
She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man
NOVEL
12
Written by
Ryusen Hirotsugu
Illustrated by
fuzichoco

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Tyriel
Cu Sith
Cat Sith
Eizenfald
Etenoa
Kagura
Uneko
Mariana
Mira
Luna



In the final room, the baron placed Mira in a bed at the center.

"Now we're here… This is a special room for our love to blossom in. Nobody will interrupt us, and there's no escaping," he whispered ecstatically, lighting what looked like incense burners in the meantime. After a while, odd-colored smoke began to rise.

That explains why there were so many doors along the way: They prevent escapes. Ugh! He's so disguasting, it makes my skin crawl.

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment



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TRANSLATION: Benjamin Daughety
ADAPTATION: Adam Lee
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
INTERIOR DESIGN: Clay Gardner
INTERIOR LAYOUT: Ria Linn Johnson
COPY EDITOR: Cheri Ebisu
PROOFREADER: Meg van Huygen
EDITOR: Viviane Wishart
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Salvador Chan Jr., April Malig, Jules Valera
MANAGING EDITOR: Alyssa Scavetta
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis
PUBLISHER: Lianne Sentar
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PRESIDENT: Jason DeAngelis

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Chapter 1

MIRA RELAXED TO THE FULLEST inside a classy inn in Grandrings, a city near the border of the northern nation of Grimdart. She was in extremely high spirits, no doubt because she'd accomplished her top secret mission to search for one of the Nine Wise Men in the Ancient Underground City below.

The summoner had successfully reunited with the necromancer Soul Howl and secured his promise that he would return. He was the third such Wise Man, after Wallenstein and Kagura.

Even more exciting were the beings Mira had encountered down in the Ancient Underground City. The progenitor spirit Martel reputedly had power rivaled only by the Spirit King himself, and the divine beast Fenrir proved an incredible ally with power beyond even Eizenfald's. That wasn't all. Mira had obtained the mansion spirit, an evocation unlike any before. That was a new magic brimming with potential. Moreover, she'd scored super precious materials courtesy of the Machina Guardian.

What had surprised her most was the sprawling research facility even deeper below the city, which had revealed traces of what she recognized as modern society. That facility could be key to solving the mysteries of this world. Her original plan had only been to find Soul Howl, yet the city had yielded so much more.

"Goodness. Part of me feels like this has just been too much to take in," Mira said, reminiscing over the past week. The thought of how she'd report it all to Solomon drew a pained chuckle out of her.

She lazed on the couch for a while before finally beginning to straighten out the situation in her head—specifically, where she should go next.

She recalled that, in the inn lobby, a group of girls had discussed the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice's impending appearance in the city of Haxthausen. Fuzzy Dice donated to many orphanages, so it was possible that he had information on the orphanage where Artesia worked.

However, Mira had obtained a boatload of information that she wanted to report to Solomon as soon as possible—about Soul Howl, about the message and mysterious plate left by the mechanized doll that had appeared upon the Machina Guardian's defeat, and about that diary page's fascinating contents. The geniuses in the castle would be eager to analyze any and all of these clues. Mira also wanted to report to Solomon about the research facility.

Couldn't she return home quickly, report to him, then head to Haxthausen?

Hrmm. From here, it'd take three days to get back to Alcait, then another three to get to Haxthausen. Six days total…

From what Mira had heard, Fuzzy Dice's appearance was anticipated five days from now. In that case, she'd be too late if she reported to Solomon; the phantom thief wouldn't hang around town after he finished his task. If she wanted to question him, she'd surely have to arrive before the day of the deed.

"If I go directly from here, I might get there in time, but…"

If her priority was getting leads on the Nine Wise Men, she needed to go straight to Haxthausen. Garuda could reach the city in a couple days' time. Going there now, and delaying her report to Solomon, would make contact with Fuzzy Dice much likelier. That would increase her likelihood of gaining info on Artesia.

So…take the information and items she'd obtained back now, or aim to intercept the phantom thief who might know Artesia's whereabouts?

"Hrmm. What to do…?" Mira murmured as she sprawled on the large sofa.

This inn room cost 150,000 ducats a night, and its luxury matched its price. Sipping the fruit wine left to welcome her, Mira gazed through a large window with a commanding view of the hotel street.

The weather didn't look good tonight. Neither the moon nor stars could be seen, and drops of water splattered the windowpane. It seemed it was beginning to rain.

Would that rain continue into tomorrow? Fortunately, Garuda and the wagon were a powerful combination that let Mira fly without fear of bad weather. While she pondered that, another idea bubbled up in her mind.

"Actually...I might just be able to accomplish the report itself with ease..."

It was simple: She'd use the communicator that had been installed (*without* her consent!) in the wagon. She couldn't deliver the plate itself, but she could communicate all the rest through speech. That realization gave her a third option: report via the communicator, then head straight to Haxthausen.

However, there was a problem with that plan.

Hmm. I should've asked for his number in case of an event like this. If only the communicator just connected us when I picked up the receiver, like it did at Kagura's base.

Indeed, Mira had no idea how to use the communicator. When she'd contacted the Isuzu Alliance headquarters from its Sentopoli branch, all she had to do was pick up the receiver. The communicator in her wagon looked entirely different, though. It had numerous buttons and levers, so it seemed unlikely that just picking up would connect her to Solomon.

What to do? While she racked her brain, she heard a knock at the door.

Forget it. I say I just press random buttons on it tomorrow! If he didn't know how to use it, she'd just have to try methods at random.

Now that she'd thought of a way to accomplish both her goals, all that remained was to attempt it. But that was for tomorrow. Mira opened the door and smiled broadly at the lavish dinner the inn employees brought to her table.

"When you finish your meal, please ring the bell by the door. We'll take your dishes," an employee said before they all left the room.

Mira put aside thoughts of work and immediately set upon her meal.

As one ought to expect at an inn that cost 150,000 ducats a night, the feast laid before her was truly fit for a king. A thick

slice of roast beef, a sauce with black pepper's exquisite spiciness and scent, a fresh and colorful salad and soup, and finally, garlic rice with an appetizing aroma.

"Ah, this meat's just too delicious!"

Mira first ate a bite of the two-centimeter-thick slice of roast beef and broke into a smile at its tenderness and juiciness. The roast beef, which had just a faint tinge of pink, was much less tough than its thickness suggested. It seemed to melt in her mouth.

This roast beef was certainly something special. Mira didn't know much about cooking, but the dish was delicious enough that she could tell serious time and effort had gone into making it.

My dinner a few days ago was exquisite, but this is even better!

The dinner she was remembering, which Martel had treated her to, had included multiple courses of undiscovered fruits and vegetables. They'd been simply sublime, even more so because they were prepared for Mira herself. When it came to salads—dishes that naturally depended on the quality of the vegetables they contained—nothing else could ever compare.

In other words, now that Mira had experienced the very best, she could no longer be satisfied by an *average* salad.

But her attitude differed when it came to meat, which was outside Martel's field of expertise. The human element—the fact that it was cooked—contributed to the contrast.

"Cooking truly is a wonderful invention."

The inn's colorful salad was no match for Martel's, but the cooked dishes, such as the soup and garlic rice, were quite unlike raw food. Their warmth filled her with a mysterious calm.

Only human cooking could measure up to Martel's supreme fruits and vegetables. While Mira savored the luxurious feast on the table, she imagined feeding Martel the meal and seeing her shock.

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After she finished eating and had her dishes taken away, Mira went to the bath chamber. Given the room's massive price tag, it had a large private facility.

"Now, this is spectacular." Mira undressed, then admired the view from the large window at the bathroom entrance. From the window next to the tub, one could see all of Grandrings.

Mira wasted no time sinking into the bath. There, she stretched out and reclined, groaning happily as she gazed at the sparkling cityscape. It seemed just a bit brighter thanks to the tinge of steam on the window.

"Things are still bustling down there, but up here, it's as quiet as can be."

In the distance, beyond the inn street, all the lights near the Adventurers' Guild Union were ablaze. Plenty of adventurers were still out there at this time. Here around the inns, though—especially the classier ones—things were much calmer.

Mira saw few people below. Instead, the calm lights of streetlamps dotted the world beneath. Two knights in matching armor passed the inn.

"Ooh. Do I spy wandering security guards? Keep up the good work, friends."

Mira had seen guards around town here and there. The fact that *two* had been dispatched here proved how classy this area was. Their devotion to crime prevention impressed Mira.

Just then, she saw the knights move. They both stared in a certain direction, then squatted.

What's going on? Curious, Mira continued watching.

The truth turned out to be *extremely* boring; it was a stray cat, of all things.

The guards found the kitty by the side of the road and coaxed it over, then picked it up and started petting it lovingly. They even fed it some food that they happened to have. The cat seemed quite used to this and showed no wariness. One had to wonder how long they'd been feeding it.

"*That* would be the perfect opportunity to exploit." Mira started to worry over whether those two guards really *were*

devoted to security. This area attracted wealthy merchants and excited tourists, but the guards were more focused on the stray cat than their work. For a villain after people's valuables, this would be a perfect hunting ground.

However, Mira realized something. *Now that I think about it, there are lots of veteran adventurers here. Perhaps they'd apprehend any would-be criminals in no time.*

Indeed, this hotel street was chock-full of adventurers and hunters of evildoers; they were easily tougher than any mere guard. Trying to commit a crime here would mean fighting at least one adventurer. Surely that was an insurmountable obstacle for criminals.

If security stepped into any situation, it would be a conflict between adventurers. *Maybe that's why they're so lax.*

When Mira looked at the guards again, she saw that another person and two more cats had joined them. The person seemed to be a woman, apparently an adventurer staying at a nearby inn. Mira couldn't hear them at all, but they seemed to be discussing the cats. Both the new felines were small—perhaps the first cat's kittens. The adventurer took a few things out of her Item Box and gave them to the strays.

It was a quiet night, and the hotel street was peaceful.

In the bathroom's faint indirect lighting, Mira relaxed and murmured, "So peaceful." Then her gaze returned to the room. "Hmm... What's that?"

In one corner of the luxurious bath chamber, a glass partition wrapped protectively around a large device. What did it do? Curious, Mira got out of the bath and approached it. When she got close, the device's function became clear.

"As I recall...this is called a phonograph."

On the other side of the glass sat a record player. Unlike the ones Mira was used to, it was a large, high-tech device with a single switch that could swap out multiple records.

Records. Hmm... Something else players made, I guess.

Looking back, Mira realized that she hadn't paid much attention to this world's music. The first thing she could immediately recall related to music was the spirit of song, Leticia

—followed shortly by the traveling bard Emilio. Apart from them, she only remembered hearing faint traces of music at an inn she'd stayed at during her rail journey.

Will we see a day when Emilio's songs are recorded to replay on phonographs?

His singing voice was wonderful. *If it reached the ears of someone involved in record manufacturing, they'd no doubt try to scout him*, Mira thought as she gazed through the glass. Then she saw the labels on the records installed in the player.

"A phonograph in the bathroom… How opulent."

No doubt the glass barrier was meant to protect the record player from splashing and humidity. Reaching the phonograph itself would be difficult, but the switch that controlled it was in the open, covered in something like vinyl. The intention was surely for guests to listen to music while they bathed. Yet another elegant way to enjoy the extremely expensive inn.

"Let's see… What kinds of music do they have?"

When in Rome, Mira thought, then skimmed the record labels. There were around fifty. She didn't know how they'd been chosen, but the titles included *Standing at Dawn*, *Rollick Hymn*, *Dandelion Bouquet*, *Rabbit Under Moonlight*, *Magical ♪ Happy Smile For You*, *All My Plowing Just Gets Me Potatoes*, and *Will the Onion Fit in the Pot?*

It was a very adventurous lineup for such a place. Some of the records sounded interesting, a couple sounded like idol songs, and still others sounded like parodies.

"Aside from those ones, I guess I won't know what these are until I listen…"

Picking a record, Mira pressed Play. With a soft whirring, the record player moved; an arm picked up the record below and placed it onto the turntable. The record began spinning, and a needle lowered onto it. The needle finally touched the groove, and a sort of nostalgic music spread through the room.

"Oh ho. Not bad at all."

It seemed she'd picked classical music. The comforting melody was perfect for an elegant bath.

Savoring the luxuriousness, Mira sank back into the tub and murmured, “Aah. Paradise…”

Chapter 2

HAVING SPENT A NIGHT in the extremely expensive inn, Mira resisted wakefulness for a while, then finally used the toilet and refreshed herself with a morning bath. Now, she was mid-breakfast.

"In the end, meat is key. Meat is love and meat is life."

Her meal this morning included consommé, fruit juice, and burgers with ample toppings.

Beef, cheese, tomato, and lettuce were the stars of the show. Rather dense for breakfast, but the first burger was delicious, with a basil sauce.

Mira had requested this breakfast the night before. Owing to the inn room's massive price tag, staying a night permitted one to order whatever breakfast they wanted from the inn's head chef. Mira had used the privilege to request that the same beef from last night be served for breakfast in the morning. The result was these luxurious burgers.

"Such wonderful breakfasts are hard to come by."

After making short work of the first burger, Mira murmured happily and reached for the second. This one wasn't just meat between buns either; the beef was again accompanied by cheese, tomatoes, and lettuce.

This was a dish of the utmost perfection, made with a liberal amount of that exquisite beef. But the burgers weren't all the same; the beef and lettuce held constant, but the other ingredients differed. The cheese might be replaced with cream cheese, sauteed eggs or mushrooms, or something else entirely. The variety of flavors satisfied Mira even more.

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After finishing breakfast and checking out of the inn, utterly fulfilled, Mira mounted Pegasus and headed toward the Adventurers' Guild Union.

The union was naturally busy, even this early, given the city attracted so many adventurers. It was chock-full of people engaged in various proceedings and types of paperwork. Mira's objective was different this time, however. She side-eyed the commotion as she weaved through the crowd and stood in front of the corner recycling bin.

"Mustn't forget this. It's too important." She casually, yet conscientiously, put her used Ancient Underground City permit in the recycling bin. An apparition of a girl appeared, thanked her for her cooperation, and disappeared with a smile. That technology had never ceased to bewilder Mira, no matter how many times she saw it.

Their curiosity piqued by the sound of the recycling bin being used in the early morning, some adventurers turned and exclaimed, wondering whether *that* could be the Spirit Queen herself. Their commotion drew even more attention toward Mira.

Apparently, during Mira's time in the Ancient Underground City, the revelation that the supposedly bodacious Spirit Queen was actually a young girl had finally spread. Words to this effect and compliments on her beauty rose from the onlookers.

Hrmm. I'd say I'm on my way to being as famous as Cyril!

In response to the expectant looks, Mira puffed out her chest confidently—an implicit statement that she was the very queen they hoped she was.

At that point, a number of adventurers approached her. They bombarded her with questions about what the battle was like, her relationship with the Spirit King, her thoughts on Jack Grave during the battle, whether it was true that she'd refused Eleonora's offer, whether she knew about the card game *Legends of Asteria*, which window she'd like to pick up a gift from someone named "M.T." at, what color her panties were—on and on.

"Er, sorry! I have some urgent business to attend to!" Unable to take the endless questioning any longer, Mira used Air Step to leap over the crowding adventurers' heads. In the process, she made sure to respond to one question: "Send that gift to Lunatic Lake, please!"

"Understood!" the employee replied.

Many in the room let out a collective groan, although Mira's quick escape impressed some. Meanwhile, one man looked up in satisfaction, having received an unexpected answer to his question.

"Light blue, huh?"

***

"Phew. Things changed quite a bit in the past week or so." Had news from Sentopoli come this far in so little time, or had her words on her first day here had such a strong effect? Both, perhaps? Either way, the Spirit Queen's image as a buxom babe had been replaced with that of tiny Mira. "This is a bit of a problem."

Fame came with its own set of issues, Mira realized, though she relished the satisfaction of the shower of praise. Then she remembered one of those voices she'd heard. *It's the icing on the cake that my fans are people of real culture!* she boasted inwardly as she strutted out of the Adventurers' Guild Union.

Now cognizant of her fame, Mira smiled at the prospect of summoning's grand return as she headed to the parking lot near the union.

That parking lot was made for both horse-drawn carriages and wagons drawn by other creatures, and it was full of both. In other words, it was packed with necromancers' golems and similar laborers.

Carriages and wagons were vital assets to adventurers, as well as status symbols. Such a vehicle's purchase price and maintenance fees were too great for a newbie adventurer to bear. Often, new adventurer groups made obtaining one their first goal.

That meant these vehicles weren't purchased *just* for convenience, but to show that their owner made a stable income as well. Here, those displays of wealth were on display all over the place, which proved that adventurers of corresponding caliber had gathered in this city.

The carriages before were all similar, but these ones have such varied designs.

Mira handed her numbered ticket to the attendant, who guided her to an area where she saw many other striking carriages. Her wagon was parked in a roofed lot for veteran adventurers, but they'd passed through an unroofed lot to get there. Along the way, Mira had seen countless carriages. They'd all had similar or identical designs, though, leading Mira to conclude that that was the standard adventurer style.

The roofed parking lot was a different matter. No two - carriages there shared a design. The veteran adventurers' carriages were all souped up in various special ways that showed off their status, with enhancements to comfort, driving power, and durability. They all seemed to be the kind pulled along the ground, however. Mira's wagon, with its top supports for flying, stood out among them. Perhaps as a result, the adventurers using the lot were taking notice of it.

First things first. Let's see if that communicator works. Thanking the attendant, Mira slipped into her wagon, avoiding prying eyes, then opened the closet door to check on the communicator set up within.

Its black case was installed in the closet, and it couldn't be moved. That meant Mira had to crawl into the closet and use Ethereal Arts: Illumination to see it. In that pose, someone peeking through the wagon window could've seen her underwear, but she was obviously neither cognizant nor wary of that.

She took the lid off the case and tossed it aside haphazardly. Inside was a black device with a receiver. Mira picked it up, praying that it would connect her directly to Solomon, like the one she'd used to connect with Kagura.

"Hey, Solom—" Before she finished saying Solomon's name, Mira realized something and put the receiver down.

If this call connected, she'd be reporting national secrets. Tons of adventurers were using the parking lot, and she didn't know who might be listening in. If she reported in now, and they heard her, there'd be no end to speculation on the Nine Wise Men.

The temporary nonaggression pact still forbade war and all other aggressive acts. Alcait could perhaps escape scrutiny by claiming that Mira was searching for missing citizens, but that wouldn't entirely hold water when it came to the raw military force the Nine Wise Men represented.

Searching for the remaining Wise Men—their homeland's most powerful offensive and defensive assets—in anticipation of the end of the treaty was in itself an extremely risky mission. Some countries might even see it as preparation for war and, in turn, condemn Alcait.



That said, Mira had a simple excuse: She was merely searching for her countrymen. In light of that, condemnations likely wouldn't lead to any serious repercussions. Still, it was all but certain that some would try to interfere with her quest. That would be a pain to deal with, Mira realized, so she decided to take measures to prevent eavesdropping.

The Mark of the Rosary appeared inside the wagon. As Mira incanted, it became fainter, then vanished into thin mist as the spell activated.

Wasranvel, the spirit of stealth, appeared without any sound or sign. "A much smaller space than usual, I see." Mira had summoned him for short periods during the battle with the Machina Guardian. Looking around the wagon for a moment, he remarked with a smile, "Oh. Now that I think about it, this is where we first met."

"Although I was asleep back then." Mira grinned wryly. During their first meeting, Wasranvel had swept the sleeping Mira out of her wagon. She'd awoken in the middle of a lake.

"Come to think of it, you're right." If one considered their first meeting to consist of mutual recognition, it would actually have been in the middle of that dark lake—a rather disquieting place to wake up to a stranger's face. Wasranvel viewed that meeting as a fond memory, however.

Based on the circumstances, Mira seemingly wasn't in battle, so Wasranvel looked out the window and asked, "Now, then, what brings me here today?"

"Well, you see, I need to discuss secret matters that mustn't be heard. I need you to prevent eavesdropping."

"That makes sense. Certainly. That's an easy request for me." Having readily agreed, Wasranvel used his power of stealth right away. It produced no visible difference, highlighting how unobtrusive the power was; still, its effectiveness was no joke.

"Mm. Perfect!" Mira complimented him. This power prevented any sound from traveling to their surroundings. It also cut off even the faintest sound from outside, filling the wagon with such silence that they heard only each other's faint

breathing. “Now, I just hope the communicator actually connects…”

The stage was perfectly set. All that remained was to try to contact Solomon.

The summoner ducked back into the closet and grabbed the receiver. Praying that she’d reach her target, she called, “Can you hear me, Solomon?!”

Five seconds passed, and she tried again. She repeated herself five more seconds later. There was no response. Simply picking up the receiver and talking into it wouldn’t do the trick.

“Hrmm… It seems I need to operate it somehow.” Mira put the receiver back. Grumbling to herself, she investigated the communicator’s various buttons and levers. She kept talking into the black object, but there was nobody listening.

Curious, Wasranvel peeked over her shoulder. “What is this thing, Mira?” he asked finally.

