noticing Mira, the reformed demon said, “I heard about you. Friend of Wally’s, right? I’m Faust. I hate to impose, but we could really use your help here.”

“Call me Mira,” she replied. “He also told me of your work. Fill me in on the situation, and I will assist however I can.”

It seemed Faust could put away his wings at will, as they were no longer on his back. Not to mention he acted like no other demon she’d ever encountered. He was... *pleasant*.

He gave her a quick rundown. They had successfully subdued the demon who had plotted all of this. Mira noticed he was tied up at Faust’s feet. However, the demon had made some move before they captured him that called this a horde of Lesser Demons. Faust’s guess was that these Lesser Demons had been standing by for a larger scheme. But now that the demon had been cornered, he’d had nothing left to lose and released them.

Lesser Demons were essentially pawns. Without a true demon’s orders, they would not move. The number of pawns that a demon controlled was proportional to its strength. Even with the majority of its abilities sealed, this viscount-rank demon could control hundreds of Lesser Demons.

"Good grief," Mira murmured in surprise. "I had no idea viscounts had such abilities."

"Yeah. There are more, but they've been sealed for the most part. But controlling Lesser Demons is a skill that can't be sealed," Faust said, looking down at the demon at his feet. "It's as easy as breathing for them."

"Like Faust said, this mob of Lesser Demons is carrying out orders. I just don't know what the hell the orders *are* that require so many of them," Wallenstein, having returned at some point, muttered in irritation. As expected of a Wise Man, he had already blown all the Lesser Demons currently on the bridge to smithereens.

Right on cue, the demon lying on the bridge began to cackle madly as more Lesser Demons dove to attack. There was the sound of an explosion, followed by the entire bridge rattling. The Lesser Demons clinging to the bridge began self-destructing. It seemed the demon was simply going to destroy the bridge while half of the passengers remained aboard, waiting to be evacuated.

The Wise Men couldn't let the bridge fall. Wallenstein rushed to head below the tracks, shouting, "Danblf, take the ones up above!"

"Hmph. Leave it to me," Mira answered and promptly summoned Garuda.

The magic circle rose into midair, and from it emerged an iridescent bird. With a single flap of its wings, it blew the Lesser Demons away. They shrieked as they were flung off course. But the buffeting winds also shook the train. Mira could hear the terrified screams of passengers through the open windows.

"Hmm. Wide area attacks are too dangerous, then."

Mira swiftly changed tactics.

Garuda responded and amped up its overwhelming presence as it glared at the enemy, holding them back by sheer force of will. It was now prepared to obstruct their charge with its own massive body. Realizing that they couldn't make it through the massive Spirit of Wind, the Lesser Demons stopped their charge and began looking around for openings.

With the demons held back for the moment, the evacuation resumed. Mira decided to check up on Wallenstein underneath the bridge.

As Mira watched, he ran along, using the multilayered structure as a foothold to destroy the mob of Lesser Demons with white fire. Amid the white flame, his black suit stood out even more. Occasionally, black flames spread and crept up on foes to burn them to a crisp. It seemed he was still living up to his title—The Shadow.

Mira was familiar with the general tactics, but many of his movements and spells excited her with their unorthodoxy. She'd thought that he had already mastered his field in-game, but it seemed he'd been sharpening his skills. Recalling how she had only recently developed partial summoning, she looked up to the sky with a big smile, anticipating what else she might discover.

Mira left Wallenstein to do what he did best, and returned to clean up the area above.

Garuda had acted as an impenetrable shield blocking attacks from the sky. But some Lesser Demons were taking wide detours to land below the bridge. With so many coming his way, even Wallenstein might accidentally let some slip through.

*Best to deal with them up here...*

Mira summoned Pegasus. Garuda's wide attacks would strike friend and foe alike, but Pegasus was a summon suitable for a close midair battle.

"Come, Pegasus. Today, we fight. Be careful; they have strength in numbers." Mira patted Pegasus's mane as it nuzzled her cheek. She pointed at the Lesser Demons blotting out the sky and commanded, "Run wild."