“A communication device made possible by a technology known as technomancy. It lets you speak with people, even from afar,” Mira answered a little proudly as she fiddled with the device. These contraptions were expensive, and their usage was restricted, so they weren’t easy to find. Wagons containing communicators were generally restricted to the military and select nobility.

Mira had heard directly from Solomon that she was an exception to that rule, so it was natural that she’d feel smug. Not that that meant anything to Wasranvel; he knew nothing about the technology.

“I see. Humans use these devices to converse with distant friends?” He looked at the communicator again, impressed. Spirits had a way to communicate with others from a distance as well. They called it “airmail,” and it involved wind spirits putting words on the breeze to carry to others.

“If you know how to use it, that is…” Mira chuckled to herself, putting the receiver to her ear again. Experiencing the same sad result, she promptly hung her head. The communicator was a convenient tool, but a tool was essentially

pointless if the person attempting to use it was too inept to do so.

As Mira pondered how to overcome this hurdle, Wasranvel said hesitantly, “Oh, speaking of conversing with distant friends, Mira… I hate to bring it up while you’re busy, but I have a message for you. May I share it before I forget?”

“A message?” What could that be about? Mira had no idea who might’ve sent a message. She turned with a surprised look, asking, “From who?”

“Well… From Anrutine. She asked me to get you to make a contract with her next time you summoned me. But when you last summoned me wasn’t a very good time for it. When I got back and told her I hadn’t brought it up, though, she was so sad…” Wasranvel grinned sheepishly as he explained the circumstances.

The primary reason for Anrutine’s request was obviously the connection Mira’s blessing provided to the Spirit King. Using the linking power it gave Mira, her contracted spirits could converse with each other, including those afar. That even applied to the king they revered.

That alone was a tremendous boon, but Mira had *also* recently made a contract with the progenitor spirit Martel. Martel had been missing for an extremely long time, and even the Spirit King was deeply moved by reuniting with her.

According to Wasranvel, the spirits Mira had contracted with so far were admired by fellow spirits across the world.

“Goodness. I had no idea…”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Mira and the Spirit King had developed the kind of friendship that allowed them to converse casually. Still, one couldn’t forget that the Spirit King was a special being, and Martel was almost as special to other spirits.

“Anrutine’s request might just be natural, though. To us spirits, His Majesty and the progenitor spirits are like parents. Even if they can’t be by our side, we feel at peace if we only hear their voices.”

Making a contract with the summoner Mira enabled a spirit to listen to the Spirit King and Martel. The spirit could feel them

close by, even if they really weren't. That was a big deal for spirits like him, Wasranvel explained.

Even in the place where she'd lived with Sanctia, Anrutine alone couldn't hear the Spirit King's or Martel's voices. She'd felt awfully isolated as a result, which explained her sadness, and her request that Wasranvel beseech Mira's aid.

Chapter 3

“OH HO! I SEE.”

The water spirit Anrutine wanted to make a contract with Mira, as her friends Wasranvel and Sanctia had. Mira was equal parts surprised, excited, and troubled by the request.

Previously, she couldn’t have made a contract with Anrutine. After all, she hadn’t had the Spirit King’s blessing yet, and she already had a contract with a water spirit. Besides, to be fair, this hadn’t been a concern for Anrutine at one time.

Now that the Spirit King Network was built and growing, things had changed quite a bit. Wasranvel and Sanctia could communicate telepathically with the Spirit King and Martel, but despite being in their vicinity, Anrutine couldn’t. That surely took a toll on her.

“I’d love to make a contract with her too,” Mira said. “But…”

If Anrutine wanted a contract, Mira herself wouldn’t have hesitated to respond to the spirit’s wishes. One issue prevented her from doing so, however. “Summoning contracts have restrictions. I can’t have multiple contracts with spirits of the same race or attributes. To make a new contract, I’d have to cancel the old one. And my current contract Undine is like a daughter I raised from childhood…”

She knew that things were lonely for Anrutine, but that didn’t mean that Mira could willingly let go of a spirit she’d nurtured as lovingly as Undine.

“Oh no… I had no idea such a restriction existed. So that’s what you meant back when you mentioned that you already had a contract with a water spirit.” Wasranvel would never ask Mira to break a bond, but he was sad to learn that Anrutine couldn’t join their community.

But even Mira, a superlative summoner, couldn’t break that rule. That is, until now.

“Don’t worry about that. The restriction you mention stems from the entanglement of mutual bonds. Allow me to untangle them for you.” The Spirit King’s voice echoed in Mira’s mind, as if he’d

been aiming for the perfect time to step in. Wasranvel heard him too, as evidenced by the stealth spirit's face suddenly lighting up.

"What?! You can do that?!" Mira replied aloud.

Contractable spirits had amazingly diverse abilities. Back when this world was a game, the standard—and strongest—spirits had been the four elementals: Salamander, Undine, Sylphid, and Gnomide. A player could raise them from the get-go as they pleased. Mira, a combat lover, had naturally made contracts with all four.

What were the advantages of contracts with other spirits? First of all, those spirits could be strong enough to use in combat immediately. Secondly, and perhaps far more appealingly, they came with special abilities that the standard elementals couldn't learn.

Mira had spent a lot of time choosing her course of action. Ultimately, she'd settled on the elementals. The other spirits had far too many special abilities to properly consider them all, and most of the ones she'd known of weren't suited to combat.

Now that this world was real, her view of spirits had changed greatly, but back then she'd still emphasized combat prowess. As such, she'd opted for elemental spirits that she could raise to her liking over luck of the draw with other spirits. And indeed, the standard elementals she'd contracted had grown to rival even advanced spirits.

Now, however, the Spirit King could apparently help her make contracts with spirits she'd been forced to pass up before. This would be a game changer, not just for Anrutine but for Mira herself.

"By communicating through you, I've gained an understanding of how summoning contracts take shape. When the time comes, just leave it to me. I promise that I'll see your contract settled well."

The Spirit King was apparently learning a lot about summoners during his time with Mira. After making that bold claim, he added one caveat: He could only help with contracts with *spirits*. He wasn't sure he'd be able to interfere in bonds with other beings. Thus, Mira couldn't make contracts with additional Pegasi, nor dragons, to acquire an ultimate cavalry that ruled the skies.

Still, the potential of making contracts with overlapping spirits was already staggering.

"In that case, I'm happy to make a contract with Anrutine," Mira declared to Wasranvel. If she could make more contracts without issue, she had no reason to refuse—especially not when the spirit herself requested the contract!

Wasranvel thanked Mira with a sigh of relief. She'd clearly lifted a major weight from his shoulders.

Mira would need to go to Anrutine if they were going to make a contract. She opened her map and tried to reason out the spirit's location from her memories of the day they'd met.

"As I recall, she should be between the Citadel and the Corridor..."

Mira had met Wasranvel and his friends in a lake somewhere between Ozstein's Citadel of Scales and Grimdart's Illusory Corridor. She'd just stopped there to take a break, so she hadn't paid the location any mind. However, she could reach the general area by traveling south for a day using Garuda. Depending how close it was, the detour might not take long at all.

"It's around here, I believe," Mira muttered, examining the map. But which lake was it? She tried to remember.

This time, Martel's voice echoed in her brain. *"Mira! Mira! Tine's going to come meet you herself. She says she doesn't want to cause you any more trouble."*

Martel had apparently been discussing things with Anrutine via Sanctia, and as a result, Anrutine had leapt from the lake and was en route to Mira through underground channels of water. If she was already on the move, this contract was clearly a big deal to her.

"It's no trouble, really. If she's coming, though, I'm happy to wait. Do you have any idea how many days it will take?" Mira asked. Just how fast *could* Anrutine arrive from the lake?

Martel informed Mira that she didn't need to delay her travels. *"We spirits are sensitive to bonds and ties. Even without a contract, there's a link between you two. A spirit can follow that link*

if they choose to. So don't wait on her; do what you need to do. She said that herself."

In short, Anrutine already knew where Mira was. It was truly incredible that she was able to follow that invisible tie between them. That ability, which she'd never heard of, surprised Mira. Yet she remembered something: *Ark Earth Online* players *had* suspected spirits of stalking them.

It was players who'd gotten especially friendly with certain spirits who experienced that. For instance, one player had been forced into a battle with a powerful monster, and his sword had broken. As soon as he gave up hope, a spirit he'd befriended dashed in and saved the day.

Thanks to that intervention, the player defeated the monster, obtained its loot, and returned safely. At first, he'd thought it was a good thing the spirit happened to be nearby... but he soon learned that that wasn't the first such incident. It only happened outside dungeons, but when players ran into danger, it was surprisingly common for some spirit to run in to assist them.

Back then, the players had believed that was simply a bonus for befriending those spirits.

Having a spirit come save you from the thick of danger was reassuring indeed. However, if they *always* arrived *anytime* you were outside a dungeon, did it mean they were continually watching from nearby? That idea—"spirit stalking"—became a running joke among the player community.

Martel had now confirmed that spirits could do just that. Still, it was questionable whether they'd be able to do so for every single player, all the time, in reality.

At that point, Mira abandoned thinking about the idea.

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Thanks to the Spirit King, Mira had unlocked overlapping contracts. She was the talk of the town in the spirit world, so more spirits would likely approach her when they heard about Anrutine. That was what Wasranvel claimed, at least.

Mira said she'd accept all comers, showing her generosity… Though, to be fair, half her willingness was curiosity about what special abilities those spirits possessed.

If Anrutine could find her without issue, there was no need to wait here, so Mira was ready to move on. Unfortunately, her next action depended on the communicator before her.

"Now, as for my business, what do I do with this thing…?" she muttered at the contraption. "If only *he* called *me* right now, it'd be perfect."

After the fight against Chimera Clausen, Solomon had called her out of the blue on the way back from Sentopoli. If he did the same now, it would be terribly convenient.

I must have some kind of link to him, like I do with the spirits! Envisioning her dear friend Solomon, Mira pleaded for the communicator to ring. In this fantasy world, thoughts and bonds had special power. Surely her feelings would reach him.

Praying that he'd detect her desperation, Mira made arcane gestures at the communicator. Behind her, Wasranvel just watched in utter silence—which was fitting, given his title.

Five minutes later, the communicator had yet to make a noise. Solomon had *not* noticed Mira's psychic pleas.

Well. Figures, I suppose. It was a bad habit of hers to try everything she could, however ridiculous it seemed. "All right… Now what?"

Mira began investigating the device as if nothing had happened. It was time to actually *try* to use it, so she picked up the receiver and punched in random numbers.

According to Solomon, due to various rules, the communicator could only connect to people registered as connections ahead of time. No matter what, Mira couldn't call someone unless they'd been programmed in already. Registration was annoying—it took a lot of time and effort—but afterward, a person could be called freely. That design meant there was no risk of misdialing accidentally, so Mira tested numbers to her heart's content.

She tried them in order. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven… Hrmm, nothing."

She didn’t know how many people were registered on the wagon communicator, but she was pretty sure it would only connect to individuals in Alcait. And since Solomon had called *her*, he at least had to be registered.

If she connected to *anyone*, it would likely be Solomon. If not, she could at least ask the person to whom she spoke to have Solomon call her back, or to tell her his number.

After trying numbers up to twenty, Mira finally complained, “Good grief, Solomon. Why not tell me how to connect to you sooner?”

Unlike phones back in her home world, communicators weren’t common here. Mira had expected phone numbers to be simple. But what if…?

Worry sprouted in her heart.

These communicators were used for military affairs as well. What if they’d been designed to be complex due to circumstances beyond her understanding? If so, it was stupid to bank on dialing the right number by chance.

“Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Twenty-three—”

Although she resumed pressing numbers, she considered delaying her report in favor of searching for the orphanage first. Once that was done, she could just go home and report on everything.

While Mira unthinkingly pounded button after button, Wasranvel finally added, “By the way, Mira, what are you doing? Is it some kind of ritual?” The sight of her pressing numbered buttons did resemble some indecipherable magic.

“Not at all. This thing—this communication device—is supposed to connect me to someone if I put the correct number in.”

Wasranvel knew nothing about communicators, so Mira gave him a hasty rundown. Entering a number would call someone, and when the recipient of the call picked up their receiver, they and the caller would hear each other’s voices.

“Unfortunately, the issue is that I don’t know the correct number…” Mira grinned sheepishly as she kept pressing numbers.

Despite Mira's perfunctory explanation, Wasranvel understood well enough. "That explains that," he murmured, turning his gaze from the communicator to what lay next to it. "By the way, Mira, that case-like object has numbers written on it. Might those be related?"

His eyes were focused on the lid she'd tossed aside.

"What...?" Mira stopped typing. "*Case-like object*"? Horror on her face, she looked toward the corner of the closet, where the abandoned communicator lid lay. She picked it up timidly.

A label affixed to the lid read *Client: 0172*.

"Client" surely meant Solomon, the person who'd sent Mira searching for the Nine Wise Men. Since it was on the communicator case, the number was almost certainly his.

"Ooh! This is it! This is certain to connect us! Damn that man for hiding it so well! Well done, my friend, for finding it!"

One had to wonder why Mira had thought it was *hidden*, but despite her whining, she rejoiced at the phone number Wasranvel had discovered in the closet.

Behind her, the spirit smiled. "Happy to help."

Chapter 4

MIRA IMMEDIATELY PICKED UP the receiver and punched in the number. Incredibly, after staying so silent for so long, the communicator started beeping.

Mira intuitively knew that the beeps were the standby sound as the communicator called someone; though it looked like a walkie-talkie, it acted like a phone. In short, the number was correct.

A few seconds later, the voice she'd been awaiting came from the receiver. "Lord of the Ring speaking." He sounded a little stiff, but it was definitely Solomon. "Lord of the Ring" was surely some kind of code name.

The communicator was loud, echoing in the wagon. Wasranvel jumped at the noise, then paid even more attention to the device, impressed.

Mira was worried at first, but the connection was solid. "Ooh, it works!" She yelled joyfully into the receiver. "It's me! It's me!"

"Ah…it's you. It's rare for you to call me. Did something happen?" When Solomon realized Mira was speaking, his tone became more casual; this was the voice of an old friend.

Relieved, Mira started to outline the current situation. "A lot. I have many things to report. First off…" She told him all about Soul Howl—the whole point of this trip—whom she'd indeed reunited with in the Ancient Underground City. She also mentioned how Soul Howl had gotten himself into a situation where he couldn't use advanced magic, and how the Spirit King helped remove that restriction.

"Wow. So he paid with his advanced magic, but still got this far at the speed we predicted. That shows how strong he is these days." Solomon sounded excited.

They'd identified the Ancient Underground City as Soul Howl's likeliest current destination based specifically on their estimate of his strength. They'd calculated that without any limitations in mind—they hadn't been aware of one, after all—

yet Mira found him just as planned. In other words, Soul Howl was just as strong with only middling magic as he was when he could use advanced magic.

"Well, yeah. That's how the two of us defeated the Machina Guardian without outside help."

Mira had seen firsthand how Soul Howl's magic had evolved, so she agreed, mentioning their battle against the Guardian. The Machina Guardian was meant to be a tough raid boss, and the pair had only defeated it on their own because of their status as laborer mages.

Soul Howl's Great Wall, an impenetrable fortress; Mira's holy sword-wielding army, overpowering in number; a battlefield shifting at dazzling speed; the Machina Guardian's new movement patterns—Mira proudly told Solomon all about it, exaggerating here and there.

"When we defeated the Machina Guardian, a mechanized doll came out of it," she added, then shared the mysterious message and metal plate the doll had left. She'd taken perfect notes on the message, so she could recite it word for word.

Solomon repeated the message slowly, as if confirming it so he could take notes as well. "Let's see... 'The black moon rises, and darkness encroaches. Those who have defeated my supreme Guardian and overcome this trial, you are worthy of inheriting our power. Take this and make ready for the battle with the coming invader.' Did I get that right? Fascinating. And you got a metal plate with weird symbols on it?"

"Indeed. An unheard-of situation, right? We also found what looked like a diary. It was hardly readable, though. We couldn't make sense of it. Still, it is intriguing. Ready to take notes?" she asked, then read the legible part.

The diary in the Machina Guardian's wreckage had been scorched, leaving only a single page. Yet the legible part alone contained very interesting vocabulary...including a specific reference to Japan.

"There you have it. Soul Howl agrees that it seems related to this world's secret. But wait until you hear the next part!" Mira said. She sounded pompous but was clearly eager to continue. "This is a long story, but..."

Now, she told Solomon about the massive laboratory beneath the seventh level. Remembering the excitement she'd felt when she first saw it, she explained the conclusion they'd reached: The research facility was clearly connected to modern Earth.

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After outlining everything, she finally asked Solomon, "So? What do you think…?"

He was silent for a moment before replying, "I've got to say, I think that's likely."

There probably was some connection between real life and the Ancient Underground City. Apart from the widespread use of Japanese writing there, they'd seen modern anime DVDs, books, and other evidence connecting it to Japan.

Solomon accepted that possibility without objection. "The Ancient Underground City's history stretches back far beyond when we came to this world. It's bewildering that there's a lab beneath the city, of all places. My researchers will be overjoyed; this is a fascinating mystery."

The Hinomoto Committee had a department dedicated to researching this world, and Solomon chuckled at the thought of their impending joy. He was plenty fascinated himself. How did the laboratory relate to the person who'd left the mysterious message? And how did *they* relate to the metal plate and "inheriting power"? Could they just be unrelated mysteries that'd happened to converge in one place?

As the king muttered to himself about various questions, Mira interrupted, "So…Solomon, should I rush the metal plate back to you?"

She'd told him almost everything over the communicator, but she couldn't give him the metal plate until she went home. That was why she'd gone to the trouble of reporting via communicator in the first place: It was the factor that would decide her next action.

“Well, I’d love to see it in person… But if you’re asking me that, I guess there’s a good reason you used the communicator?”

Sharing what she’d learned in person, after she’d gone home, would’ve been much easier. Thus, the question of why Mira had opted to call provoked Solomon to hypothesize.

“Okay, let me think. Wait a sec,” he said. Acting as if he were taking a quiz, he pondered the question.

For her part, Mira didn’t immediately explain her rationale; instead, she left him with the clues, leaning back smugly. “All the information is available. Will it lead you to the answer?” This was another silly game they played often.

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After a couple minutes passed, Solomon exclaimed, “Ooh. I know!” He’d seemingly figured out why Mira had used the communicator.

“Go on,” Mira urged.

“You’re planning to search for that orphanage, aren’t you?” he demanded.

“Ugh…correct,” she confirmed reluctantly.

“Knew it,” Solomon chuckled, then added, “Seeking that out before you come back and report to me will be faster and more efficient. But frankly, I’m surprised you even remembered that.” He was genuinely impressed that she’d stayed focused on the orphanage amid all her running around.

“Of course. Who do you think I am?”

The sad truth was that Mira had only remembered because of the rumors about Fuzzy Dice in the inn lobby, but she was happy to take the credit herself.

“Sure. Silly of me to doubt you. As for your initial question, I’d say there’s no rush.” Brushing off Mira’s bragging, Solomon confirmed that she didn’t need to hurry the plate home. “Our brainiacs are as busy as can be right now, after all.”

Grinning knowingly, Solomon announced that they'd made progress investigating the large cave beneath Nebrapolis. Incredibly, they'd successfully identified the withered plants in the cave, which were wildflowers that only grew in very specific locations—flower fields surrounding the white pillars that dotted the continent.

"Oh ho. Quite a connection," Mira muttered, remembering one specific meadow.

They had yet to determine what the pillar there was, but the field was famous for the Angel Drop herbs one could harvest there. Those herbs cured an illness called the Living Dead's Plague. As its name implied, it made the living seem all but dead, even robbing them of their sanity.

"Once we figured that out," Solomon continued, "we started to realize what that big hole was."

The large cave contained a hole over a hundred meters deep. Based on what they knew so far, they'd theorized that it was where a tower had once stood. Investigating the hole with that notion in mind, they found massive ley lines running directly below it. Ley lines were vital force fields connected to many ancient sites.

For some reason, the white pillar that stood in that cave had disappeared. It was no stretch to hypothesize that a dark demon had done something to cause that.

"We've made lots of progress," Solomon concluded, "but knowing what to do next is a different story."

What purpose did those white pillars serve to begin with? This one's disappearance made it difficult to research, so they were considering investigating the remaining pillars throughout the continent. However, Solomon added, the fact that a dark demon got rid of a pillar in the first place was already extremely troubling.

"Right," Mira affirmed. "Nothing good can come of a demon's involvement."

"Exactly. So our brainiacs are hard at work—I mean, they love researching mysteries like this. If you brought that metal

plate now, they'd be torn between two great loves. If that happened, I bet they'd literally lose sleep to work on it."

The objects and information Mira brought home especially intrigued Suleiman, and in light of that, Solomon half-jokingly (and half-seriously) worried that he might work himself to death.

"Hrmm… I see," Mira said. "Well, mustn't push them too hard. Besides, the pillars interest me too."

Solomon's reasoning convinced her. She did want to know how the white pillars, which existed all over the continent for unknown reasons, related to this. Players had simply considered those pillars locations to gather items for special quests. But now that everything was real and had history behind it, the mystery of the pillars had deepened.

History and mystery, hrmm…?

At some point during their time in the game, every player had sensed that this world was just too vast. And, even more impressively, too *full*. Countless mysteries packed this continent. Many were beyond reckoning, yet any number of lunatics boldly pursued the truth behind those mysteries.

Mira opened her Friends List for once and looked through the names. There, she found someone specific: Autodi Dolfin. He was one such lunatic—a self-styled archaeologist.

"I just checked, and it looks like Dr. Dolfin's in this world too. Think he might know something?"

Dolfin had always run around the continent in search of mystery and adventure. If that curiosity was intact, he was surely researching all the white pillars he could find. Asking him about them might even be faster than sending an investigation team.

When Mira proposed as much, Solomon hesitated. "It's a nice idea… The problem is, we don't know how much he actually *has* investigated."

"Oh…I see your point."

The self-styled archaeologist typically looked into whatever flight of fancy was on his mind at a given moment. He'd pour his blood, sweat, and tears into one thing, then abandon it the instant something interested him the tiniest bit more. He came back to the original topic once he was done, yes, but hopping

from one mystery to another meant that he had a pile of unfinished research.

"At any rate, we can't send private messages now, so I can't think of any way to connect with him," Solomon added. "I'm not sure we'd ever find the guy." They could at least ask whether he knew anything about the pillars, but Dolfin was a restless archaeologist. Finding him might be just as difficult as finding the Nine Wise Men.

"A way to connect with him…" Mira murmured. The word "connect" reminded her of something—the Spirit King's blessing came with the power to "link." Perhaps she could use that to trace her bond with Dolfin? She began clinging to that faint hope.

Just in time, the voice of the Spirit King himself echoed in her mind. "*Miss Mira, may I ask a question?*"

Surprised that *he* was the one with a question for once, Mira replied, "*Ask me anything.*"

His question surpassed her expectations *and* canceled out the purpose of searching for Dolfin. "*These 'white pillars' you've been discussing—are you referring to the Onbashira of Earthly Reversal?*"

He'd said outright what was seemingly the proper name of the pillars they'd racked their brains over for the longest time.

"Come again…?"

Now that Mira thought about it, it was no surprise that the Spirit King—who'd lived for an eternity—knew about the pillars. Frankly, she should've asked him first. She'd been touched by the researchers' efforts, yet the Spirit King's words ran rings around those in no time. She gasped in utter surprise.

Chapter 5

"SOMETHING WRONG OVER THERE?" Solomon asked worriedly. He must've heard Mira react to the Spirit King's claim.

"No... Well, you see, the Spirit King apparently knows something," Mira said. "Wait a minute."

She heard a boyish giggle from the other end of the receiver. "Oh, of course. I get it. Man, that's incredible. It's like having a knowledge hack. Okay, I'll wait! Take as long as you need!"

The Spirit King's presence overcame all effort with ease; he was like a walking spoiler dispenser. Some people might be unhappy with the mystery being revealed all at once, instead of unraveling bit by bit, but that was less important to Mira. And Solomon sounded happier than ever; as a king, he genuinely appreciated the help.

"Now, about that white pillar," Mira said. *"Between us, that's what we've been calling those this whole time."*

Were the pillars really what the Spirit King called the "Onbashira of Earthly Reversal"? To determine that, Mira gave him the locations of as many pillars as she could. Before long, the Spirit King confirmed that they were certainly one and the same. The locations Mira listed matched the ones he knew of perfectly. According to him, there were fifty-two in total.

"Ooh, goodness. They really are the same!"

Having discovered that the white pillars were the so-called "Onbashira," Mira reveled in unearned superiority at one-upping the kingdom's scholars. Simultaneously, she realized something: The Spirit King claimed there were fifty-two pillars, yet she only knew of around twenty. Where were the remaining thirty-odd?

When she asked, the Spirit King replied that only half the pillars were on the surface. The other half were deep underground, and Mira only knew of the former.

"The underground ones are hidden," he added. *"I doubt they're easy to find."*

"I see. So a bunch are buried in the same type of surroundings…" If she asked, Mira could probably learn exactly where those hidden pillars were, but that didn't matter right now. She needed to know *why* they existed. *"The point is, what are those pillars for, anyway?"* she asked bluntly.

Nebrapolis contained a hole where a pillar should be, and the dark demon there was likely responsible. In other words, if they knew why the pillars existed, they'd know what had motivated the demon.

"Allow me to answer. The Onbashira of Earthly Reversal purify the world. The gods thought them up, and angels, demons, and we spirits worked together to erect them far and wide."

He launched into the details. The reason they'd created the pillars traced back to the continent-wide war against the Monster-Ruling God. That war had engulfed humanity, spirits, angels, demons, and gods alike, nearly destroying the world itself. As a result, it left scars, even after good prevailed.

Worst among those scars was the contamination of the Celestial Shrine of Nirvana, where souls went to rest, and of ley lines.

The shrine's contamination made it difficult for souls to reincarnate properly, leading to a sharp increase in stillbirths. Worse, many children who survived birth were heartless, loyal only to a desire to destroy all around them, much like monsters.

Meanwhile, ley-line contamination damaged the natural world extensively. Rivers dried up, the earth cracked, and natural disasters wreaked havoc everywhere. Worse, the mountains themselves began to desiccate, and odious, otherworldly plants infested the world. The plants were alien even to Martel; in fact, they *infuriated* her. She refused to acknowledge them as real greenery.

"The Onbashira of Earthly Reversal were built to purify that contamination. The ones on the surface and the ones underground perform different roles."

Having summed up their reason for existence, the Spirit King finally got to the heart of things. First, the pillars on the surface purified the Celestial Shrine of Nirvana. They affected

souls as well, slowly but surely returning the contaminated ones to normal.

The pillars underground purified ley lines and maintained their flow, exerting an effect on mana. They had been set up in pits where ley lines intersected, gradually repurifying contaminated mana.

The pillars' cleansing effects gave Angel Drops harvested nearby similar capabilities. Martel welcomed that; as the progenitor spirit of flora, she was happy for the herb to evolve in such a way.

"That's the role of the Onbashira of Earthly Reversal." After concluding the explanation, the Spirit King murmured nostalgically, *"Ah. We were so busy back then."*

"I see. Amazing."

He'd revealed the truth of the mysterious white pillars. Since they were purification devices, it was easy to see why dark demons had targeted them. That led Mira to another realization: exactly what the dark demon she'd defeated had been up to there.

"In other words, a dark demon would destroy an underground pillar to interfere with ley-line purification and curse the world with natural disasters once more!" she guessed, hoping for the Spirit King's confirmation. The place was ruined now, but Solomon's investigators were superb, so there had all but certainly once been a white pillar there. Thus, the demon must've been after the pillar. Its plot seemed clear now that she knew the pillars' function.

The Spirit King refuted her confident guess, however. *"No, don't think that's it."*

According to him, the purification was complete. Impeding it now wouldn't actually affect anything, and a demon would be aware of that.

"What...? Then why would that dark demon...?" Mira cocked her head, confused. She'd been so certain about her theory.

What had the demon's goal been? The location suggested that it was related to the ley lines, but the mana circulating

through them was so plentiful that only the combined efforts of gods, spirits, angels, and demons could alter it.

"Hmm..." After a moment's thought, the Spirit King asked with determination, "*A question for you, Mira. What exactly was the location of what you believe was an underground pillar?"*

"Hmm? Location?"

However much she mulled the conundrum over, she couldn't come up with anything else. As for the question the Spirit King had just asked her, she had to wonder what significance the location could have now. Still, if he was asking, there must be something.

Mira used a map to show him Nebrapolis's exact location, describing the specific position of the underground chamber that would've contained a pillar. She also told him about the tunnel it had opened.

"So it is true," the Spirit King murmured after a while. Then he corrected his appraisal of her theory; she was half-right. *"The dark demon you defeated almost certainly did destroy the pillar. Still, I believe its motivation lay elsewhere."*

"What...?" What could its reason have been, if not the one Mira guessed? She waited expectantly for the Spirit King to continue.

A moment of silence passed. Then another voice entered her mind—one that seemed likely to know the truth.

"Sym, she has your blessing, so she'll have to deal with it someday. I think you should just tell her." That was Martel's voice. It seemed the Spirit King was struggling over whether to explain the truth to Mira.

He couldn't speak lightly of the white pillar they believed had been under Nebrapolis, which meant it was connected to some secret of a global scale. Martel's words rattled Mira. What would she have to "deal with"? It was starting to sound like this was drawing her into a mess with massive implications.

"I've come this far. Lay it out..." Mira did her best to act tough, albeit only in her mind.

"You're right. Now that things are in motion, we cannot keep the secret much longer," the Spirit King told Martel.

Then, he unveiled that secret. First, he revealed that there were six hidden pillars in addition to the Onbashira of Earthly Reversal. The latter fifty-two pillars had been built with the help of those he'd mentioned, but the additional six were constructed by the Trinity—two apiece—and hidden so that nobody but the builder knew where they were. Indeed, one of those very pillars had been below Nebrapolis, unknown even to the Spirit King and Martel.

What were those six pillars for? The Spirit King explained that as well. The pillars the Trinity created had a built-in feature beyond purification or mana manipulation: *sealing*. Their power interfered with mana by scooping it out of ley lines, purifying it into divine energy, and then using that refined energy to seal things.

Since the six pillars' function was to "seal" things, the next question was naturally what they sealed.

"As I recall, Mira, I once told you about the war against the Monster-Ruling God."

"Right. Back when I met Martel."

The Monster-Ruling God had been the lord of monsters, including many mutants and new breeds. According to legend, a human hero had defeated the god in one fell blow.

Mira quickly realized why the Spirit King had brought that up. *"Could it be?"*

What those six pillars were sealing was all too clear now.

"Indeed. The pillars seal parts of the Monster-Ruling God. Head, torso, right arm, left arm, right leg, left leg—six pillars, six parts," the Spirit King confirmed.

Mira had surmised that the pillars sealed the god itself—thoroughly, given that the Monster-Ruling God had been divided into six pieces. That brought a question to mind, however: Why had it been necessary to go to such lengths to seal an enemy supposedly killed in one strike?

"Seals... Don't tell me." Sealing rituals were common in fantasy, so Mira could imagine multiple reasons, one of which she offered as a hypothesis. *"Is this Monster-Ruling God immortal?"*

After a moment of thought, the Spirit King replied, *“Immortal? Hmm…I’d call that half-correct.”*

So Mira’s suggestion was partially right. What was the other half, then?

The Monster-Ruling God had indeed died, the Spirit King explained, but the problem was what happened afterward. The god’s corpse started making an eerie noise. Not a regular noise—one heard across the continent, regardless of the distance or obstacles between the sound and those who detected it.

What could that noise have been? The gods and spirits never found out, even with their combined power, and the sound continued ceaselessly.

“It was really weird,” Martel murmured, recalling the old days. *“It was like the Monster-Ruling God was calling someone… Its parents or…”*

When Mira asked her what the sound had been like, Martel tried imitating it. Was her impression poor, or had the corpse really sounded like that? Either way, all Mira understood from her answer was that the sound had apparently been a single note repeated with a certain cadence.

Hrmm, she thought. *Sounds like some kind of signal.*

“*What the sound meant was unclear, but it was eerie,”* continued the Spirit King. *“We decided to destroy the corpse for good on the spot.”*

When it came to the Monster-Ruling God, mysteries had still abounded, and they’d planned to use the corpse to investigate those mysteries. But the sound it produced was far too eerie, disturbing not just humanity but spirits, angels, and demons as well. After that, they quickly agreed to dispose of the corpse.

The real problem began there, however. The corpse couldn’t be destroyed through cremation, nor by any other effort the gods and spirits made.

“I see. No wonder you said I was half-right.” Mira’s guess that the god was immortal was close, since although the deity itself died, its corpse continued to exist.

“We even tried using methods that could destroy gods. That was the first time I’d ever seen dust return to its original shape.” The Spirit King muttered that he still couldn’t believe it, then continued.

What that sound had meant remained unclear, but given its source, everyone felt very uneasy. Since the corpse seemed indestructible, they *had* to seal it. However, even that had failed. The miasma billowing from the corpse was too much for the sealing coffin to handle. Its seal broke, and the sound—which was no doubt important to the Monster-Ruling God—continued.

That had only made the danger more evident, so they’d tried even more methods. Along the way, they discovered a ray of hope: Cutting the corpse apart dispersed the miasma. But they also discovered that, with each cut, the corpse diverted more power to repair itself. By the time they’d divided it into ten pieces, that power was too great to keep the pieces in one place, since the body parts automatically attracted each other.

Thus, the final method they arrived at was dividing the corpse into six. That was the most pieces they could keep away from each other.

“*It wasn’t easy either. Even though the individual parts didn’t immediately break the seals, the miasma kept building up.”* The Spirit King’s tone seemed to lighten as he recounted the hardships of that time, as if he was proud of how they’d solved these problems.

The solution had been using the white pillars to seal the corpse parts. That was what it had taken to finally seal the corpse. The pillars dampened the sound, weakened the parts’ mutual magnetism, and purified the miasma.

“Ah, and just the other day, we discussed why the stigmata - appeared. This would be why. The six sealing pillars have much more divine power than the other fifty-two—quite enough to awaken the stigmata.”

“Goodness… What a surprising truth to learn here.”

Soul Howl was trying to save a woman with stigmata, which manifested when she came in contact with divine power. That apparently stemmed from the pillar that had once been

underground. This important information coming up as if it were a mere afterthought elicited a bitter chuckle from Mira.

That white pillar was fundamentally the same as any other Onbashira of Earthly Reversal, made through the combined efforts of spirits, angels, and demons. The Spirit King recalled the memory fondly.

“Everyone was together back then,” Martel murmured, nostalgic as well.

Chapter 6

"THE QUESTION IS WHERE THE BODY part once sealed there now resides. Have your friends recovered anything of the kind, Mira?"

"Hrmm. I don't think they mentioned finding anything like that. I should ask, though."

The sealed spot would naturally have housed part of the corpse, but Solomon hadn't mentioned coming across anything there. Had there really been nothing, or did he judge it not worth mentioning?

Mira asked him whether they'd found remains in the underground chamber.

"Wow. Another sudden, significant question. Uh…only withered plants, nothing else. We identified all the plants and searched the hole thoroughly, so we wouldn't have missed anything. Are you saying something else was there after all?"

Although Solomon claimed he'd found nothing suspicious, he was very interested in why Mira had asked. Such pointed questions suggested that she and the Spirit King knew something he didn't, which naturally piqued his curiosity.

It was too early for Mira to say, though. "I'm going to ask him some more questions. Wait a little longer, please," she replied, returning to her conversation with Sym.

On the other end of the communicator, Solomon grumbled, obviously envious of her relationship with the Spirit King.

He'd been listening in, but Mira repeated Solomon's response anyway. *"There you have it. Apparently, they found nothing of the kind."* Solomon hadn't picked up any parts of the dead god, which meant that a piece of its corpse was elsewhere in the world.

"So it was already taken away," the Spirit King replied. *"This is a problem."*

His words revealed genuine concern, and this certainly did sound problematic. If Solomon had recovered part of the corpse,

Sym might've been able to reseal it. But now they had no idea where it was, and it would be a chore to track down.

"The seal is layered, so nothing can be done to it at the moment. But now that the ley lines' power can no longer purify it, it's only a matter of time."

The layered seals had locked away the mysterious sound and weakened the magnetism between the corpse parts. According to the Spirit King, the absence of the eerie noise proved that those seals were still functional. After all, that sound would be audible to everyone in the world, however far away they were. If they couldn't hear it, the seals were undamaged. Still, the miasma would inevitably build up until the seal one day broke.

"With the corpse divided into six like that, the seal would take five years or so to break," Martel said, estimating their remaining time. Then she brought up something that could reduce that wait: "*As long as the other corpse sections haven't rejoined, that is.*"

The god was in six pieces now, but if the seals somehow broke and those pieces reunited, the miasma would accumulate faster. If they *all* united, that eerie cry would regain its original volume.

"Right. That would be worse."

They couldn't allow that to happen, knowing that a dark-demon hoping to cause calamity was behind this. Although Mira and the others weren't sure how, that demon had found a seal location previously known only to the Trinity. Perhaps the same thing was happening elsewhere—or so the Spirit King and Martel seemed to fear.

"Could anything else break the seals?" Would it have been possible for something other than miasma to rupture this one—special magic, demonic power, or a divine item?

"Surely not. The Trinity placed those seals directly. I can't imagine anything but miasma or the Trinity themselves breaking them... Either way, it makes me wonder how the corpse part was removed and where it is now."

As long as that strange sound's meaning remained a mystery, it was best to leave the corpse parts sealed away,

although part of the corpse was now missing. The bigger problem was where in the world it was now, especially since only the Trinity had known its location before.

"That's true," Mira agreed.

The Spirit King fell silent for a moment, then asked, *"Mira, can you tell me more about when you encountered the demon in Nebrapolis? I want to know everything."*

Realizing that Sym had the kernel of an idea, Mira explained the situation in detail. At the bottom of Nebrapolis, an Adventurers' Guild Union-managed dungeon, was a lake next to a white castle. She explained that a dark demon—a third-rank count—had emerged from the lake and forced her and her party into a fight.

"I see. And the cavern was in that lake," Sym muttered before going quiet again.

After a while, he offered a few hypotheses. The first was that the corpse piece had been taken before Mira and the others reached the bottom floor. However, that hypothesis was the least likely; if the dark demon already had the body part, it would've had no reason to hang around.

The next hypothesis was that the corpse part was stolen after Mira's group left, but before Solomon's investigation team arrived. The fact that his team hadn't found the part meant that someone else knew about it. Furthermore, not even the Spirit King and Martel had been aware that it was beneath Nebrapolis. Yet the dark demon that Mira defeated *had* known. There might be others like it out there.

Dark demons were extremely individualistic, though. They almost never told even fellow dark demons such things. And the fact that the count held a noble title proved that it wasn't another's subordinate, so it hadn't been obeying a greater demon's orders.

It was possible that the theft was the doing of one of its subordinate demons. However, according to Solomon, even the weakest entrance barriers set up by the Adventurers' Guild Union were too strong for a demon below baron-rank to break. Barriers set up for dungeons of C-rank and higher would be even stronger.

Nebrapolis had originally been a C-rank dungeon, but the demon's appearance had caused it to be temporarily reclassified as A-rank. Viscount and lesser demons wouldn't be able to get through that barrier, so that would also have been impossible for even a third-rank count's subordinates. Thus, taking the corpse before the investigation team arrived would've been difficult.

The Spirit King also hypothesized that the thief might've tunneled into the dungeon, but when they asked Solomon, he refuted that possibility. His investigators were first-rate; after discovering the cave in the lake, they'd combed the dungeon top to bottom and found no other suspicious holes. It was certain that nobody had entered the dungeon between Mira's group leaving and his investigation team entering.

"That leaves us with one hypothesis, then. You and King Solomon may not like it."

There *were* only a limited number of people who could've done it, Mira realized. *"You mean...someone on the investigation team."*

"I think that's the only possibility." Once the Spirit King pondered this matter enough, he'd come to one conclusion: Someone on Solomon's team had taken the body part. Nonetheless, under the circumstances, stealing the part wouldn't have been easy. How Solomon and Mira reacted to this information would depend on *why* the part was taken.

"So...what would that body part look like?" Mira asked.

Its appearance was one thing that could indicate why someone had stolen it. If they could tell at a glance that the corpse part was important, greed might've overcome them. On the other hand, if it looked scary, a reasonable person would've steered clear.

"Hmm... Well, if it's the same as it used to be, the material would look just like any other rock. Since it's a body part, it probably looked like part of a broken statue."

"I see..."

If the thief mistook it for a statue fragment, they might've thought it had historical value. But would any of Solomon's handpicked few be that mercenary?

Mira offered her thoughts. *"I heard Luminaria was among the investigators. Surely nobody would try to hoodwink her over something of doubtful value."* Knowing that a demon had shown up down there once, they'd sent the Wise Man with the investigators to stand guard. Attempting to deceive her would take real courage.

"Luminaria had power similar to yours, as I recall. Trying to sneak something past her for a little money would indeed be a poor decision. Whoever did so must've been determined to take the part."

"Right. The perp did this with firm certainty, not flimsy hope."

That was pure conjecture, of course, yet the likelihood seemed extremely high. But who'd taken the body part…and why? All the clues pointed toward a demon.

"It's highly unlikely that any human was aware of this corpse part," said the Spirit King. *"I think it's safe to assume that a demon knew about it and had a subordinate attempt to snatch it."*

Mira and the Spirit King focused their discussion on that point. The first scenario they came up with was that an investigation team member had been switched with a demon. Demons had many abilities, including shape-shifting. They could conceivably take a team member's identity, accompany the team to the location, and steal the body part when the opportunity arose. Then they'd just have to escape without anybody noticing.

The second method would be mind-controlling a team member. Demons had a terrifying power that allowed them to enter people's minds and manipulate them as they pleased. That required the target to be mentally enfeebled, but once the demon was in, they could control that person like a pawn.