Pegasus neighed gleefully and took flight. It broke through Lesser Demons' defenses and knocked them down one after another. Soon the Lesser Demons reformed their ranks to minimize casualties.

"Hrmm. They have a captain among them."

Lesser Demons and monsters could sometimes have exceptionally proficient leaders known as captains. The presence of a captain could tip the balance of a battle, especially during a monster swarm.

Based on the coordinated actions of the Lesser Demons, this leader was no slouch. Some were even able to break off to harass the evacuating passengers. Adventurers had spread out to protect the weak, but their attackers were ready to strike at any opportunity.

If Mira took too long, there would be too many evacuees to protect.

She cast another summoning spell.

### **[Evocation: Hippogriff]**

A magic circle rose up, and the Hippogriff emerged with slow steps. With the upper body of an eagle and the torso and legs of a horse, it was truly a legend come to life. Mira's Hippogriff had pronounced eagle features. Its eyes were piercing, and it was enveloped in magnificent wings that looked truly ferocious when spread. Its legs were muscular, adding the strength of a warrior to its elegant bearing.

The Hippogriff was just as adept at midair combat as Pegasus. If Mira sent it from the opposite side, they ought to be able to break the Lesser Demons' formation with ease.

But... this was their first time seeing each other in thirty years. How would the Hippogriff feel? Feeling uneasy, Mira looked the Hippogriff in the eye, just as she had when they'd first met.

After a moment, the Hippogriff stretched out its wings and stepped closer to Mira. It extended its head forward and bent its legs as if bowing. It looked like a knight pledging allegiance to its liege, and its eyes were full of joy at its master's return.

"I see. Thirty years later, and you still serve?" Mira smiled and rested a hand on the Hippogriff's forehead. "Your loyalty is appreciated. Let us fight together once more."

The Hippogriff flapped its wings powerfully in response.

Mira gestured toward the horde of Lesser Demons in the sky and roared, "Exterminate them!"

The Hippogriff shrieked and darted forward like an arrow, assaulting the Lesser Demons in an aerial pincer attack with Pegasus. The sudden ambush from both sides shook the fiends, who had focused their attention on Mira.

"This is a rare opportunity for another test. Might as well give it a shot." Dozens of lesser demons were cut down in an instant as black arms bearing black swords appeared from nowhere and swung down on their hapless foes. "Aha. No problems there."

Mira found that if she aimed for a moment in which the enemy had stopped for any reason, she could summon multiple swords and still hit her mark.

Next test: hitting targets in concert with her partial summons. Mira gave Pegasus and Hippogriff new orders. This battlefield was now Mira's testing ground.

Faust stopped fighting to watch.

A pincer attack *and* a sudden killing blow from thin air. As the demons tried to short up their ranks, Pegasus crackled with lightning and scattered them. It didn't end there; the lightning sought and tore through them one after another. Pegasus's mood had changed. It now fell on the enemy with terrifying ferocity, its eyes burning with jealousy every time it laid eyes on the Hippogriff.

Garuda continued to provide a barrier between land and sky. Pegasus and Hippogriff devastated the enemy formations, and black swords felled the demons at every opportunity. Soon, the hundreds of Lesser Demons who had covered the sky were eliminated.

"Hmph. Was that it?" Mira surveyed the sky in satisfaction as she touched down next to Faust, confirming that no demon had escaped.

As she did, her eyes paused on the adventurers standing with the group of evacuated passengers. Since they were more than a hundred meters away, she couldn't see their faces, but they all looked to be frozen in awe.

"Wonderful work. They didn't even get close to the passengers. Erm... Should I call you Mira? Because Wally called you Danblf a minute ago, but..." Faust seemed impressed, but there was a measure of confusion on his face as well.

"Ughh..." Mira shuddered.

"As I recall, Danblf was another Wise—"

"Faust, I'm going to stop you there," Mira interrupted, glaring daggers at him. "Do you understand me?"