One flaw was common to both scenarios, however: The target's personality would change. When Mira asked, Solomon said that the investigation team was tight-knit. In other words, even if a demon looked just like someone or mind-controlled them, imitating them perfectly would be nearly impossible. Sooner or later, the demon's speech or actions would surely seem suspicious.

And as long as Luminaria was there, it would be extremely difficult for a team member to smuggle out a body part while

they were already under suspicion. In light of that, there was only one way for a demon to get what it wanted.

"Intimidation, then?" asked Mira.

"Right. Given the circumstances, I think that's most likely."

Meeting a team member, threatening them, and forcing them to steal the body part: That would fit a dark demon's style, and it would be an effective way to control a human.

There were many ways to intimidate people, such as threatening their friends, family, or romantic partners. To protect a loved one's life, obedience would seem the only option. It was more than enough reason to risk danger.

"The problem is, how and when did a demon meet a team member? Demons can hardly walk around the city in broad daylight."

To intimidate a victim, you needed to find out who they cared about, then make it impossible for the victim to betray them. If the victim cared about a friend, family member, or partner, as expected, then the dark demon must've lurked in the city to watch them and confirm that. Thinking that a dark demon had been so close to regular folk was truly terrifying.

"Hmm. All right... Allow me to teach King Solomon the Spirit Vitalization Ring," the Spirit King offered. *"That bolsters an area's spiritual power and gradually purifies it. Those purifying effects are painful to dark demons. If one is in the city, it will be forced to leave before long."*

"Ooh. Now, that sounds impressive!"

The Spirit King described the Spirit Vitalization Ring as something originally used to revive devastated wastelands. It was a special circle that created livable environments for spirits, and it had once helped free the continent from the shroud of miasma.

When he offered to teach Solomon the same ability, Mira thanked him gleefully.

"To maintain the effect, one must pour spiritual power into the Spirit Vitalization Ring once a week," he elaborated. *"Does King Solomon have the resources to do so? If not, I can call for aid."*

Cleos was the first person who came to Mira's mind. He was an excellent summoner who could skillfully use light spirits' power to the fullest.

"Uh...I think it should be fine. They have a half light spirit, half elf there. His spirit magic should be plenty."

"Hmm. Yes, that should do. Now, Mira, I'd like you to share our thoughts with King Solomon."

"Indeed I shall."

Mira picked up the receiver and told Solomon everything: the role of the mysterious Onbashira of Earthly Reversal, the six hidden pillars, the Monster-Ruling God and its corpse, and the dark demons' involvement in all this. Of course, when she forgot things, the Spirit King was forced to add them in.

Chapter 7

AFTER MIRA EXPLAINED EVERYTHING, Solomon paused for a moment. “I had no idea things were so dire,” he finally replied. “And the investigation team…? But…okay. I think I get the situation.”

Surprise and confusion tinged his voice; even he seemed taken aback by the scale of it all.

His shock didn’t last long, though. “We’ll have to handle the corpse thing first. Now that we know something so dangerous is out there, we can’t leave it be.” Solomon decided his next priorities in his usual manner; such instant decision-making was a skill he’d cultivated during his time as king.

“Should I head back after all?” Mira offered. “Tracking the corpse down will likely mean running into a dark demon again.”

Even a dark demon of the lowest rank, with no title, could defeat an intermediate adventurer. The dark demon seemingly working behind the scenes this time was probably less tough than a third-rank count. Still, with so little information on the enemy, there was much room for uncertainty. In the worst case, they might be forced to fight an enemy as strong as a first-rank viscount.

To battle such a foe, several skilled veteran adventurers would have to join forces. Sending in an investigation team carelessly could cause a great loss of life. Since pursuing the corpse part would require enough firepower to deal with whatever situation arose, Mira offered to take on that duty.

Solomon assured her that wouldn’t be necessary. “Relax. Go look for the orphanage as planned. After all, I’d rather have you find everyone quickly. I think we can manage without you.” He sounded almost unworried, and it was no bluff either. He was confident that he could fight off a dark demon.

“I hope you’re right. Are you sure…?” Mira asked again. Not because she doubted him but because she loved her friend and homeland.

“Heh. Guess I should tell you something.” Solomon cleared his throat smugly. Then, as if unveiling some great truth to a waiting audience, he declared, “The elite unit I’ve trained for so long is finally ready for action!”

Even more excited than usual, he explained his announcement—the reason for his confidence. Ten years ago, on the day the treaty was signed, he’d set a plan into motion. He handpicked talented youth from the army, screened them rigorously, and put them through harsh training. This elite squadron was the result. He’d named it “Goetia.”

The unit’s objective was simple. They’d serve as a backup in case the Nine Wise Men, Luminara excepted, failed to return. Mira was running all over in search of the others, and she had promises from Wallenstein, Kagura, and Soul Howl; those three planned to return home sooner or later. Her progress had been pure luck, however—the results of stumbling into the Wise Men in the nick of time.

Back at the end of the war, Solomon had hoped that Mira would come, but he couldn’t be certain of that, let alone rely on it. He’d had to devise a backup strategy. He’d begun that strategy with the Accord Cannon he’d once shown Mira, developed it with Protean Dolls made for combat, and concluded it with the Goetia team of elites.

Goetia comprised five pairs of soldiers working as a team—five front liners and five back liners. Solomon had trained the former, and Luminaria the latter. Furthermore, Felena—aide of the Tower of the Holy—was *always* there for their training. In fact, it would’ve gone nowhere without her. That training was as intense as possible; serious injuries occurred daily.

“Even if I can’t get Goetia as strong as you guys, I still need to be able to control a battlefield to some degree. And I’m honestly impressed that they came so far in just ten years.”

The Nine Wise Men were reputedly the strongest people on the continent. Replacing them in a mere decade would’ve been a ridiculous proposition. Still, while Goetia’s members weren’t perfect stand-ins, Solomon was more than happy with their progress.

“The real clincher was the vault of treasure I told you about recently!” he continued. “It contained tons of strong weapons, so Goetia got high-quality equipment ahead of schedule. That equipment happened to synergize well with them too. Now their fighting power’s about 30 percent greater than I expected!”

The vault he mentioned had lain dormant beneath Nebrapolis. Realizing that it held not just gold and silver but treasure-class weapons, Solomon had seemingly prioritized arming Goetia. You couldn’t underestimate the offensive boost new weapons granted, especially if those weapons had mysterious powers. As a result, each of Goetia’s soldier pairs had become reliably strong.

“I see. And you plan to assign that squadron to pursue the demon…?”

“Exactly. Giving them real combat experience is all that remains, and I say this is the perfect opportunity.”

That was why Solomon didn’t need to wait for Mira to come back. He was among the strongest of paladins, and Luminaria was the strongest sorcerer on the continent. Elites trained by that pair and armed with first-rate weaponry could certainly hold their own against a dark demon.

From what Solomon told Mira, they could fight a viscount or even a count. If they *couldn’t* hold their own against one of those, they’d never be able to substitute for the Nine Wise Men. This assignment, Solomon added, would be a final exam of sorts for them.

“In other words, I’ll soon give this mission to a mix of Goetia members and investigators. Anyway, *he’s* here to deal with the demon stuff. I’ll talk to him later, so don’t worry about that side of things. Focus on your search.” After so much bragging, Solomon finished with that final decisive statement.

So, *he* was present—Wallenstein, the man working to return the mankind-hating dark demons to their original light-demon state.

“Hrmm. Right, fine. I think I’ll do just that.”

When it came to demons, Wallenstein’s information network was as vast as any nation’s. If his people would be

working with Goetia, there really was no reason to worry.

Solomon returned the topic of conversation to Mira's mission. "By the way, you said that orphanage was in a nameless village in the mountains of northeastern Grimdart, right? Do you have any idea where?"

Artesia, the Elder of Holy Arts, was seemingly connected to the orphanage. The first round of information Mira gathered about it had pointed to the mountains of Grimdart, and Solomon had sent personnel to investigate the lead. Unfortunately, either the information wasn't common knowledge or someone was suppressing it; he was unable to track down such a village.

"I do happen to have an idea about that…" Mira replied. The king of a whole nation hadn't found this village, yet she claimed —with no shortage of smugness—that she'd had the ability to get results.

Solomon's tone of voice rose slightly, his interest piqued. "*Wow,* nice. And what is that idea?"

"You want to know, do you?" Mira asked, growing even more excited to explain.

"I do, I do!"

When she heard Solomon's enthusiasm, Mira replied pompously, "Then I suppose I must share it."

She told him proudly about her strategy—despite not knowing whether it would work at all. The plan was to apprehend the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice. Mira had heard rumors that he donated to various orphanages. If that was true, he might know something about the one in the nameless village.

"Ooh, makes sense. Not bad." Mira's hypothesis was certainly simple, but surprisingly, Solomon responded well to it. After all, his investigation hadn't found *anything*.

The Church of the Trinity managed the majority of orphanages. Noble-run charity projects were the next most common. And then—very rarely—there were orphanages funded by investment from organizations like local governments.

The government knew of almost all these orphanages. And there were lots of benefits to officially operating an orphanage in

the Grimdart area, whether the church, nobility, or local bureaucracy ran it. In other words, in the course of following Mira's lead, one of Solomon's agents should've been able to get information on all the orphanages in the area. Yet they'd failed to find the one in the nameless village. There was one simple reason for that: It hadn't been registered.

Orphanages cost money, requiring investors to keep them afloat. Upon reporting their involvement, investors received preferential treatment from the government, and it was hard to imagine someone eschewing that benefit. Thus, if the orphanage existed, then either someone with shady motives was involved or there was some reason to hide investments in it.

Shady motives seemed nearly impossible if Artesia was connected to the organization. She loved children—she'd never do anything to endanger them. The only questionable thing about her was whether she could ever bear to let them go.

In that case, where had Artesia gotten the funds for the nameless village's orphanage? It supposedly housed over a hundred orphans, so it surely cost a small fortune to run. Even if Artesia was there, she couldn't simply make unlimited money off killing monsters. And if she made that much money through her Holy Arts, people would spread rumors about her skill. Yet Solomon said that no such rumors existed.

"Even if the orphanage is under church control, they have limited funds," he mused. "And really, I'd be surprised if a nameless mountain village has a church to begin with. Normal donations wouldn't be enough either. Frankly, even I don't see a way to cover over a hundred kids' expenses through normal channels. But if a phantom thief funded the orphanage, that'd explain why it isn't registered with the state or the church. Not a bad hypothesis, especially for you. It's totally plausible."

Mira had just had a hunch that Fuzzy Dice would be familiar with the nameless village's orphanage, but with the additional context Solomon provided, that was starting to seem surprisingly realistic.

"Right? Right?!" Getting even cockier than usual, she ignored Solomon's backhanded compliment, acting as if he'd simply praised her. When Solomon complimented her further,

she added elatedly, “I just had to think about it a little, and it came to me!”

Having buttered her up, Solomon finally asked, “Now, you say you want to catch that phantom thief. Any idea where he is?” Fuzzy Dice was elusive. His identity and his hideout’s location were equally unknown. How could Mira apprehend such a person?

Fortunately, she had hot gossip. “Indeed. I heard he sent his calling card to a certain company in Haxthausen. If he plans to show up himself, there’s no need for us to search for his hideout, is there?” she explained, still cocky.

There were other approaches, such as exposing his identity or finding his hideout. The calling card gave the exact time and place he’d appear, though, so why not just meet him there?

“Wow—his calling card! In that case, it’ll definitely be fastest for you to go there in person. Then you can duel the phantom thief himself… I’ve heard of pretty famous adventurers being hired to catch him, but nobody’s gotten their hands on him yet. Good luck. I wonder whether you can cuff him…” Solomon sounded elated. He was really looking forward to the big confrontation between Mira and Fuzzy Dice.

“Of course I can,” Mira replied matter-of-factly. She was confident.

“You’ve got a strategy worked out already?” the king asked searchingly.

“Naturally. It’s a guaranteed victory, I assure you,” she replied, growing smugger by the second.

“Oh, awesome. Tell me more!”

“It’s a secret, I’m afraid. Before long, the news of the day will be Fuzzy Dice’s capture at my hands. Then I’ll spill the beans!” She smirked fearlessly, declaring her victory ahead of time.

Mira’s ultimate strategy was linked to the person who stood next to her even now. There’d be plenty of ways to learn the orphanage’s location—from just talking it out to bribery or tailing Fuzzy Dice—but Mira had her heart set on *capturing* the thief.

Chapter 8

"BY THE WAY, WHICH COMPANY did Fuzzy Dice send that calling card to?" Solomon asked casually. "I hear there're lots of big companies around there."

"Uh, what was the name...?" Mira thought for a moment and managed to remember. "Dorres, perhaps?"

"The Dorres Company, huh?"

"Oh, heard of it?"

"A bit. I mean, when I was investigating that Chimera Clausen stuff, their name came up in reports a lot. Man, they're rotten to the core."

The Dorres Company was involved in all kinds of shady activities—fraud, the illegal drug trade, racketeering, and even assassinating competitors. It was incredible that they'd evaded the law so long.

"Fuzzy Dice is definitely a righteous kind of thief, that's for sure." According to Solomon, all Fuzzy Dice's targets had one thing in common: shady dealings. Mira had gotten that sense based on what she'd heard about him too. She already envisioned him as a thief with a strong sense of justice.

Just then, something occurred to her. "Hey, what'd his other targets do to attract his attention?"

That question was mostly out of curiosity. How evil did someone have to be for the righteous thief to target them?

Solomon seemed just as interested in that. "Pretty bad things, as I recall. Wait just a sec. I have a list around here... Ah, there it is. Let's see..."

It seemed he'd researched this. He carefully read out what he'd found. First, a total of fourteen people had fallen victim to Fuzzy Dice. The majority were merchants, but they included even Adventurers' Guild Union members and nobility. Their misdeeds were plentiful and diverse, but most were especially heinous, up to and including murder.

“Of all those criminals, one is surprisingly…unremarkable,” Mira mused.

“Yeah. Looking at the list again, I think the same thing.”

Amid the phantom thief’s fourteen “victims,” the same person—Gerhard Herman—stuck out to them. He was a noble who ruled one edge of Grimdart. He was also Fuzzy Dice’s first target, the spark that ignited the legend of the phantom thief.

The first thing that struck them was that heist’s calling card—or rather, lack thereof. These days, Fuzzy Dice was known for sending a calling card, then elegantly stealing from his mark. But according to Solomon’s research, he hadn’t sent one before his first crime.

“Quite plain, compared to his M.O. these days,” Mira noted.

“Seems like he didn’t have his persona established yet,” Solomon said.

His research also detailed Fuzzy Dice’s first theft. He’d stolen concealed evidence of a crime, then unveiled it for the world to see. He hadn’t touched *any* money or valuables, Solomon noted. “His first goal was evidence of the crime, basically.”

“That proves his hatred of it, I suppose.”

The accusation leveled against Gerhard based on the unveiled evidence was human trafficking. A heinous crime, but Fuzzy Dice’s second and third targets had committed even more—and worse ones. Gerhard paled in comparison.

What caught Mira and Solomon’s attention was that the evidence pointed to Gerhard trafficking war orphans.

“It apparently caused a hell of a ruckus back then.” Solomon’s documents contained a record of the events, which described the state of the nation and Gerhard’s treatment. He read with great interest.

Even nobles had to be tried for their crimes, but they could pull strings when necessary. When rumors spread, they were able to quash them without suspicion. Gerhard had relied on such methods while dipping his toes into human trafficking. That practice was obviously illegal in Grimdart; if the matter was publicized, Gerhard wouldn’t get away with it. But those

connected with Gerhard thwarted even outright challenges. Several investigators looking into him had “disappeared” during their efforts.

Then Fuzzy Dice made his heroic appearance. The phantom thief overcame the noble’s efforts, smoothly stealing evidence of his crimes and exposing him to all the world. As such, Gerhard’s true nature became known. At that point, there was nothing even a noble could do. He was executed in the name of the law.

That had been nine years ago. After Gerhard’s execution, the public expressed concern for the orphans he’d victimized.

“The national government used military intelligence to find many victims of his trafficking,” Solomon noted.

Back when the aftershocks of the Defense of the Three Great Kingdoms had yet to settle, and everyone struggled through life, reports of poor, orphaned children being exploited by evil nobles had spread through the surrounding countries.

Making ends meet after the war was difficult. People couldn’t spend time worrying about others’ kids, let alone war orphans. Still, many believed that children represented the future. On top of that, the news of a corrupt noble’s punishment was a ray of light in the dark. Thus, the public supported Fuzzy Dice’s deeds, and cries of concern for the children grew louder until they reached the government’s ears. The national coffers were in a sorry state, but ignoring the problem would only have led to greater discontent, which forced the government to act.

“I’m sure that was part of the phantom thief’s plan too—saving the trafficked kids.”

It wasn’t easy for an individual to track human trafficking, but Fuzzy Dice had succeeded in his plan to rely on the national information network. That, Solomon added wryly, was a terrifying prospect for a head of state like him.

“At any rate, it’s interesting how often orphans come up in all this,” Mira mused.

They believed Artesia was running an orphanage. Fuzzy Dice was rumored to donate to orphanages. And now it turned out his first job had involved rescuing trafficked war orphans. Mira couldn’t help mulling that over.

“Do you think Fuzzy Dice could’ve been Artesia all along?” she asked.

“No *way*. That’s just… Hmm.” If they knew anything about Artesia, it was that she’d do the impossible to help children. “I mean…maybe Fuzzy Dice’s first crime was like her, but sending calling cards and stealing things? That’s not.”

“You’re not wrong about that,” Mira admitted.

After some thought, the two discarded the possibility. Outside her passion for saving children, Artesia was typically quiet, which didn’t match what they’d heard about Fuzzy Dice at all.

“Well, either way, we’ll know as soon as we capture him,” Mira said dismissively. What mattered wasn’t Fuzzy Dice’s secret identity but whether he knew of the orphanage they were looking for.

“Yeah, fair enough. I think we can leave it at that.” Thus, their discussion of the thief concluded.

“Okay, I’d better get moving,” Mira declared, ready to end the conversation. “If anything happens, I’ll call you again.”

“Well, if you’re heading to your next destination right now, I guess you won’t be home for a while…” Solomon said, stating the obvious. He sounded a little sad.

“Well, no. That’s true. What? Are you lonely? Hmm? Is that it? Hmmmm?” Mira lifted the receiver back to her face and smirked. Her friend was alone, unable to leave the capital as he pleased, and she was happy to give him a little more of her time.

“Oh, not me,” Solomon continued sadly. “Your poor wife is, though.”

He’d apparently heard recently from Cleos, Mira’s acting Elder, that Mariana constantly asked when Miss Mira would come home. Cleos would answer, “Sooner or later, surely.” When Mariana asked where Mira had gone, however, it forced Cleos to admit that Mira was visiting the Ancient Underground City. And worse, that—depending how her trip went—she might have to head to the lowest level.

Admitting that was a mistake. The Ancient Underground City’s lowest level was notorious in the Linked Silver Towers,

especially for the strength of the Machina Guardian within. Long ago, when the Nine Wise Men had finally started to take shape, they'd attempted the battle to test their skills. They'd ended up retreating in tatters. That was their first—and last—raid-boss battle.

In hindsight, they'd been inexperienced back then. Still, they *were* the Nine Wise Men. It was a big deal that they'd been so thoroughly trounced together, and it remained a sore spot.

As such, when Mariana learned that Mira had gone to the Ancient Underground City, she was horribly worried. And knowing that Solomon had sent Mira there, Mariana got awfully prickly around *him*, he added with a grumble.

"Goodness. Mariana..."

Mariana was a very competent aide. She was good at housework, as well as kind, polite, and considerate. Yet she, of all people, was being snippy with the king himself. Mira found it cute how Mariana got riled up about her. If she'd said she wasn't happy about it, it would've been a lie. Still, she couldn't shrug off the fact that she was worrying poor Mariana. Perhaps, Mira began to think, she *should* go home.

Just then, Solomon said a few numbers to her. "Zero nine zero five. Got that?"

"Hm? Zero nine zero five?"

"Yep. That number connects to the Tower of Evocation. 'Nine' is for the nine towers, and 'five' is because it's the fifth tower clockwise from the Tower of Sorcery." Solomon kindly explained the meaning of the number he'd given Mira. It was one she could use with the communicator. However far away she was, she could use the device to communicate with Mariana in the Tower of Evocation. "Call her once in a while, if you want. I mean, *please* do. It'd help me out." Given Mariana's usual kindness toward everyone, Solomon felt her surliness even more acutely.

"Thank you. I'll make sure to call her after this. Can't let her worry too long, after all." Mira couldn't care less if Solomon was lonely, but *Mariana*? She had to make sure the poor girl wasn't concerned. The summoner planned to contact her soon.

“By the way, if you could mention casually to her that I paid out of my own pocket to get her a good military-grade communicator so you two could talk, and that this isn’t my fault… You know…” Solomon was making an unusually direct request.

That was because it had become common knowledge throughout the castle that poor, sweet Mariana was being curt with him. Her rudeness, in turn, led to rumors that Solomon did something legitimately awful to her. He was desperate to put out the fire.