"...Okay. Mira. Your name is Mira." Given that she'd just won an aerial battle single-handedly, Faust was not inclined to argue.

"Good. Now, I wonder why so many demons were gathered here?"

Wallenstein was still fighting below the bridge, but he was sure to have them mopped up soon. Mira left Garuda on guard duty and spectated.

"I think they were getting ready for the bridge's destruction," Faust answered. "A single demon can't collect the life energy of over a thousand deaths at once. The Lesser Demons were probably looking for scraps." He paused a moment, then added, somewhat disquietingly, "I would know."

# CHAPTER 20

“LOOKS LIKE I still can’t beat the great Danblf’s speed record versus bigger armies,” Wallenstein mused as he returned

from below. When his words were met with an uncomfortable gaze from Faust, he raised an eyebrow in confusion.

“Listen, Wallenstein. My name is Mira now. Mira. Not Danblf.”

Faust nodded along for emphasis.

“Huh? Ahh... an alias! Got it. Okay, it’s Mira from now on. And you call me Wally, okay?”

She wasn’t sure if he really understood, but this was a workable solution.

He looked at the demon lying on the ground. It was fast asleep, apparently due to something Faust had done.

“I guess all we can do now is take it home. Faust, meet up with the others and go on ahead,” Wallenstein ordered with a sigh.

“Understood.” Faust slung the bound demon over his shoulder and turned. “See you later. That goes for you, too, Mira.” The former demon bowed and returned to the train car. A few faces peeked from the windows, apparently Wallenstein’s friends who had been lying in wait, just in case.

“So, uhhh, Mira. Looks like I won’t get back to Alcait for a while now. But I’ll try to poke my head in at least once this year, so let Solomon know. Buuut if you could fill him in for me...” Wallenstein slumped apologetically, a stark contrast to his sharp secret agent-like attire.

“Hrmm... Well, I do understand your circumstances. If your work can turn demons from foes to friends, then we can hardly ask for more.” The plans of demons were the source of countless tragedies. If such darkness could be erased from the world, then it would be truly revolutionary. “I’ll let Solomon know to wait a little longer.”

"Thanks!"

"So, I was thinking." Deciding to put a pin in the issue for now, Mira shifted topics. "We were forced to fight here today. In these cases, what happens to the sealing process? Also, what should I do if I run into a demon without you around?"

In some situations, fighting was inevitable. This would happen again, and now that Mira knew about the demon sealing, she had to decide how she should deal with this dilemma.

"In cases like this, we often give them a chance to escape," Wallenstein said. "Simply releasing them would make them more cautious, so it would be harder to tail them."

It was necessary to make the demon think it had escaped of its own volition and ability. Once things had calmed down, they would resume the sealing.

"But when you run into a demon by chance..." Wallenstein retrieved a few black threads and some round white rocks. "Demons who don't remember their true purpose can be incredibly dangerous. It would be better for the people around if you defeated them swiftly. But I would still greatly prefer to release their memories."

He then held out the two tools.

The black thread could subdue any demon up to duke for three days. When the white rock was shattered, it would emit a special signal that could be sensed by Faust's kind. If she took the subdued demon to a safe place and shattered the rock, Wallenstein's friends would come take care of it.

"Aha, understood," Mira said. "I'll do my best not to defeat demons just because they're demons."

"I would be delighted if you tried." Wallenstein smiled faintly now that he had Mira on his side. Then his expression tightened, and he added, "But if human life is in danger, do what you've got to do. If people die, then what's the point in all of this?"

"Very well... And you're certain you're fine with that?"

"Yes. Besides, as long as you don't damage the demon's soul, it'll be reincarnated as a demon again. It may extend the process, but I think we'll see the work done someday."

It might take years or even decades, but they had as many chances as they needed to return the demons to their original mission. It seemed Wallenstein was ready and willing to pursue this for the long haul.

"Reincarnation!" Mira gasped. "Then maybe that demon..." Mira told Wallenstein about the demon she'd encountered in Nebrapolis.