“Hrmm… Well, I might, if I feel like it. Anyway, I’m going to call her. Later.” Indifferent to his needs, Mira began putting down the receiver, prioritizing her next duty.

She heard Solomon insist, “Make sure you *do*, please!” just before she hung up and caused his voice to fade.

After finishing the call, Mira took a breather for a moment, then picked up the receiver again. At that point…

“Mira…Mira! What was that about a wife *I just heard? Tell me! Shouldn’t he have said* ‘husband’*?! His name is Mariana? He’s a man, isn’t he? But ‘Mariana’ is a woman’s name. Is* she *your wife?! Mira, tell me! Tell me what’s going on!”* Martel’s voice, even more excited than usual, echoed in her brain.

“Martel, please! I made you promise before you linked with Mira that you’d interfere with her private life as little as possible,” the Spirit King warned her quietly.

Once a fire was lit in Martel’s heart, however, even the Spirit King would struggle to put it out. *“But, Sym! Mira—a girl—has a wife! Aren’t you interested?!”*

“That isn’t the issue right now. Goodness, you’re a handful… When it comes to love, I don’t know what to do with you.” In his opinion, Martel was obsessed with talking about love—no matter who the couple was, in fact. Indeed, the more complex the circumstances, the more fired up she got. *“Sorry, Mira.”*

With that, the Spirit King gave up on reining Martel in. Even he had to throw in the towel eventually, and Martel battered Mira with questions like a nosy old gossip. The mental image made the summoner chuckle drily to herself.

“Uh, Mariana and I…” Mira managed to calm the eager Martel when she began to explain: Mariana was her aide and helped out with Mira’s needs, so “wife” was just a joke Solomon had come up with.

“Oh. That’s all? That’s a shame…” Martel now seemingly understood that Mariana was nothing but a helper and that nothing special existed between her and Mira. Her enthusiasm died away at once, and she fell silent.

Mira was relieved when Martel’s voice stopped echoing in her mind. *I think that calmed her down. Damn you, Solomon.*

That made her recall Solomon’s words: *“Your wife.”*

Solomon had just been teasing her, but Mira didn’t mind the idea whatsoever. Having Mariana as a wife wouldn’t be bad. Far from it, it’d be ideal. Mira fantasized about it, but never said a word about that; she knew it would only reignite Martel’s passion.

Chapter 9

"NOW... ZERO NINE ZERO FIVE, was it?" Mira faced the communicator once more, picked up the receiver, and prepared to dial the number for Mariana's tower. She stopped herself, - however. *Wh-what do I say? Where do I begin...? I'm getting nervous.*

Perhaps because of the "wife" chatter prior, Mira felt like she was calling a friend she had a crush on. She'd have had an easier time if she instead put herself in the shoes of a husband calling his wife at home, but that was too hard for her to muster.

Still, she couldn't wait until she had her feelings straight. Martel was watching, and the spirit's eyes were too keen for Mira to let her uncertainty slip. If she hesitated, Martel might realize and say something like "*Aww. You're awfully nervous just to talk to your aide... My, my... Hee hee!*"

Sighing, Mira forced herself to press the buttons. She heard the dial tone from the receiver. Listening with bated breath, she racked her brain over what to say.

"Hello. Tower of Evocation. Acting Elder Cleos speaking."

"Oh, it's just you..." She heaved another sigh as if disappointed.

Now that Mira thought about it, it didn't surprise her that Cleos had answered, but she'd fully expected Mariana. A betrayed feeling filled her with indescribable emptiness.

"Um, okay. That's rather harsh..." Her words hadn't put Cleos off. Instead, he added expectantly, "Anyway, from your voice, I'm guessing this must be Lady Mira."

"Right, yes. It's me. Erm, Solomon told me Mariana's worried about me, so I decided to call."

Her emotions had cooled for a moment when Cleos answered, but when she explained her call, her nervousness flared up again. Struggling to feign calm, she finally asked, "So... is Mariana there?"

“I knew it! Oh, thank goodness! Mariana must be cleaning the tower right now, but I’ll get her right away. Wait just a minute, please!” It seemed Mariana’s mood lately had been a struggle for Cleos too. His voice, coming from the receiver, sounded as if he’d just recognized the arrival of his savior.

Mira heard footsteps rushing and the sound of a door being flung open. Cleos was apparently in a real hurry to get Mariana.

Okay. Now’s my chance. She used the unexpected moment of calm to collect herself and figure out what she’d say to Mariana. She’d first have to tell the fairy that she was perfectly safe, naturally, and that she’d even found Soul Howl. *Mariana will be happy to hear that,* she thought with a grin.

The problem would come when it was time to tell Mariana about her next mission. The mysterious orphanage, the phantom thief who likely knew about it, the rumors that he’d appear in Haxthausen… If Mira returned to the tower first, she wouldn’t make it in time—she had to press on. So she’d grumble about…or, rather, *explain*…that to Mariana.

Making Mariana feel lonely had wounded Mira, but she was loyal to both her country and her friends. This wasn’t her plan just because Solomon requested it. It might’ve looked like Mira was simply going with the flow, but she was doing her best for her homeland.

Mariana will surely understand, she hoped as she waited.

There was no hold tone on the communicator, and some quiet noises came through the receiver. Suddenly, another sound interrupted: *Thunk. Thunk.* Mira couldn’t tell what it was, but after she heard it, she also heard a door slowly open. Mariana had finally arrived.

Mira braced herself, straightened her posture despite being jammed in the closet, and awaited Mariana’s voice with a determined expression. Immediately, however, she was startled by the sound of something falling on the other end of the call.

Unsure what it was, she composed herself and called through the communicator, “What was that? Hey, Mariana, are you okay?”

When she spoke, there was a small rustling sound. That wasn't Mariana. What was it, then? Mira became anxious, but she quickly realized that her worry wasn't necessary.

A needy cry came through the receiver: "Squeak! Squeak!"

"Ooh! Is that you, Luna? Look how smart you are, using the phone!" Mira cooed.

"Squeeeak!" Luna cried happily from the other side. So that commotion on the other end of the line had been her doing.

The whole top floor of the tower could hear communicator conversations, so Luna had picked up Mira's voice even from elsewhere in the tower. The little bunny had learned to use the communicator from watching Mariana and Cleos, and she'd rushed in, opened the door, and knocked the communicator to the floor—just to speak with Mira. Since Luna was smart enough to do all that, Mira had praised her accordingly.

"Lovely! How have you been doing, dear?"

"Squeak squeak squeak!"

"Oh, really? Full of energy all day, every day? That's wonderful," Mira continued to coo.

"Squeak!" Luna replied excitedly.

Mira didn't know whether the bunny actually understood what she said, but it sure felt like they were conversing. Sometimes a pet owner didn't need to understand their pet to truly *understand* them.

"Squeak!"

"Same here. I've missed you too, dear."

As they chatted, Cleos's voice came through the receiver. "Luna, you should let Mariana have the phone."

Holding the receiver, Mira suddenly froze up. When Cleos's words sank in, they naturally led her to assume that he and Mariana were waiting by the phone; that meant they'd heard her entire conversation with Luna.

If you were already there, you should've said something, damn it! Mira cringed at the thought of them hearing her dote on the bunny.

“Miss Mira, is it really you…?” Mariana asked, voice weaker than usual.

That made Mira realize fully how worried Mariana had been. “Yes, the one and only. I heard that I worried you, Mariana. I’m sorry. As you can hear, I’m alive and well. There’s no need to worry anymore,” she said slowly and carefully. Though guilty that she’d made Mariana anxious, she smiled at the feeling that they really *were* like a married couple.

“It certainly seems that way. You did sound happy and healthy just now,” Mariana said mischievously, no doubt teasing Mira about her exchange with Luna. Without question, though, her joy was abundantly clear.

“Ugh…” Mira cradled her head in renewed shame. She didn’t care when people saw her *naked*…but being caught playfully cooing to a pet was mortifying, maybe because it was so off brand compared to her carefully maintained image.

While she writhed, Martel and the Spirit King piped up in her brain.

“Lots of pet owners are like Mira, right?”

“For sure. Forsetia was the same.”

Realizing that the spirits had witnessed it all as well, Mira cringed harder. Wasranvel watched quietly, empathizing with her pain.

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“Anyway, there you have it. I conquered the Ancient Underground City and even found Soul Howl!” Mira announced her greatest accomplishments, obviously trying to change the subject.

Cleos replied first. “Ah! So Soul Howl’s finally been found!”

“Well done. You’ve always been so impressive, Miss Mira,” Mariana said sweetly.

Luna’s squeaking came through the communicator too; she was evidently celebrating alongside them.

Mira had successfully moved on with the conversation. She smirked to herself, then quickly explained what'd happened with Soul Howl—that he wouldn't return until he finished his Holy Grail, but that his work was near its end already.

"So, well, that finishes this mission. But, um…" Mira hesitated, then managed to convey that—despite being gone so long that she'd worried Mariana—she still had things to do before she could come home.

Perhaps to justify that, she began giving detailed reasons for her absence.

There was an orphanage seemingly related to Artesia in northeastern Grimdart, not too far from where she was now. She still didn't know the exact location, so she meant to go after the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice, who donated to a number of orphanages. Fuzzy Dice had issued a calling card to a company in Haxthausen, announcing that he'd appear in four days. If Mira wanted to apprehend him, there simply wasn't enough time to come home first. She had to go straight there.

Having explained the circumstances, she asked permission. "As you can see… Well… I have to go right to Haxthausen. Um, is that…okay?" She sounded like a husband making excuses for coming home late.

Mariana had listened intently without interruption. After a short pause, the fairy answered weakly, "Yes, of course." Mustering her courage, she added, "If I said I wasn't lonely, it'd be a lie, but I love…that you work your hardest for this country and its people. Please prioritize your work, Miss Mira. That's what I care most about."

Mariana's voice overflowed with kindness and strength, and her words came from the heart. It was true that she missed Mira, but more than that, she treasured Mira's exploits and lively adventures.

"But, um…I'd be happy if you called me once in a while. Just whenever you remember," Mariana added in a murmur. Those words were heartfelt too, though tinged with embarrassment.

Mira squirmed in sheer joy. Who wouldn't be happy to hear that—to be so loved? "Of course! I solemnly vow to call often. It's a deal!" she answered impulsively, delight evident in her voice.

Mariana was happy too. They hadn't been talking long, but her loneliness was clearly gone.

After that, the pair enjoyed a casual conversation—or rather, Mira talked *at* her aide the whole time, telling her all about the adventures in the Ancient Underground City. Mira's stories began in crowded Grandrings and continued chronologically until, outside the Ancient Underground City, she parted with Soul Howl.

She also told Mariana about the nameless fruit she'd eaten. "It was too sweet *and* too sour. What a ridiculous flavor!"

"Really?" Mariana replied with surprise and joy. "I can hardly imagine this Queen of Hearts you speak of."

Mira spoke at length, and Mariana reacted; the stories continued in that manner until Mira briefly—with permission—mentioned Martel. She left out what the spirit actually protected but did proudly mention the many treasures she'd seen and the fact that she'd acquired a summoning contract. Her stories didn't end there. She rattled on about how she'd also met the divine beast Fenrir and obtained a summoning contract with *him* as well.

Cleos reacted more strongly to that than Mariana did. As the girls started chatting casually, Cleos had withdrawn, but talk via communicator was audible throughout the top floor. When Mira mentioned the mansion spirit's contract, Cleos had charged back in to demand details.

She'd explained that the spirit resided in an old mansion and was somewhat similar to a weapon spirit. After enough growth, she'd be able to summon a big mansion for herself. This proved that spirits could reside in things other than weapons and that those spirits could enter contracts. That was a major breakthrough on its own.

Furthermore, the Spirit King easily explained why they hadn't been able to make such a contract before: To control an artificial spirit, you had to prove you were its master. You simply had to win a battle against a weapon spirit, but what victory criteria existed for mansions or furniture? Apparently, their lack of an answer to that had been due to a simple lack of contractors until now.

Mira had managed to make the contract on exceedingly simple grounds: she had the Spirit King's blessing. The fact that the Spirit King accepted her was more than enough reason to obey her.

Once she explained that, Cleos left, satisfied. Immediately after, though, progenitor spirits and divine beasts had come up. At that point, he barged back in, even more excited. "Goodness—a progenitor spirit! And the divine beast Fenrir to boot! How wonderful. Incredible work, Lady Mira! To summon a progenitor spirit, what kind of ritual is necessary?! And how do you construct the circle that summons a divine beast?!"

Mira had gotten flustered about the whole "wife" thing, but as one might expect of a mage who'd clawed her way to the very top, she got especially passionate when it came to summoning. The impromptu discussion of that subject lit a fire under her, and before long, there was no stopping the conversation.

What would be the most efficient way to procure the mana to summon Martel, outside Mira's own special abilities? Did other Transcendent Evocations exist? Could she make contracts with other progenitor spirits? Most importantly, how in the world could one learn the new Astra's Ten Rings skill and harness Transcendent Evocation?

Furthermore, what would happen when the weakened Fenrir regained his true power? Would he continue as an advanced summon or change into a Transcendent one?

Mira and Cleos drew on their knowledge to the fullest as they exchanged their thoughts on these matters. This was a new frontier for summoning. Every mage in the tower would spend days and sleepless nights investigating this, had they known about it.

In terms of its conditions, Transcendent Evocation didn't seem very practical. For mages, its charm lay elsewhere—call it the appeal of "cool" magic, perhaps. Mira and Cleos knew that better than anyone else in the tower, and there was no end to their ever-growing excitement.

Chapter 10

"THE WORD 'ASTRA' RELATES to the stars, doesn't it? In that case, the method of learning it may also connect to the stars."

"Hrmm, the stars… Stars…"

Cleos and Mira were discussing a potential method for learning Astra's Ten Rings. Taking into account the methods for learning the Bound Arcana and Mark of the Rosary, they came up with two possible ways, but neither seemed convincing. Thus, they began considering a third. Their ideas about that one came from the simple vocabulary of the skill's name.

"Ten rings… Ten realms… It could have a religious… Huh?!" While he ruminated on the words, Cleos suddenly gasped and stopped speaking.

Had Cleo had an idea? "Hm? What's the matter? Did you think of something?!" Mira asked expectantly.

His response was stilted and rushed. "Well, er, how do I put this…? Something's come up. I need to leave right away." He seemed flustered.

Had something actually come up? Worried, Mira asked more about it, but Cleos flatly replied that it was a personal problem and not something she needed to worry about.

"I'm sorry, Lady Mira. Let's discuss this another time when we can talk at length. In the meantime, I'll ask Suleiman about it. He's sure to know something. Now, goodbye!"

Cleos rattled off a bunch of promises, then ran off at once. Apparently, the problem was quite urgent. What had him in such a panic? Mira was disappointed—they'd just gotten into the meat of their summoning discussion—but just then, she happened to remember something.

"Oh—sorry, Mariana. I totally forgot in the midst of our conversation!"

Yes, she'd forgotten Mariana. After Cleos's interruption, they'd begun debating summoning, and that had lasted until now. In other words, they'd totally neglected Mariana.

When it came to magic, Mira got carried away easily. Before she knew it, Transcendent Evocation had dominated the conversation. She apologized over and over, feeling like a husband caught having an affair.

“No, Miss Mira, don’t worry about me. I’m happy just to hear your voice. You both seemed to be having so much fun that it made me happy too. Please, do whatever you need to. But…I’d be very happy if you showed just a little concern for me here and there, like you have today.” Mariana said she’d forgive Mira however long she was made to wait. Those feelings were heartfelt, her unabashed truth.

She thinks so much of me! Mira was captivated; Mariana’s words made her sound like the ideal wife. Now, Mira was certain their love was mutual. “I won’t just show a little. You’re my greatest love, Mariana!” she declared proudly.

Mariana’s shy but happy voice came from the receiver: “I feel the same.”

After that, the pair talked for a whole hour, more intimate than ever—not just about Mira’s adventures but about simple things like what they liked and matters that were more personal.

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During a natural pause in their conversation, Mira decided it was time to end the chat. “Well, the time’s flown. Sorry for bothering you when your morning is so busy.”

Thinking back, when Mira first called, Cleos had mentioned that Mariana was cleaning the tower. In other words, that work was still undone.

That was a mere trifle to Mariana. “Not at all. Call me anytime. Nothing is more important to me than you, Miss Mira,” she said politely and firmly, meaning every word.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” Mira replied with a giddy smile. “Be careful of your health.”

“Yes, of course. Take good care of yourself too.”

After some kind words to each other, it was finally time to hang up.

“Right… Well…goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

At that, Mira gently lowered the receiver. Hanging up was just too hard. Mariana seemed to feel the same, as the call showed no sign of actually cutting off. Mira bit the bullet; despite her reluctance, she put the receiver down first. A click indicated that she’d ended the call.

The sudden silence was heavy. Suffering a renewed feeling of distance between herself and Mariana, Mira put the lid back on the communicator and gazed at it for a while.

On Earth, it had been normal to use a device like this to talk to distant friends. But now that Mira really thought about it, it was kind of incredible. Their conversations had been simple and casual, but just hearing each other’s voices let them feel each other’s emotions from afar.

Words are like magic, Mira realized, struggling to crawl out of the closet.

At that moment, perhaps unsurprisingly, a fascinated voice echoed in her mind. *“Mira… Mira! You talked to Mariana for an awfully long time. And what was that about her being your ‘greatest love’? I don’t think you’d say that to just any old aide, Mira. Is the ‘wife’ thing true?!”*

That over-an-hour-long conversation had revealed the real depth of Mira and Mariana’s relationship, and Martel hadn’t failed to sniff that out. She stuck her nose into the matter quickly, like a nosy relative.

“Sorry, Mira. I keep telling her not to pry into private matters,” Sym apologized.

“So it’s okay for Wasranvel to hear and not me?” Martel complained. Unlike her, the spirit of stealth got to listen in right next to Mira. Martel insisted that was unfair, although she was obviously being unreasonable.

Wasranvel himself heard this complaint, and he was clearly flustered when Martel dragged him into the argument. He didn’t protest, however; he maintained the silence he was known for.

“There she goes again,” the Spirit King said ruefully. *“But, uh…*can *we assume your relationship goes a little deeper?”*

Martel had been freed from thousands of years of solitude, and now her thirst for love stories was insatiable. It was even influencing the Spirit King. His voice sounded fascinated as it echoed in Mira’s mind.

“Well, I suppose. You didn’t mishear.” Mira’s relationship with, and love for, Mariana… There wasn’t much reason to hide those anymore, and Mira admitted them outright.

“Wonderful! That’s just beautiful, Mira!”

“Indeed. It feels nice, doesn’t it?”

Martel and the Spirit King chatted further about Mira and Mariana’s relationship. They didn’t seem concerned over whether it was straight; the Spirit King simply said that the love between two individuals was a precious thing. Few spirits had experienced it, Martel added.

“He was so happy when he found love back then.” Martel was recalling Rieslein, the progenitor spirit of space-time and one of very few spirits who’d found love. His romance had ended in tragedy, but back then, he’d been bursting with hope. *“I’m supporting you with all my heart, Mira!”* Martel declared warmly and firmly.

Maybe she genuinely wanted to see two lovers happy—to see love that didn’t end in tragedy—rather than just to gossip about romance.

“*And a girl and girl together*. *Oh, how exciting! I’m getting all fired up!”*

Actually, no. She was just an unashamed gossip.

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Before departing for Haxthausen, Mira went to the shopping district of Grandrings, ostensibly to stock up on necessities.

I have around 200,000 ducats left… Well, that should be enough.

The war funds she'd gotten from Solomon were running low, but she wouldn't run out as long as she didn't splurge too much. She could sell the magic stones she'd gathered, if necessary.

Having decided that, Mira headed off to a plaza full of open stalls. These stalls were a common sight wherever people gathered. They gave off a variety of scents, stimulating the appetites of passersby. The wares enticed even those who weren't hungry. It was almost lunchtime, so people gradually filled the plaza.

Mira was used to these sights, having been to many such places, so she dashed through the area gracefully. Perusing the stalls that caught her eye, she bought dish after dish.

"That looks delicious too. Something else to buy. Oh ho—yakiniku bento? How could I not?"

Mira purchased a wide variety of foods, from food-stall staples to more elaborate meals, and deposited them all in her Item Box. During dinner last night, she'd realized something. It was extremely simple, and perhaps she should've realized it long ago: Prepared food was easy and delicious.

The Ancient Underground City was a popular dungeon among beginners and veterans alike. Mira had prepared for her conquest of it as any adventurer would. As she did, she'd been influenced by those around her.

Adventurers camped and cooked—or so the common person thought. Perhaps because she'd always admired the idea, Mira had gotten into the mood to do just those things. As a result, she'd bought tons of ingredients. Unlike the average User's Bangle, former players' Item Boxes had an incredible ability to maintain the freshness of anything deposited into them.

Mira had used that ability to the fullest by buying fresh ingredients. There was nothing wrong with that; she ended up having a better food situation than other adventurers, possessing an abundance of vegetables that others would've had trouble getting their hands on. That said, she didn't have the skill to draw out the ingredients' potential to the fullest, which

halved their value. Her lack of skill increased the time and effort of cooking as well.

Prepared food was the answer to which experience had led her. If she couldn't make delicious food, she'd just buy it. Her Item Box maintaining freshness meant that newly made food stayed that way. And hopefully, this wouldn't put her experience cooking in the dungeon to waste... Hopefully.

"Mmm. I think that ought to be enough," Mira muttered in satisfaction after counting the meals she'd stuffed into her Item Box.

By the time she left, she'd converted half her remaining funds into food. In the end, she'd bought a hundred meals during her little shopping spree. Including snacks, those purchases would keep her fed and happy for a long time.

After she departed, the sheer amount of money she'd rapidly squandered led to a discussion among the stalls of the silver-haired beauty who'd shown up and bought far too much food to eat on her own.

Later, they heard rumors from the Adventurers' Guild Union that the Spirit Queen was no buxom babe, but a small girl. That description fit the silver-haired customer perfectly. In turn, the legendary Spirit Queen was soon known as a glutton.

However, it would be a long time before Mira knew about that.

Chapter 11

A FEW HOURS HAD PASSED SINCE Mira departed for Haxthausen. Travel in the wagon pulled by Garuda was impeccably comfortable, and the view from the window was superb.

"Ah. Now, this is the life."

As Mira gazed at the endless, verdant earth below and blue skies above, she relished the luxuriousness of her environment. The wagon was like a secret base—a wonderfully relaxing one.

She sipped yogurt au lait and snacked on stuffed buns she'd bought at the food stalls. It was a truly relaxing moment, enjoying refreshments as she watched the world from on high.

After finishing her snack, Mira continued to gaze down. She confirmed her current location and muttered, "We'll probably get there around tomorrow evening..."

Land travel from this distance would've taken around a week, but it was barely a day by sky. Her trip was going smoothly, and she'd get there tomorrow by doing nothing but continuing to relax. It was so peaceful now, it was hard to believe she'd been running around the Ancient Underground City mere days ago.

She could only fly because Garuda was there to carry her. "This is all thanks to you, Garuda, really. Thanks," Mira told her friend, who replied with a happy squawk.

Though they were high in the sky, the air around the wagon was like a comforting spring breeze. The wind enveloping Garuda mirrored its emotions; it was happy too right now—though Mira couldn't feel that, tucked away in the cabin.

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"Hmm..."

A while after snack time, the urge to pee set in. Mira blamed the scenery for putting her in such a good mood that she'd drunk two whole yogurt au laits.

Unfortunately, she was up in the sky. She couldn't use the mansion spirit's bathroom. Fortunately, this wagon was made with such needs in mind.

Mira opened the closet door and crawled downstairs. When she opened a trapdoor in the corner, there was a simple toilet.

The limited wagon space left the bathroom area cramped. Mira couldn't stand up straight and use it, but since it was made for someone of her stature, it was surprisingly fairly comfortable. In fact, there was something cozy about its size. That height restriction made the toilet a Japanese-style one.

Alcait's engineers were no joke. Although the toilet was "simple," it used technomancy technology. And, although using it consumed magic stones, it was perpetually clean. Waste was processed, then dumped under the wagon.

"Ah, satisfaction. Everything needed can be condensed into such a small space. How wonderful."

This wagon, built as a result of Mira's negotiations with Solomon, was the ideal secret base. She'd fallen in love with the mansion spirit back in the Ancient Underground City, but the wagon was truly wonderful as well.

Mira wondered whether the mansion spirit had grown yet. When a contracted summon grew, or their bond with her deepened, the contract could expand to match. That yielded various benefits.

On that note, I should check Sanctia and Wasranvel as well.

Both had put in great work during the Machina Guardian battle, and Mira wondered whether they'd also grown in some way. She acted quickly, closing her eyes and focusing inward.

Hrmm. I see a lot more than I used to.

She felt a definite connection. That much, she was accustomed to. From there, she focused even more deeply on the link between herself and the spirits. An image similar to a family tree, or perhaps a video game's skill tree, came to mind. A contract allowed one to select and unlock skills on that tree.

Moved by the depth of their connections, Mira focused on her contracts with the mansion spirit, Sanctia, and Wasranvel.

Ooh, here we go! I can finally power up Sanctia's evocation! Still nothing for Wasranvel, it seems…

Perhaps because a thousand of her dark knights had wielded Sanctia, the spirit's link to Mira had deepened and strengthened. Mira had many more options available now.

However, Wasranvel had experienced no such change. Was it because his job was so simple? Or did his status as a greater spirit require more use in order for him to grow? Either way, Mira didn't mind taking it slowly. Her real focus right now was the mansion spirit, after all.

When she went to check her contract with that spirit, Mira noticed another contract that she could expand. *Ooh! Is that another result of the shift to real life?*

All the spirits she'd contracted in-game had reached their growth limits, so it'd been a long time since she'd bothered to check their details. As for her new contracts, like Wasranvel and Sanctia, she'd checked them individually here and there. Given that the others had all been capped long ago, she saw no reason to pay them any mind.

But her dark knights and holy knights had far surpassed their previous limits, making it possible to expand their contracts again. How long had they been ready?

Surprised by that revelation, Mira checked all her contracts in a flurry. She found that every contract but Wasranvel's was ready to expand.

What a fool I am, taking for granted that everything stayed the same… They didn't just grow; our bonds have come so far too. Mira mentally thanked all her contracted allies, making a mental note to say hello to them all sometime soon.

She didn't sit brooding sentimentally for long, however. She took the opportunity to expand all her contracts, starting with the mansion spirit that had prompted this check.

Expanding a contract added various effects to that contract's magic circle during summoning. It could bolster a defensive barrier, increase stats, provide elemental attributes, and more. The effects depended greatly on the specific contract.

In the mansion spirit's case, its expansion elements were unrelated to battle. Mira opted for one that would add a tub to the bathroom. She was eager to lounge in a bath instead of just showering all the time.

Thus, Mira expanded every contract that she could.

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Good grief. If I'd noticed sooner, the fight against the Machina Guardian would've been so much easier. Feeling a real sense of growth, Mira returned her consciousness to the surface.

"Now, let's see..."

She stood and summoned a holy knight as a test. This time was different from usual; the holy knight appeared in the same place as Mira, essentially surrounding her.

"Oh ho! Incredible. I feel no extra weight at all!"

That was due to a new expansion element, Equip Weapon Spirit. Its effect was basically just that—Mira could "wear" the weapon spirit. The holy knight appeared as protective armor, making her look like a princess-knight hybrid.



The performance of the armor itself depended on the holy knight that comprised that armor. As such, Mira's well-evolved summons created armor much stronger than the average suit.

The armor's helmet and visor could be freely removed, and the tower shield characteristic of holy knights was gone. Or, rather, Mira had removed it as she calibrated the new technique. She'd tried holding a sword, but given her usual fighting style, fighting empty-handed seemed easier.

It was also possible to make the armor move like any other holy knight.

"Still much more room to grow stronger, I see."

She could expand her contracts and grow beyond her previous limits. All this new power hadn't come from new contracts; it came from bolstering power she'd already cultivated, and its sheer potential filled Mira with heartfelt joy.

At one time, she'd been hailed as the strongest summoner. Despite the feeling of accomplishment, that made her aware of her own limits. She'd expanded many contracts as much as possible, leaving her with the assumption that she had no more room to grow.

Now, however, she knew that wasn't true. The bonds she'd deepened so much showed that she *could* still grow. The limits she'd encountered previously, she realized, might've been set arbitrarily. There were so many differences between the game world and this real world—so many unknowns to discover.

Eager for those discoveries, she pulled out the notes she'd copied from Soul Howl's notebook and studied harder than ever.

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In the flying wagon, Mira flopped down and read those copied notes. "Goodness. That jerk Soul Howl's made so much progress," she muttered to herself, sulking a little.

They'd theorized that Soul Howl might've arrived in this world before even Solomon. After all, Solomon checked his Friends List as part of his daily routine. Doing so, he'd noted the

dates on which a few Wise Men appeared in this world. However, Soul Howl's name had never appeared. That meant he'd been in this world before the king started monitoring the list.

Those last thirty years had been no joke. During that time, the necromancer had researched and compiled notes that far outshone Mira's own. Naturally, the competitive summoner pored over the notes endlessly, desperate to catch up and overtake Soul Howl.

Hours passed in the blink of an eye. Night fell, the moon and stars shining in the sky.

"Whoops. Getting late, I see."

It was already past 9:00 p.m., and as she gazed into the night, Mira realized she'd been so engrossed in her research that she hadn't even eaten.

Well, at any rate, she'd already made it more than halfway to Haxthausen. That seemed like enough progress for a day, so she ordered Garuda to find a river and land by it. There seemed to be one close by. After circling far above, Garuda descended on the river, lowering the wagon to the bank.

"Fantastic work. I'll need your help again tomorrow, so rest well." Mira thanked the bird, petting it gently, and dismissed it. Garuda proudly spread its wings, accepting the task, then disappeared in a warm glow.

After that, Mira summoned the mansion spirit and started eating one of her packed meals to sate her hunger. "Mmm. Yes, this idea was genius."

She didn't need to go to the time or effort to cook. When she was hungry and wanted to eat, she could fulfill the urge immediately. Satisfied by her own brilliance in stocking up on precooked meals, Mira savored her fresh yakiniku bento.

Having filled her tummy, she finally went to a place she'd intentionally avoided until now: the bathroom. Thanks to her expansion work, it now boasted a tub.

Mira had previously been forced to settle for showers. Those were luxurious enough, but now she could take full baths —even this far from human settlements.

Suppressing her impatience, she slowly opened the bathroom door.

“Ooh…a bath! That’s a bathtub, without a doubt!”

What had once been just a shower had now expanded beautifully. Next to the shower was a well-made stone tub. It was about as big as a tub in an ordinary home, but the lustrous stone had a classy sheen like that found in a noble’s abode. If there was one problem, it was the fact that the tub had no water in it.

“Should’ve run the bath while I ate.”

Mira now regretted saving this for last, but one misstep wouldn’t dishearten her. She turned the faucet on full blast to fill the tub. Based on the speed the water flowed, the bath would be ready in just ten minutes.

Though the mansion spirit was an incredible being, this method of running a bath was as common as could be. Mira smiled gleefully as she watched the tub fill bit by bit. As long as she could summon the mansion, she could bathe, whatever the circumstances—even on mountains during raging blizzards.

This was just the beginning of boundless possibilities, and her excitement only grew.

***

“Halfway there…” Unable to sit still and wait, Mira stripped and gazed at the rising water impatiently. “Hrmm. While I’m at it…”

Antsy, she pulled out her Just Add Water! Easy Technomancy Laundry Bag and threw her dirty clothes into it. Then she removed a travel bag from her Item Box and transferred some worn underwear to the laundry bag.

“That ought to do it.” The Easy Technomancy Laundry Bag was overstuffed, but Mira decided it’d be all right. She ran hot water in from the faucet, then sealed the top of the bag. “Now we wait… Ah, how convenient.”

When she flipped the switch, the laundry bag started bubbling. This was all it took to wash her clothes. Dinoire Trading

truly had cutting-edge technological capabilities. Sure, this wasn't the same as a real washing machine, but her clothes weren't *that* dirty. Mira figured it would do just fine.

Once she'd finished loading the laundry bag, she turned back to the bath. "Still needs to be a little deeper..."

It was about one-fifth empty, but Mira was small. That was more than enough water to sink into and submerge herself to her shoulders. However, she wouldn't compromise; the joy of hearing the water overflow and splash as she got in was key to the bath's luxury, after all.

"Ah. Speaking of luxury, I think it's time for a certain something!"

As she envisioned the perfect moment in the bath, something that would allow for even greater ecstasy crossed her mind: a cold drink afterward. The feeling of the beverage cooling her hot body would truly be the ultimate finishing touch. She'd already stocked up for that purpose, preparing for the day when she could truly bathe in the mansion spirit.

"This is my first bath here—an event to remember. I need to choose carefully..." She opened her inventory and looked up and down at the items she'd squirreled away, searching for the perfect one. A few minutes later, she'd made her pick.

She pulled another of Dinoire Trading's technomancy goods for adventurers out of her Item Box. It was the Quick-Chill Cooling Box, a self-explanatory container small enough to hold in one hand. Anything that fit inside would chill to an ice-cold temperature. A sister product, the Quick-Heat Warming Box, did the exact opposite.

Mira put a magic cell into the cooling box, placed the drink inside, and flipped the switch. There was a faint sound like swirling wind. Now, she only had to wait.

Having prepped for *after* the bath, she listened to the flowing water again; the bathtub was full.

"Finally, the time has come!" Mira turned the faucet, stopping the water, and dipped her hand in. The bath was hot—over forty-two degrees Celsius—which made it the *ideal* temperature for her. "This is it. This is it!"

Having confirmed that her bath was perfect, she finally plunged her right foot into the tub. Pressure and heat enveloped it. Feeling the warmth creep up her leg, she placed her left foot in as well before finally sinking in all at once.

“Ah, aaaah…paradiiise!” she squealed, delighted.

At the same time, water rushed over the tub edge, falling like a waterfall to the bathroom floor. Because Mira was so small, the water didn’t have as much force as it used to, but the feeling of conquest was just as powerful. Then, a rush of guilt for making a mess, and the stimulation of the heat, rushed through her, awakening a sensation akin to pleasure.

Mira stretched her legs out like a king in the tub and savored the long-awaited bath.



Chapter 12

LAYING BACK IN THE WATER, Mira relished the comfortable bath. After a while, though, she felt like something was missing. *What could it be?* she thought.

She looked around. It didn't take her long to realize.

"That's it…"

The problem was the wall immediately next to the bath. The room had expanded just enough to accommodate the tub, but the bathroom was still barely big enough to cram in two people. Even with the added bathtub space, it was hardly large.

There was no question about it—this bathroom was cramped.

Until now, Mira's baths had all been in larger spaces—the luxurious tubs in her rooms in her tower and in the castle, the lovely personal baths in hotels, larger public baths, and so on. In retrospect, she had quite a diverse history with baths. Thus, despite having the privilege of bathing someplace nobody else could, she still felt dissatisfied.

The main reason was this claustrophobic feeling. She wouldn't have minded this in a bath back in Japan, but now that she was familiar with luxurious spaciousness, this seemed too hemmed in.

"It might feel different if only there were a window…" she muttered, gazing at the high white wall next to her. The room wasn't just small; it contained no window affording an outdoor view, which only added to the cramped feeling.

This mansion's resident was a girl, so a window would practically invite a Peeping Tom. Mira didn't particularly care, though. She prioritized her need for a satisfying bath. As she reflected that this moment would be perfect, if only there were a window, the entire mansion began to shake.

"What the—?"

Was it an earthquake? Even as the thought occurred to her, the house clearly started to change. The shaking grew more

violent, warping the wall next to Mira significantly.

What was the meaning of this? She'd only made a contract with the mansion spirit recently and didn't know everything about it, so the reason for this outburst was beyond her. Was it angry that she thought the bathroom was cramped?

No—the mansion spirit was changing according to her wishes. As the shaking subsided, the wall next to her became a panoramic window. There was no light outside; all she saw was the land, covered in darkness, and the stars glimmering in the sky.

"Ooh... A starry evening is always a magnificent sight." Countless stars shined across the sky, undisturbed. Feeling the sheer breadth of the sky above in that moment, Mira relaxed anew in the hot water. She put her hand on the window. "You made a window for me," she murmured. "Thanks, friend."

Since the mansion spirit had opened a window just because she wanted one, it presumably had a flexible structure. In other words, it could rebuild itself as it pleased. Realizing that, Mira fantasized about what she could do when it got bigger. It would be a home full of her hopes and dreams, able to realize any ideal.

About an hour after getting in, Mira finally had her fill of soaking. She got out of the bath and left the room.

"Ah, I love baths." She dried herself with a towel and threw on a pair of undies. Under the pretense of letting her hot body cool, she stayed half-naked and picked up the Quick-Chill Cooling Box. "Let's see... Ooh! It's ice-cold!"

The drink in the box was surprisingly chilly—truly the perfect drinking temperature.

Mira picked up the bottle, labeled "coffee milk," and smiled gleefully. "I knew it. This is the perfect drink after a bath." The ultimate drink following the ultimate environment.

Mira had picked a coffee milk sold not for household consumption but for public baths. She wanted to balance the mansion spirit's security with the sense of travel the coffee milk provided.

She'd gotten many varieties of coffee milk; indeed, her decision-making earlier had focused on *which* she wanted in this moment. She'd chosen one produced by Brobel Plateau Farms.

Other options had included the Royal Coffee Milk sold by classy hotels, Morning-Squeezed Extra-Rich Coffee Milk using milk from a local dairy, Coffee Milk Flower Star concocted by an award-winning pastry chef, Special Select Coffee Milk blended by a first-rate barista who never compromised on quality, and still others.

As a place where many people gathered, Grandrings sold all kinds of coffee milk, and Mira had bought every single type for this very moment.

"Another fantastic view." She walked to a big window as she opened the coffee milk, leaned next to it, and gazed outside. This window faced a different direction from the bathroom window, providing a view of the nearby river. The water reflected the moon and stars shining that evening.

It was a beautiful night, worthy of her first bath in the mansion. She toasted the sky, brought the coffee milk to her lips, and elegantly tilted the can. She didn't stand with her legs at shoulder width and her left hand on her hip; that wasn't something that one did alone. Alone, one had to change how they did things, resulting in Mira's current method.

She drank the coffee milk like fine wine, quaffing it unhesitatingly, then slowly savoring the taste. This was the way to truly enjoy a postbath coffee milk.

"Mmm. The coffee flavor spreads through the mouth instantly, yet the milk's smooth texture and rich flavor make its presence known and equal. You really can't beat farm-fresh quality!" Mira cast her gaze at the sky, emulating a critic.

A pet theory of hers was that food produced on a farm—classic farm-fresh ice cream, caramel, cheese, sausage, and so on—was delicious. She'd drawn that conclusion from simple experience. The name "Brobel Plateau Farms" was proof enough that this coffee milk would be wonderful.

After a couple sips, Mira added, "Mm, such lovely harmony," swirling the liquid gently. She was fully acting the part

of a coffee milk sommelier, although she'd never properly taste-tested every type.

Still, the half-naked gourmand certainly savored her ice-cold coffee milk. Her posturing aside, it was true that the beverage was delicious. Enjoying it, Mira ended her day with great satisfaction.

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The next morning, Mira woke at the perfect time, neither too early nor too late. Sunlight shone through the window, filling the room with pleasant warmth.

"Mmm...lovely morning."

Waking under perfect conditions, she sat up and stretched, sitting in a sleepy daze for a moment. Then she slowly got around to preparing for the day.

She used the bathroom, showered, and finally woke fully. At that point, she sat in the middle of the room and contemplated, "Now, what do I feel like today?"

Naturally, she was thinking about the day's most important meal, breakfast. Since she'd bought *so many* foods for that meal, she was spoiled for choice—perhaps too spoiled.

"Hrmm...I think I'll have this, this, and this."

After some ten minutes of thinking, she finally selected a menu, then enjoyed it while she watched the calming view through the window.

Today's breakfast was a set of specialty sandwiches from a lovely bakery that she'd heard about from a passing housewife in Grandrings. In addition to staples like egg sandwiches, ham and cheese sandwiches, and the like, Mira had thrown in a teriyaki sandwich to really "beef" up the meal.

The housewife hadn't steered her wrong; all her recommendations were delicious. The voluminous, juicy teriyaki sandwich in particular was so good, Mira was tempted to fly back for more.

"This really is the ultimate way to use an Item Box."

After eating her sandwiches, which would stay fresh however long she waited to consume them, Mira finished her satisfying breakfast by picking up a drink: malted milk. This beverage was made by adding powdered malt to chocolate milk. It was truly the perfect breakfast drink.

A passing female adventurer had recommended the malted milk. It was from a famous sweets shop in Grandrings—the same place that sold Coffee Milk Flower Star—and was a breakfast staple.

“Lately, I feel like I have more vim and vigor than ever.”

Mira smiled in satisfaction as she examined her healthy figure. Did the food she ate really influence her shape much? That wasn’t clear, but for now, she was still in her ideal form. Her tummy was a little bloated from overeating, but that was neither permanent nor important.

Finally finishing breakfast, Mira changed her clothes and prepared to depart.

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“Mm-hmm. Good and ready.”

After changing, packing, and preparing to leave, Mira checked one more time in case she’d missed anything. After that final confirmation, she stepped through the door and exited the mansion spirit.

It would technically be fastest to leave by dismissing the spirit, rather than going outside first. There was a reason Mira didn’t do that, though: Stepping through the door simply felt more like an adventure. Moreover, she simply liked to see the mansion spirit from outside.

“Good. Yes, very good. Being lord of a castle and its grounds is every man’s dream, after all. And this mansion spirit—my property—can even be packed up at will. It truly is my home. Ah, how wonderful.”

A home sweet home, a sanctuary where one could relax to the utmost, was the ultimate destination everyone dreamed of.

Mira was no exception, and her hopes for the mansion only grew.