"Soul Howl used that as his base, and there was a *demon* there? Add in the zombie outbreak and the appearance of a half-demon... Could Soul Howl be involved in this, too? No—unsealed demons are all still firmly on the side of evil. Perhaps...?" Wallenstein was absorbed in thought. He muttered to himself, thinking and rethinking on different explanations.

"So, Wally. Will the demon I killed in Nebrapolis reincarnate?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah, don't worry. One broken neck won't damage the soul."

"Hrmm. Very good." Feeling her heart grow a little lighter now, she recalled something else. "Incidentally, there is one more thing on my mind. It's about those Lesser Demons..."

She filled him in on the flower field.

\* \* \*

"A flower field with a white pillar and monsters killing each other... That certainly is strange."

"Isn't it? Faust told me that Lesser Demons only act on the orders of demons. Is that universally true? Could demons be lurking about Alcait, plotting some scheme?"

Mira had killed that Lesser Demon, but based on what she'd learned today, it must have been part of something larger. Demonic activity always heralded disaster. Mira was uneasy at the thought that Alcait might be in greater danger.

But Wallenstein promptly dispelled her worries. "I don't know what the demon was planning there. But for now, I doubt they'll go near Alcait. My comrades have been searching that area for a few days, and I've heard of no sightings. I'll have them do another sweep just in case. Leave the investigation of that flower field to us." It seemed Wallenstein had some cards up his sleeve.

"Thank you for everything, really."

"Alcait is still home, after all. I can't leave it to suffer. Besides, demons are kind of my specialty at this point."

Before they realized it, the passengers had returned to the train, and the engine had begun to rumble. Around them, a few adventurers and railroad staff were performing safety checks. One of them looked Mira's way. Mira waved toward him to signal that there was no problem. She then looked back to Wallenstein.

"So, Dan—erm, Mira. I'm glad we were able to catch up."

"Me too. If you need anything, just ask."

"Thanks." Shaking Mira's hand, Wallenstein finally excused himself and backed up a few paces. A magic circle floated up from his feet. He disappeared in a flash of white light, much like a summons being dismissed.

"Come on! Really?!" She gasped at the sight.

It truly happened in an instant. Had he developed some sort of teleportation magic? Why hadn't she been informed of this?!

"Teleportation, exorcism... An application of barriers? Or perhaps Ethereal Arts? It was just like summons dismissal..." she muttered to herself as she returned to her seat. After a while, she suddenly remembered Garuda and the others were still standing guard in the sky and dismissed them from afar.

\* \* \*

The army of Lesser Demons and the appearance of a full-on demon had quite an effect on the passengers, who were eager to be anywhere but the trestle bridge. Once the engine itself was back in working order and the checks were complete, the train rushed off to escape the place.

As they sped to the next stop, Mira found herself surrounded by adventurers who had seen her rather spectacular performance in battle. She was stuck answering question after question.

The adventurers asked about every detail, but whenever she was asked about her

strength, Mira responded in only one way:

"You have witnessed the true power of summoning!"

As for Agent Smith—or rather, Wallenstein—Mira made up a convincing story about him being a demon hunter who had left to pursue another demon still at large. Many had witnessed the demon appearing on the train and Wallenstein protecting him, so there were rumors that they were in cahoots. A rumor like that would certainly make it harder for Wallenstein to do his work. Mira generously spun him up a good cover story.

*You owe me for this one, friend.* Mira smirked to herself and swore that she would wring the secrets of teleportation from him one way or another.

But the image of the enormous horde of Lesser Demons hanging in the sky stuck in her mind. Mira and Wallenstein had destroyed them all before they could cause any real trouble, but the sheer numbers alone were abnormal. Given the scale of the attack and the fact that all the passengers had witnessed it, this was sure to become public knowledge.

Word was about to spread across the continent.

\* \* \*

Eventually, the train reached the next station. Several representatives of the Adventurers' Guild Union were waiting on the platform. When they spotted Mira, they requested she visit their office the next day to be debriefed. Mira readily accepted, as this would surely come with some reward.