The mansion spirit now sat in an endless grassland, but as long as she had space to summon it, she could come home to it anytime she wanted. That overwhelming advantage put the spirit head and shoulders above other homes. Even nobles and royalty would surely covet this summon.

A peerless personal castle, now with a bath to boot—and this mansion had so much *more* potential.

"I look forward to our next night together, friend." Mira rubbed her cheek against the mansion, envisioning the endless possibilities, then finally dismissed it. "Now...we should arrive around evening."

After checking the distance to her destination, she considered her lodgings in Haxthausen. The mansion was great, of course, but once-in-a-lifetime inn stays were lovely as well.

While she mulled that over, she strolled to the wagon parked by the river and activated her summoning magic. Garuda emerged from the circle and immediately bowed to Mira, showing fealty. It was a loyal beast indeed.

"Good to be working with you again, my friend." Mira thanked Garuda for its loyalty with a pat on the beak.

She always remembered to show such gratitude. She'd been able to speak to the creature in-game, but now that the game was reality, her recognition of her summoned friends had become a constant. The summoner was just happy that they'd helped her so much.

Garuda stood and spread its wings wide. Those iridescent wings were its calling card, and the way it spread them was boastful.

Mira and Garuda had a long, involved past. The beast had once sworn fealty to Danblf, for it both revered him and owed him a debt of gratitude that could never be repaid. As such, despite the simplicity of the job of carrying Mira, Garuda was proud to do it.

"I'll leave this to you." Mira gazed at her reliable friend for a moment. Satisfied, she returned to the wagon, sat in front of the

window, and watched the flowing river and endless grassland.

When Garuda saw that Mira had settled in, the wagon slowly rose upward. The gentle sound of the wind was refreshing, and it was wonderful to see the scenery lower beneath her, even though she'd seen that many times before.

What was a seemingly ordinary Japanese-style room at a glance soared through the sky, the magnificent view providing luxury of yet another type.

Chapter 13

ENJOYING A MEAL WHILE GAZING upon the world from on high was a luxury only a flying wagon could provide. But having a picnic surrounded by nature beneath the clear blue sky would be fun as well.

Able to choose whichever option she pleased, Mira opted for the latter and partook of an elegant lunch by a large lake in the middle of a beautiful grassland.

“How nice to have peace and quiet.”

Clouds drifted in the distance, and the sun burned bright in the sky. Grass stretched all around, interrupted only by the clear blue lake. In this picturesque setting, she devoured a hot and steamy breaded katsudon meal smothered in sauce.

Not far away, Garuda had skillfully caught a lake fish with its beak. It was now chowing down and relaxing. Still, it remained wary, shooting glances at its surroundings. And of course, the beast never forgot to direct a cool breeze toward its master.

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“Well, I think it’s high time.”

After a peaceful lunch, Mira stood and looked around. There was no sign of human life in this grassland far from civilization, making it the perfect place to do something flashy without being noticed.

What did she intend to do in such a location? She wanted to follow through on her idea yesterday and greet all the summons she hadn’t yet summoned in this world.

“First off…”

Which should she summon first? After a moment’s thought, she decided with surprising ease. A spirit who’d been quite helpful lately—not just in the Ancient Underground City but as recently as last night.

[Evocation: Undine]

As Mira cast the spell, a magic circle like rippling water appeared, and a beautiful woman emerged. She had timid-looking eyes and hair as blue as the deep sea, and she wore rather revealing white garments. A fish-shaped pendant hung from her neck.

This was the water spirit Undine.

The spirit looked down sadly, so Mira spoke softly, searchingly: “Long time no see, dear Undine.”

Undine’s timidity probably worsened the surprise of being summoned after so long—or so Mira thought. The spirit quickly pulled her into a bear hug, however. Mira remained calm. She’d raised the spirit from birth, after all; Undine was like a daughter to her.

“Oh, yes, of course. I’m sorry. I’m happy to see you again too.” She patted Undine’s back, as if soothing a child, before finally letting go.

Undine looked as happy as could be. She still couldn’t talk, but Mira intuitively knew what she wanted to say. Mira’s bond with Undine allowed a single look into her eyes to say all she needed to hear.

Undine couldn’t speak—not because she lacked intelligence but because she was still inexperienced in human communication methods. Learning those would take her decades.

However, the bottom line was that spirits and humans communicated in different ways. And spirits could communicate with each other from a young age. With a spirit like Wasranvel—who *could* speak human language—as an intermediary, Mira could converse with Undine.

However, summoning such an intermediary spirit wasn’t necessary. Mira had a much simpler way to communicate, and it wasn’t anything as vague as emotional intelligence.

“She says, ‘Daddy is Mommy now. Very surprising. But you’re cute. And warm. I wanna hug you again. Can I? Please?’”

The Spirit King himself would be Undine’s voice. Via their bond, he could easily hear the voice of *any* spirit Mira had

contracted; as a result, he could also be their interpreter.

"I...I see. How very...loving."

Undine was timid, but affectionate, and the Spirit King repeated her words exactly as she'd said them. As a king, his voice retained a firm dignity, despite how casual he'd been lately. Such a deep, powerful voice naturally made one want to kneel—but now it was repeating such childish words. Mira chuckled reluctantly at the incongruence, deciding not to declare that she'd rather hear Martel translate for Undine.

At any rate, Undine's feelings were clear. Mira hugged her gently and thanked her for all her help with the showers and baths.

"'I'm happy I can help you, Mommy. I'll do my best, so keep on relying on me,'" the Spirit King interpreted once more. *"You are truly loved, Miss Mira. I knew I had the right idea about you."*

Martel butted in. *"Yeah! I knew it the moment I saw her. Everyone loves you, and you love them in turn!"*

The pair recounted other spirits' words about Mira, along with their hopes that the relationship between mankind and spirits could continue to grow.

"Um...well, I'm honored." Mira left her reply at that, shut off the conversation in her brain for a bit, and focused on Undine again. "Thank you for all your help to come," she said gently, patting the spirit on the head. Undine beamed, continuing to hug her.

After dismissing Undine, Mira regretted putting this off for so long. "I knew this was a good idea."

She began greeting each of her contracted summons individually. She summoned the serpent Umgarna; the ever-growing spirit beast Jingulara, an icy haze tiger; and more. Many had changed in the past thirty years. Others hadn't. But all were overjoyed to see her again after so long.

"Everyone's being too kind. I'm truly blessed."

None of her friends were angry with her due to the three decades of neglect; instead, they rejoiced over their reunion. A tear came to Mira's eye, her heart warmed by the summons' kindness as she felt the real bonds between them.

***

“Mother, I see a big city!” Eizenfald squealed from inside the wagon. Having shape-shifted into a young man, he gleefully peered out the window at the city they were approaching.

“Ooh! You certainly do. Seems we’re almost there.”

On the way to Haxthausen, Mira had decided to take a small detour to a city called Ligret. It was in a location near Grimdart territory where a number of trade routes intersected. As such, it prospered as a hub of commerce in the northern half of the continent.

As for why Mira chose to detour there and why a humanoid Eizenfald was present, that could be explained by what had happened after she finished greeting her summons.

Mira and her summoned companions alike had all rejoiced over their mass reunion. Then Eizenfald brought up one of her promises: that she’d do him any favor he asked. He’d wondered if he could redeem that promise now.

Unfortunately, Mira was in a hurry to find Fuzzy Dice and ask him where that orphanage was. But how could she say no to Eizenfald’s puppy dog...er, puppy dragon eyes?

As a result of his request, Mira detoured to the closest big city to grant his wish: a day of walking around town with his mother.

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After they landed in Ligret, Mira left her wagon in a rented parking spot and went sightseeing with Eizenfald.

The shops here had gathered items from all over the continent, each unique in its own way. Just window shopping felt like touring the continent. Obviously, many people congregated in large cities; merchants and adventurers were joined by tourists stopping through en route to Grimdart. The busy

downtown even had street performers filling the place with laughter.

As they walked, Eizenfald saw a performer breathing fire. “I can do that too!” he shouted, trying to shoot off his dragon breath.

The duo jumped at a limited-time sale on sweets at a nearby shop, coming out with a huge haul. At a souvenir store, Mira bought a *devious* juice to give Solomon upon her return. She was having just as much fun as her dear son.

Time flew when you were having fun, and today was no exception. The clock ticked past five in the blink of an eye, and the sun began to set. As smaller shops prepared to close, the pair finally started to wind down after the entertaining day.

Suddenly, Eizenfald declared, “Mother, I smell something… nostalgic!” Then he ran off happily.

“Eizenfald, please! Running’s dangerous!” It was more dangerous for passersby than for Eizenfald himself, of course.

Worried, Mira pursued the dragon as he darted off. He rushed from downtown Ligret to the restaurant district, then into a back alley. How far was he planning to go? Mira followed him into the alley and stopped in her tracks. The alley was full of food stalls; it was just as crowded as the main street.

“Ugh…where’d that boy go?”

Finding Eizenfald in this commotion would be impossible, so Mira used the link of their contract to search for him. Then she heard a woman scream directly above her—from the same direction she sensed Eizenfald in.

“Huh?” the voice cried. “Wha—?! Who are you?! What the —?!”

“What’s going on?” Mira muttered to herself. The screeching sounded like it came from the roof of the restaurant next to her. What in the world was happening there?

Anxious, Mira hopped up to the rooftop with ease. When she looked, Eizenfald was indeed there—hugging a woman, for some odd reason.

“It’s been so long,” he exclaimed, delighted. “I’m overjoyed to see you again!”

“What’s going on? Who *are* you?!” The woman was utterly confused and flustered.

The little girl next to her was gobsmacked too. “Huh? Bwah? Wha—?”

The woman’s voice was familiar, Mira realized—and she was someone the summoner would expect Eizenfald to be this fond of. She approached the trio and greeted them. “Aha! It really is you, Kagura!”

Eizenfald had indeed run all this way to hug Mira’s fellow Wise Man.

“Huh? Gr-Gramps? Why’re you here?!” After a short look of genuine surprise at the unexpected reunion, Kagura began pleading for aid: “Also, *help*!”

“Come now, Eizenfald, that’s enough. Let her go.” He’d offered Kagura adequate affection for the occasion.

“All right!” Upon Mira’s order, Eizenfald obediently released Kagura. Still, he couldn’t contain his joy. He fixed her with a broad, innocent smile.

As for Kagura, she obviously had questions. “Who is this? One of your friends? What’s the deal?” Mira and a handsome young man were an unusual combination, to be sure.

“This is Eizenfald. He’s got magic that lets him shapeshift into human form now.”

Following Mira’s introduction, Eizenfald greeted the pair more formally, grinning. “It’s been years, Miss Kagura! And it’s nice to meet you, miss.”

“Huh? Oh, wow! It’s really Eizen… How in the world did you create a spell like that?”

Kagura’s first impression had been of a pretty, but random, boy coming up and accosting her out of nowhere. Now that she knew he was an old friend, her impression of him softened greatly. He’d gone from a suspicious stranger to an object of curiosity. As a Wise Man of the Linked Silver Towers, she was naturally interested in magic she’d never seen.

Observing Eizenfald carefully, she muttered, “Yeah, I don’t have a clue,” then looked expectantly at Mira.

Mira replied that she didn’t understand the spell either. The pair promised to research it together once things settled down.

Kagura’s companion also introduced herself. “My name’s Tyriel. Pleased to meet you.”

She seemed relieved that this stranger was Mira’s friend; calm had replaced her earlier confusion. She now came off as much more composed than Kagura.

“So what brings you here?” Mira asked. “Something related to Chimera? Or demons?”

Kagura was supposed to be working with Wallenstein to investigate the sealed oni coffins and affairs related to Chimera Clausen and demon activity. If she was up on some random restaurant’s rooftop, surely there was a reason.

“Um…we were staking out that joint there.” Kagura pointed at the restaurant across the alley.

This wasn’t connected to either Chimera or demons, she revealed. It turned out that dozens of children had gone missing from this area lately. Kagura had visited this place on her usual Chimera-and-demon business several times, and during one visit, she’d caught wind of that problem.

“I heard a lot of things. It sounds like four children disappeared in this city alone. I can’t ignore that,” she declared matter-of-factly. She was investigating the apparent abductions.

“I see. And the fact that you chose this spot to stake out must mean you came across a relevant clue?”

“Yep, that’s right,” Kagura replied confidently.

She told Mira about the lead she was pursuing. Apparently, liberal use of the Isuzu Alliance’s information network had yielded information on a suspicious group that had appeared in town recently. Despite that group’s emergence, though, Ligret was a key commerce city. It was very possibly already a hotbed of crime that could lead to such abductions, unconnected to other circumstances in the area. On top of that, a particular group being suspicious didn’t necessarily mean they were involved in the disappearances.

Still, Kagura seemed convinced that this group was the cause. “Do you know about Fuzzy Dice, Gramps?”

“Well…yes,” Mira nodded. “What about him?” What did the famous thief have to do with missing children?

The fact that Mira was familiar with Fuzzy Dice made things easier for Kagura to explain. “The thing is…”

She shared the revelations from Isuzu’s investigation. According to her, this had all begun a year earlier when the Creek Company—a large company in this city—had their shady dealings exposed by Fuzzy Dice.

Their evildoing revealed, the Creek Company was forced to dissolve. Executives were arrested, and criminals were punished. But investigation had uncovered that some employees escaped the eyes of the law. Those remnants seemed to be involved with the disappearances.

“Now we’re here watching a guy we heard is linked to them.”

Peering through her binoculars, Kagura boasted about the Isuzu Alliance’s investigative abilities. Why, surveilling just one man seemed like almost a waste of their prowess—except for one thing.

“Huh?” Kagura shrieked. “He’s gone!”

Tyriel likewise panicked. “He is!”

Apparently, during their conversation, the target had finished his meal and left.

“Ugh! Good going, Gramps!” Kagura groaned, annoyed.

She summoned Tweetsuke, Growlta, and Kushellge, assigning them to search for their target. But where had he gone, and how? Had he entered another building?

In the end, they were too clueless to find him again.

Chapter 14

“UGH...”

Losing her mark depressed Kagura. Without the Isuzu Alliance’s power behind her, her investigative abilities were lacking at best.

Tyriel kept looking through the binoculars, revolving like a lighthouse light, but it wouldn’t be easy to find the man again that way.

“Oh, good grief. There, there.” Smiling in exasperation, Mira patted her sad friend’s back. “Very well. I’ll just have to help you.”

Supposedly, the man Kagura was looking for was a former employee of a company defeated by Fuzzy Dice. Thus, there was a chance that he’d seen the thief in the flesh. If all went well, Mira might even be able to interrogate him about Fuzzy Dice’s strengths and abilities. Since it was possible she might have to confront Fuzzy Dice eventually, such information would be extremely welcome.

“Fantastic! Thanks, Gramps!” Kagura’s depression turned into joy in no time flat. Hope and expectation were clear in her eyes.

“Don’t mention it. Knowing the situation, I can hardly abandon you.”

Fuzzy Dice was one thing, but Mira was worried about the missing children too. Thus, she proudly and promptly summoned Woofson and First Pupil Cat Sith. Despite their issues, they were reliable specialists in searches and investigations.

On top of that, even discounting her summoning magic, Mira’s investigative abilities equaled Kagura’s.

“We’ll get this case good and solved in meow time!” Mira’s First Pupil wore a well-fitted suit and coat; he was perfectly dressed for a stakeout. He stood proudly, showing off his little black notebook.

“Woof! No matter how intricate the mystery, leave it to me to unravel.” Woofson, the Cu Sith, appeared in classic detective clothes. He made a dashing entrance, holding a pipe like Holmes himself—which, incidentally, was empty.

As the investigative dynamic duo appeared, a sudden gust of wind blew.

“Aww! First Pupil, it’s *you*!”

That gust was Kagura, charging at an unthinkable speed. She snatched up First Pupil in her arms.

It happened so fast that he couldn’t even comprehend what had happened. “Mreow?!”

To Kagura, who loved cats more than anyone else in the world, the cat fairy was top-class cute.

“Gosh, you never change,” Mira chuckled at Kagura’s incorrigibility. Her love for kitties hadn’t abated one bit.

Strangled by Kagura’s vice grip, First Pupil tapped out. “Uncle… You win…” However, once Kagura got like this, she was impossible to stop.

Well aware of that fact, Mira ignored the others, summoning additional search personnel. The seven Valkyrie Sisters, Wise Popot, the Korpokkur sisters, Undine, Sylphid, and finally Wasranvel appeared one after another.

Once everyone had gathered, Kagura squealed in delight. “Wooow! It’s been so long, everyone!” Over a decade had passed from her perspective, and over thirty years from theirs.

“A pleasure to see you again, Lady Kagura.” Alfina spoke for everyone, happy to reunite with her.

Kagura was stunned by how the younger Korpokkur sister, Etenoa, had changed. And, while this was the Wise Man’s first meeting with Wasranvel, she’d heard much about him from Scorpion.

“If she asks you for anything weird, you can always tell her no,” Kagura informed Wasranvel. His concealment abilities were ripe for abuse, especially when it came to things like peeping.

“I’d never do such a thing!” Mira glared at Kagura, offended.

After they'd enjoyed their reunion, Mira changed the subject. "Well, uh, anyway…can you tell us everything you found out during your investigation?"

She wanted Isuzu's info on the missing children.

"Will do." Kagura shifted from friendliness and joy to a serious mood. Still squeezing First Pupil in her arms, she disclosed tons of findings.

Using that information, Mira narrowed down their search area and specifics about their target. It was now time to search in earnest.

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"Alfina and Elezina, you head south. And…"

Ligret was a large city; a blind, brute-force search wouldn't be efficient. Thus, Mira split the city into districts, assigning her friends to each. She sent the Valkyrie Sisters, Korpokkurs, Wasranvel, Undine, and Sylphid into different areas of the city. Wise Popot would get an owl's-eye view of Ligret from above.

"Woofson, can you search downtown? And First Pupil—"

Just as Mira was in the middle of sending her two "professionals" to the busiest parts of town, Kagura took matters into her own hands: "—Will search the area nearby with me!"

Mira tried to continue. "First Pupil…you'll focus on searching the shopping district's back alleys—"

"My investigation's now underway!" Kagura insisted. "Let's go, little buddy. Later, Gramps!" She leapt from the roof without pause and began walking off.

Mira knew that nobody could stop Kagura when she had a cat in her arms. Still, she sighed at the abduction. At least Cat Sith could compensate for Kagura's poor investigative abilities. The real problem was that Kagura might be so overly affectionate that she got in the way of Cat Sith's work.

While Mira worried, Tyriel nervously volunteered, "Um… shall *I* take the back alleys, then?"

“No, no. I will. It’s more important for you to watch over those two and make sure Kagura doesn’t disturb my pupil’s work.” Kagura was likelier to notice her own problematic behavior if Tyriel was there to point it out. Or so Mira hoped.

“Yes, ma’am!” Tyriel replied energetically, then chased after Kagura.

Now Mira had been pigeonholed into investigating the back alleys herself. She looked to Eizenfald. “Well…I suppose we’ll start. Sorry, son. I promised to spend the day with you…” Despite her commitment to the poor dragon she was raising, she couldn’t overlook danger to children.

“It’s okay. I’m worried about those missing kids too. Let’s save them together, Mother!” Eizenfald replied sincerely. He’d clearly grown up empathetic enough to care more about the children’s safety than his own needs.

Misty-eyed at the knowledge that she’d raised a good son, the young mother stiffened and turned to him. “Of course. Let’s go rescue them, Eizenfald!”

“Yes, Mother!”

The duo departed to investigate the shopping district’s back alleys.

***

An hour had passed since the start of the investigation.

Mira still hadn’t found anyone matching the description Kagura provided. “It doesn’t seem clues will come easily after all.”

“No…” Even Eizenfald, who’d been eager to help before, was depressed now.

The former Creek Company employees Kagura had mentioned were a very select group. Mira and Eizenfald had sought out some people who’d once been employed there and asked them a few questions, but those people were normal, hardworking members of society.

Where were the evildoers connected with the company? Would it be worth just shouting the question aloud and seeing if

they answered? Mira entertained that delusion for a few moments.

Then Etenoa contacted her. *"Chief, Chief, get over here!"* she cried, both panicked and excited. *"We found a guy who's really sus!"*

"Someone suspicious?! Understood. I'll be right there!"

What made him suspicious? And where had Etenoa learned "sus" from? What had caused that poor girl to turn out so strange to begin with? With those rather invasive questions in mind, Mira headed to the scene.

En route, she informed Kagura of the situation via First Pupil. Kagura and Cat Sith replied that they'd meet Mira soon.

***

A few minutes after Etenoa's message, Mira reached a park just outside a residential area. It was well maintained, with perfectly manicured trees lining the paths. It would surely make a refreshing setting for a lunch. It was late now, however.

One particular tree in the park looked quite different from the others. When they approached, it became clear why: A man was *buried* in the tree. Some might scream if they came across such a sight at night, but Mira approached without hesitation.

Uneko ran over with a proud look on her face, welcoming Mira and Eizenfald. "We captured someone suspicious, Madam Chief."