The Union put her up for the night at a high-class inn, and before long, Mira found herself sprawled out in the room's private bath.

*I really never expected to meet Wallenstein like that. At the very least, we have his word that he'll be back within the year. I suppose that's one down? Six to go!*

Not a bad start. Deciding to pamper herself a little, she expensed an alcoholic drink to the Union's tab.

*Demons, though... Their original mission was to create a better future. What a surprising twist. But Faust seemed nice enough. If that is a demon's true form, then if Wallenstein*

*achieves his goal, it could be a world-changing accomplishment.*

Mira mowed through a plate of expensive cheese as she pondered the matter.

“But I have to wonder what exactly their original mission was...”

What would demons do in service of a better future? Realizing that she hadn’t asked, Mira shrugged and assumed that as long as Wallenstein was involved, it couldn’t lead to anything bad.

Then she helped herself to some top-shelf charcuterie.

\* \* \*

The next day, Mira testified to the Union on the grounds that she had spoken with a suspect. She protected Wallenstein’s identity by telling the same improvised cover story she’d told the adventurers. Her testimony was readily accepted as truth when she presented Solomon’s medal.

Witnessing once again the power of Solomon’s name, she had to marvel at the influence her country held.

Mira couldn’t depart on the day she had to testify, so she spent the rest of the day sightseeing. Station cities were often a melting pot of a region’s cultures, making it quite enjoyable to explore them.

Her room at the inn was once again comped as she waited for the next day’s train, and Mira arrived back at Silverside the following evening.

\* \* \*

It was a bit pricier than the surrounding inns, but Mira couldn’t help wanting to spend one more night at the Starry Villa.

When morning came, she heard the usual broadcast announcing the railroad schedule. With nowhere to be, Mira snuggled deeper into her comfy blanket and continued to snooze.

After lazing about for most of the morning, she finally crawled out of the covers and rang the breakfast bell. Today’s breakfast was full of familiar comfort foods. After

savoring every last morsel, she sipped green tea, relaxed for a bit, and finally left the room.

\* \* \*

"Thank you for choosing Starry Villa."

"Right. Thank you."

Mira left the inn, adorable twin ponytails bobbing behind her. The receptionist had been happy to tie them for Mira again. High on her own imagined perfection, Mira stepped into the street to find a good place to summon Pegasus.

A man stood idly before the Starry Villa, as if he'd been waiting for her to exit. When he saw her, he hurried over.

"Excuse me," he greeted her. "I believe you are Miss Mira, Danblf's pupil? Might I have a moment of your time?"

"I am. But who are you?"

He looked to be in his late thirties and balding, with crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. His remaining hair was black, as were his well-tailored butler clothes.

"I would love to give you an answer, but there are too many people here. Forgive me, but might I trouble you to move somewhere... quieter?" The man glanced about, voice lowered.

If he had business with her due to being the supposed pupil of a Wise Man, then it was likely important. The two strode away from the bustling main street and faced each other again.

"My apologies for imposing on your time," he began. "Now, allow me to answer your question. I serve someone quite like yourself: a fellow pupil of a *different* Wise Man. I've brought a letter for you, and my master wishes to arrange a meeting. The details are enclosed. I hope you are willing to consider my master's request."

"A pupil of a Wise Man? Are there others besides myself? Whose pupil are they?" Mira asked, eyeing the man's bald spot. She had been led to believe there were no other pupils. If they existed, then Solomon would have told her.

Who could they be? Mira glared penetringly at the man.

"My deepest apologies. My master is quite cautious and fears those who would take advantage of their power. I have been asked to conceal their name and their master's. Apologies again for my rudeness, but the answers you seek are in the letter." With that, the man pulled a carefully sealed envelope from his pocket and offered it to Mira.

"Hrmm. This pupil is a shut-in, eh?" She'd get this sorted out soon enough. Besides, Mira was interested in knowing if there truly was another—or, more accurately, an *actual*—pupil. She accepted the letter.

"I must now take my leave." With a deep bow, the man disappeared into the crowd. Mira did not bother to watch him go, instead tearing open the envelope and reading the letter on the spot.

*Forgive me for my presumption in writing to you.*

*When I heard there was another pupil of a Wise Man like myself, I could not help but reach out immediately. Due to personal circumstances, I cannot appear in public.*

*I understand that this is difficult to ask of a stranger, but I hope that you will meet me at the abandoned garden in the southwest of Silverside.*

*I will wait for you as long as necessary.*

Mira returned the letter to its envelope, shoved it into her waist pouch, and opened her map.

*Hrmm, the abandoned garden? I think it was around here...?* The station town known as Silverside had not existed in-game, so Mira was unfamiliar with its layout. After staring at the map for a while, she made a vague guess about where to go.

*I wonder what sort of person they are? I hope she's a cute girl!*

It bothered Mira that they refused to go out in public, but this seemed to be a way to kill two birds with one stone. If they truly were a pupil, then they would know where one or more of the other Wise Men would be.

Not a moment later, she had mounted Pegasus and was on her way to investigate a new lead.

# AFTERWORD

**HERE WE ARE AGAIN:** the afterword, also known as the page-padder.

First, I would like to thank you for buying my book! And thank you as well to everyone involved in its publication.

This volume is chock-full of my personal yearnings.

Being jostled by the train as you look off into the beautiful horizon, enjoying a meal you painstakingly chose at a station, villages occasionally appearing in the distance, sights that feel nostalgic even the first time you see them, traveling as freely as the wind blows... How I wish I could experience such a journey myself.

...Don't you feel the same way? I do. Often. So I took my feelings and stuffed them into Volume 5! I hope you liked it.

Also, I just love train-station bentos. I've had readers send in websites with lists of station bentos before, and they seem so delicious. I just ate, and I'm already falling into the trap of wanting to eat again!

What is that strange allure that station bentos have?

I want them, but they're expensive. But I swear, one day, I'm gonna do it. I can't afford railroad trips, though. I'll just have to eat one from the station in my town.

Also, I hear they let you buy some online! I'd love to give that a try. I have to keep working toward that goal...

\* \* \*

By the way, this volume has *two* versions: one normal one, and one with a drama CD included! What a shocking development! I was blown away when I went to the CD recording. So many thoughts went through my mind, like, *Wow, real voice actors!* That experience was once in a lifetime. Again, a huge thank you to everyone involved!

Incidentally, I wrote a whole new story for the drama CD. I did my best, really. Those

who have heard it probably know, but there are plenty of mentions of panties! All according to plan. Heh heh heh.

Changing the subject! Lately (it's March, by the way), PlayStation VR has been a huge topic of conversation. I hope they make a game where you can explore another world! Ruins sleeping in the depths of forests, massive shrines sunken in the sea, hidden passages behind waterfalls that lead to underground cities... Oh, I can't take it! Imagine: you're chasing monsters, running away from dragons, and before you realize it, you've gotten lost and wandered into a hidden village!

Being friends with a Pegasus and flying around sounds lovely, too. You cross the ocean, and you find a range of floating islands! Endless ruins, endless riches to be found, and the mysteries of the world revealed along the way. Just perfect.

When I think that a game like that could come out some day, my excitement is boundless.

Also, can't miss this one: thank you, fuzichoco! Look at that cover. This is what I've been dreaming of.

Phew, I could go on forever. I wanna ride that train! I wanna ride it far, far away! Escape the galaxy and fly off to the ends of space! Look out the window and see galaxies, nebulas, and planets. All kinds of aliens could ride it, too. Doesn't that sound fun? Oh, it really does...

Anyway, that about does it for this one. I've been getting better at eating my vegetables lately, thanks in no small part to everyone who's bought my books.

Hot pot is great, and it's got so many veggies. How healthy is that?! My current goal is to add more kinds of ingredients, and I'm counting on your support to make it happen!



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