"Look! Uneko found that guy, like, easy as pie!" Etenoa exclaimed, adding that his capture was all thanks to her sister.

The Korpokkur sisters explained the details. While investigating the district Mira had assigned them, they'd found this park. They'd split up and begun questioning the trees. When they did, Uneko was suddenly attacked. However, the older of the reliable sisters wouldn't be defeated. She fought back and beat the assailant, leading to his current state.

The man in the tree was indeed the one who'd attacked her. She'd buried him in the tree using the Korpokkur ability Wooden

Prison.

“That’s incredible, Uneko!” Eizenfald exclaimed. His envy was clear—no doubt because she’d saved the day instead of him.

“Indeed,” Mira added. “Well done!” It was unclear whether this man was the one they were after, but he was clearly suspicious enough to warrant investigation.

Uneko smiled broadly at Mira’s praise, despite the traumatic events earlier.

While the Korpokkur sisters continued telling them about that encounter, Kagura joined them. That made things easier. She quickly used her confession-extraction spell to get the man to speak, which rapidly confirmed that he was involved in the children’s disappearances.

That didn’t resolve the problem, though. This man was just a procurer; he’d merely kidnapped children who fit requests he was given. In other words, they’d only apprehended an underling.

Still, one thing was clear now—these disappearances were true abductions. The requests the man had received matched the missing children’s descriptions perfectly.

And he even targeted Uneko. Who in the world is making these requests?

Proud of her most recent success, Uneko broke into a smile whenever Mira made eye contact. While the summoner adored the Korpokkur’s cuteness, she realized that whoever was using this procurer was a serious pervert.

The interrogation continued. Done asking about the man himself, Kagura questioned him about the higher-ups overseeing procurement staff like him. “Whoever’s giving you these orders, where are they?”

The man replied readily to her questions. First, she and Mira were correct that former Creek Company employees had masterminded this. Their company had trafficked people before; this man had helped quite a few times. To him, the similarities in how his new higher-ups conducted their dirty work had stuck out like a sore thumb. Someone closely involved in the Creek

Company's former wrongdoing was involved in this, if nothing else.

As a mere underling, however, the man hadn't seen any of the higher-ups' faces. On top of that, he knew nothing about the places where they'd sold the missing children. With no information on the people pulling the strings, nor any way to figure out their location, Kagura's interrogation ended inconclusively.

Still, she and Mira came away with a promising lead: the location and procedures for handing over kidnapped children.

Mira suggested an easy solution. "Okay, it's decided. Let's storm the place and arrest them all. If my dark knights surround it, they'll have no way to escape. Problem solved!"

"You can leave the dirty work to me!" Eizenfald added eagerly. The two were ready for a rampage.

Kagura put the brakes on their plan, however. "No *way*. These are the kind of villains who keep their own lackeys in the dark. How do we know the people at the handoff point will be the real masterminds?"

Even if they charged in and apprehended people, they might not capture their ultimate targets. What if the receivers were hired middlemen as well?

"Couldn't we just interrogate them too? If we repeat the process, we're sure to reach our marks eventually."

The next target might not be the *leader*, but they'd definitely be linked to the next level up. Follow that chain, Mira argued, and it'd lead them to the top.

"We would if things were that easy," Kagura replied, then related her experiences with the Isuzu Alliance.

According to Kagura, the bosses of these kinds of organizations were extremely cautious. They used numerous precautions to avoid being found. If she and Mira moved up the organization one level at a time, they'd surely be discovered along the way. If so, that would be it. Their targets would hide, severing the information chain. That had happened several times during Isuzu's investigation of Chimera Clausen, after all.

"I see... That would really be troublesome," Mira admitted.

It seemed like a lizard detaching its own tail. Still, since they now had these clues, she felt it was time to close in on the masterminds.

“At any rate,” Kagura grinned, “I have the perfect plan.”

Chapter 15

AS A KEY CENTER OF TRADE, Ligret had numerous ware houses. One cluster of those storage buildings was off in an area outside the city center.

A man pulling a cart approached a warehouse. The sun had set, and the moon and stars shone in the sky. Moonlight illuminated the man's face; it was the assailant who'd attacked Uneko and suffered the consequences.

"According to my intel, the kids who went missing in Ligret were all adolescent girls who look similar to you, Gramps," Kagura had said as she boastfully revealed her perfect plan.

That plan was simple. If they kept climbing the organization's chain of command upward, their enemies would get away before long. They needed to let the kidnappers guide them right to the higher-ups. So, in a nutshell, Mira was now to be a bait "victim" delivered directly to the kidnappers' den of evil.

She could protect herself if necessary, and depending where they sent her, she might find the other victims. That could even give her the opportunity to bring down the organization then and there. They could also potentially track down other victims if Kagura interrogated the leaders afterward.

It was truly a perfect plan.

"Perfect," my foot! It ignores my *needs!*

Mira lay in a long, narrow crate among the boxes loaded on the cart. Her arms and legs were bound, and she wore a simple dress in a style common to little girls. She forced herself to endure it.

To avoid being discovered, Mira would have to pretend to be asleep the whole time. Her butt and back gradually started to hurt, however, forcing her to shift in the box. The shaking carriage jostled the aching areas, leading her to gripe endlessly.

At least put a cushion in here with me or something. And why not just put me in the box right before the handoff?

Still, there was a reason she'd accepted this. Upon hearing the plan, she'd initially refused, saying it sounded too difficult. She'd proposed a wide-scale search using her summoning magic to the fullest.

Kagura, however, countered that that likely wouldn't succeed. Furthermore, a large-scale search would surely alert the enemy.

Then Tyriel volunteered as the bait. She wanted to save the children as soon as possible, so she preferred to try the method likeliest to succeed.

Based on her height and appearance, Tyriel could potentially have done the job well enough. Of course, the others couldn't bear to let her do such a thing, so Mira stepped up to the plate.

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Apart from Mira's aches and pains, the strategy progressed smoothly. After approaching the warehouse without issues, the man knocked rhythmically—twice, then once, then thrice.

This man was now working for them as a double agent. After they'd decided on their plan, and Kagura ended her interrogation spell, she'd presented him with two simple options.

The first involved them handing him over to the police after he helped them eliminate the human-trafficking ring; however, in return for his assistance, they'd recommend a reduced sentence. The second option was for them to burn him to a crisp where he stood. Kagura even gave him a demonstration, reducing his jacket to ash with a single talisman.

"I won't hold back next time," she'd warned.

Cooperation was effectively the man's only choice. A talisman was now affixed to his stomach in case he betrayed them, so he'd begun a life-risking performance.

Someone's eyes peeked through the tiny window in the warehouse door. Showing them the box he'd brought, the man

began negotiating. “Hey, I found a real beauty. How’s five mil sound?”

The eyes narrowed. “Hmph. You have no shame, asking that price right away. Where’d you get the nerve? Well, c’mon. Let’s have a look.”

The man had seemingly demanded a far higher payment than usual, but that proved to pique the doorman’s interest. The door opened, and he came out.

“Now, let’s see…” The doorman walked to Mira’s box, opened the lid, and looked inside.

Okay. Fake sleep, fake sleep…

Mira’s butt and back still hurt, but she stayed perfectly still, as if drugged. The doorman began looking her up and down.

This bastard staring at me has such a shudder-inducing leer…

Her skin crawled as she felt his breath on her neck, cheeks, thighs, and feet. She could practically feel him drooling over her, but she endured it for the children’s sake. And then…

“You named a fair price. I get it,” the doorman said, sounding lascivious yet satisfied. He finally looked at Mira’s face, then flipped her dress up.

Bastard! You’re nothing but trash!

Mira heard the doorman lick his lips at the sight of her bare body. “Yeah, real nice,” he whispered to himself.

What utter humiliation. Mira was enraged further by the knowledge that the same thing had happened to the children before her. She made a mental note to dish out extra punishment to the doorman.

“Good stuff. She’s the best you’ve brought so far. Hell, I want her for myself.” After seeing every bit of Mira’s beautiful figure, the doorman grinned happily. “All right, five mil. Take the box to number three.”

He wheeled the cart through the door.

***

Seems the first stage of the plan went well enough.

Once her box was hauled into the warehouse, Mira continued to feign sleep. She listened to the sounds around her, trying to discern what the doorman was doing. He was seemingly transferring the boxes from the cart to someplace else. Apparently a carriage, based on the neighing horses she heard.

She was being taken to another location.

A half hour or so later, the carriage finally started moving. It was a simple cargo carrier, traveling by night. Its wheels reverberated with every hoofbeat, shaking Mira's poor back and butt.

"Treat the passenger a little better, would you? Good grief." Feigning sleep was already getting difficult, and this didn't help at all. "I'll remember this," she muttered angrily.

After driving for a while, the carriage containing Mira's crate stopped in a spot where lots more carriages were parked. This was a district crowded with pubs, busiest at night, so nobody paid any attention to a random carriage parking here at this time.

Disembarking, the doorman moved to the driver's seat and opened the box Mira was in, apparently reluctant to let her go just yet.

Now what's going on? Have we already reached their hideout?

Mira couldn't tell what was happening around her, save for the fact that it was raucous. Could she start fighting now, or did she have to wait? Amid the drunken voices, she struggled to understand the situation. Finally, she decided to wait and see, feigning sleep all the while.

"Oh, man. Too good," the doorman said.

Wha...?! You damn pervert!

Assuming she was asleep, and exploiting that fact, he groped Mira's boobs and butt.

"Yeah, that's nice..." the doorman moaned ecstatically, touching her to his heart's content.

Mira withstood the discomfort. If she punched his lights out now, it'd jeopardize the whole mission.

After a while, the doorman muttered, "Whoops. Better hurry."

He left the carriage with a satisfied expression. Where was he going? Mira sent Woofson after him just in case.

I'll kill him.

Since her arrival, he'd only added to his list of crimes. Now she'd rendered judgment. No leniency—as soon as this was all over, he was dead.

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Two minutes later, a man got into the driver's seat—a different one from the doorman. The doorman was going back to the first warehouse, Woofson explained. In other words, this would be a second handoff.

That was a cautious step, indeed. Mira was relieved that she'd reined herself in before.

The carriage moved again. Its fake captive writhed in pain, her rage only growing at the road's continued violence against her delicate form.

A while later, the carriage stopped in front of a mansion on the city's outskirts. The driver exchanged words with the gatekeeper, and the gate opened. The carriage drove onto the property, circled the building, and stopped behind it.

This time, the wooden box containing Mira was unloaded and hauled off somewhere. When it opened, someone else touched her. Mira braced herself, recalling what'd happened earlier, but this man seemed gentler. He picked her up and laid her on something soft.

Hmm? Is this finally it?

As the aching in her butt and back lessened, she used Biometric Scan to search her surroundings. *A weak signal...* There were other people there, but not adults, judging by the strength of Biometric Scan's response.

After ensuring that the man who'd brought her here was far enough away, Mira opened her eyes a sliver. It was too dark to see anything.

Is this…a basement?

Using Ethereal Arts: Illumination for light, she checked her surroundings again. The walls and ceiling were rough stone. This seemed like an underground storehouse, but she was the only thing being stored here, besides a few simple beds. Spotting objects on them, the small signal she felt before became clear.

Could those be…?!

There were four children on the beds, but they didn't move, as if they were dead. The fact that Mira had sensed them with Biometric Scan meant they were all alive, though.

Hrmm… I think they're fine. Under the circumstances, anyway.

Mira untied the ropes around her hands and feet, then checked the children one by one to ensure their safety. They were tied up, but they were just sleeping. The man who'd attacked the Korpokkur had mentioned this: The kidnapped children were transported while they slept under the effects of a special drug.

And four children are missing from Ligret, right?

Seeing the girls lying in the beds, she remembered Kagura's description of those four missing children. She'd mentioned that they were adolescent girls resembling Mira. Clearly, these were the very same girls.

"I'll get you out of here in no time, I promise," Mira told the sleeping children gently. Untying their hands and feet, she used Biometric Scan once more to search a larger area around her.

There were dozens of people, perhaps even a hundred, one floor above.

That was a lot. Between that and the fact that the four children were being kept here, Mira hypothesized that this was one of the organization's key hideouts.

All that was left to do now was the dirty work. Once Mira had a grasp of the situation, she reported to Kagura through First Pupil.

First Pupil passed on Kagura's reply: *"'Got it. Keep it up, Gramps. We'll be a little longer,' she says!"*

"Understood," Mira replied simply, and got right to work.

First, she summoned Guardian Ash to guard the children. That would prevent the enemy from taking the girls hostage or otherwise harming them.

"Now, are you ready?" Mira asked her summons.

Everyone replied in turn.

"Yes, Mother!"

"The Sisters Seven are prepared to fight at any moment."

"Good and ready!"

"Ready anytime."

"Popot's ready to fight!"

"I'm prepared as well."

"Undine and Sylphid say they're also ready and raring to fight," the Spirit King reported.

Everyone had been following her on her journey as bait, and now they surrounded the building above. Through their reports, she got a sense of its exterior. The mansion, built on a large estate, covered about four hundred square meters. It had three floors, and most of its occupants were on the first and second.

"Such reliable friends," Mira realized anew. Then she ordered, *"Chaaarge!"*

The moment she did so, the floor above filled with shouts and crashes.

Chapter 16

THE SUMMONS WAITING AROUND the mansion surged in all at once. Together, they had enough military might to fell a small country.

Mira destroyed the basement door's lock and came upstairs to find not a battle but a rout of fleeing soldiers.

There was a large lobby and a grand staircase on the mansion's very stereotypical first floor. Wise Popot, Undine, Eizenfald, and Wasranvel were there too.

Some human traffickers were among them; ten of the evildoers lay on the floor. Others had tried to fight back but been mercilessly trampled. Yet others had tried to escape, jumping out doors and windows. Their screams were audible soon after.

The Korpokkur sisters kept watch outside, ready to catch any escapees. Uneko and Etenoa's flora cages were nigh impossible to escape.

"Overrun with ease. Figures." Just stopping by town, she'd wound up using overwhelming force against a group of villains. She knew it was excessive, but her minions were eager to fight.

Mira gazed up at the criminals running frantically down the stairs before her friends took them down mercilessly. She didn't even have the opportunity to get in a punch or two.

Eizenfald raced over to her. "Mother!" he cried, dragging two men behind him, as if excited to show off his accomplishment. It was an incongruous sight, given his innocent, pretty-boy smile.

"Well done, son. I'm surprised you controlled yourself so well." At first, Mira felt a little uneasy about the men's motionless bodies, but her worries weren't borne out.

"Yep! I avoided finishing them off, just like you said!" Eizenfald replied proudly, then let the men go. Both fell to the ground, but they were clearly alive.

"Yes, yes. Well done. I'm proud of you."

When Mira praised him, Eizenfald beamed with joy. “Now let’s go, Mother,” he added. He apparently planned to tag along with her, hoping to show his stuff right in front of her. His excitement was evident at a glance.

“Fine, fine. Let’s go.” Practically pushed upstairs by her son, Mira climbed to the second floor.

On the way, Eizenfald promptly downed any criminals who tried to run down past them. Each time that happened, he whipped around, hoping for more praise. Mira’s compliments made him happier and happier.

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When they reached the second floor, the Valkyries were running the place.

Alfina rushed over immediately upon Mira’s arrival, swift as the wind. “Master, there seems to be a room for their leader at the far end of the third floor,” she reported.

Coincidentally, she was dragging a man behind her, just as Eizenfald had. Her captive wore suspiciously fancy clothes, but despite his apparently high status, he looked terrified.

“Now, tell us more about your leader. Fess up, or else…” Alfina pointed her sword at his neck. It seemed she’d begun interrogating him after a quick defeat.

“U-u-umm… O-oh, I know! He carries a spear. He handles it like nobody else… And this one special spear he uses has a tip that pops out!” The man confessed quickly despite his fear. It seemed he wasn’t terribly loyal.

“Master, I’m told that he uses a spear,” Alfina reported firmly.

“Yep, got it. Well done, Alfina. I’ll leave this floor in your capable hands.” Mira had heard the man just fine. She voiced her approval, then walked toward the staircase to the third floor.

“I won’t disappoint you, Master!” Alfina’s energetic voice echoed.

After that, there was a dull thud. Perhaps the Valkyrie saw no value in keeping the man conscious after the interrogation; she'd knocked him right out.

Mira continued to the third floor, heading toward the door at the end of the hallway. Along the way, she encountered a few men who seemed to be guards, but Eizenfald made quick work of them.

When they arrived and opened the door, a fully armored man stood before them. In his hand was a very fancy-looking spear. It seemed certain he was the ringleader.

"Hm? Here I thought bounty hunters had found us… You're one of the basement girls, aren't you? And this guy with you… Some knight come to save his princess, huh?" Shooting glances at both Mira and Eizenfald, the ringleader added, "Man. We sure dragged in trouble this time."

One person present completely failed to read the room. "Knight? Well, no," replied Eizenfald. "I'm her son."

"Huh…? The hell does that mean?" The ringleader no doubt thought that the knight and his comrades had come to save an abducted girl, so to him, Eizenfald's words came entirely out of left field.

The thought of explaining annoyed Mira, and she saw no need to do so. Instead, she chuckled and stepped forward. "Don't bother questioning it. It has nothing to do with you."

The ringleader of a child-trafficking ring was in front of her, and she was *ready*.

As Mira calmly approached him, he noticed the bangle on her arm. "Okay…I get it. Not quite what I expected. So this was a setup!" The bracelet was just like the User's Bangles worn by veteran adventurers. That told him what was going on; he realized Mira's so-called abduction had all been planned on her part. "Bold of you two to come alone, though. You must be confident about your strength—but don't underestimate me."

He thought veteran adventurers had come in and destroyed almost his entire organization. Yet he sounded too composed as he wielded his spear, and his determination was quite unlike that of the others they'd faced so far.

Merely readying his weapon, he emanated stubbornness and intimidation. His stable stance showed that he wasn't the average powerful foe, and his face held confidence cultivated by experience and hard work.

Despite wielding a spear, he overflowed with mana. Mira gathered that he was a dark knight who favored the spear. The fact that he had such complete control over an impressive amount of mana indicated strength rivaling the strongest A-rank adventurers.

"Oh ho. Finally, someone worthy." Mira prepared for a satisfying experiment—a fiercer battle than she'd expected. Her hopes were dashed, however.

"Mother! Mother! Let me fight him!" interjected Eizenfald, who'd trained hard so that he could battle even in human form. "I'd love for you to see the results of my training!" he pleaded, eyes practically sparkling.

Regardless of the situation, he never really grasped the gravity of things. Mira chuckled.

"Nraaagh!" With a room-shaking roar, the ringleader thrust his spear fiercely.

He'd aimed for Eizenfald, seeing the moment as an opening for a surprise assault. His attack was lightning fast, closing the distance in the blink of an eye. Even an A-rank monster of great speed couldn't have escaped it.

"Don't interrupt, please!" Eizenfald insisted. Although focused on persuading Mira, he batted the spear tip away with ease the moment it was about to reach him.

A scene almost too gruesome to describe immediately unfolded. The instant Eizenfald's hand touched the spear, the ringleader's body crumpled and went flying.

Worse, the sound of his spear breaking was accompanied by the crash of armor shattering, followed shortly after by a boom as his body smashed a hole in the mansion wall. It all happened in an instant, but the ringleader found himself launched out of the mansion.

"Well...I suppose that's settled." Mira grinned wryly. Despite the ringleader's posturing when they arrived, his exit was less

than ceremonious.

“Oh *no*!” Far from showing off his training, Eizenfald had robbed himself of the opportunity to try anything further. He was mortified.

Meanwhile, Mira looked back and forth between him and the hole in the wall. She realized something important. “Maybe we ought to prioritize teaching you the art of restraint.”

If Eizenfald *had* had the chance to show off his training, that poor man might’ve ended up a blood smear on the floor. Mira shuddered at the thought.

Then, she received word from the Korpokkur sisters outside. They’d evidently captured a half-naked man in tatters. He’d tried to escape by breaking through a wall but made a poor landing, and he was in their custody.

It seemed the ringleader was alive. It was lucky for him that Eizenfald had merely brushed him aside. With a sigh of relief, the mother and her gleeful son returned downstairs.

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After a quick tour of the mansion, Mira looked at the people bound by the doorway. “Hrmm,” she murmured. “Seems things are well in hand.”

Based on what she’d heard from a few others, twenty of the nearly hundred people here were former Creek Company employees. The other eighty had worked at other companies and organizations, but apparently, every one of them had once belonged to an enterprise destroyed by Fuzzy Dice.

They were more remnants. And these people in similar circumstances, with similar human trafficking know-how, had evidently gathered and formed another trafficking ring.

While Mira learned all this, Kagura, Tyriel, and First Pupil finally arrived. Meeting up, they exchanged a few quick words.

“Oh,” said Kagura. “Looks like you’re already done here.”

“That’s our Ringmeowstress for nya!” First Pupil cheered Mira on.

“Of course,” replied Mira. “Why, I could’ve done this before breakfast.”

After that, they headed to the basement. When they opened the door, they saw several of the men felled by Guardian Ash. No doubt those men had been trying to escape elsewhere with the children. Fortunately, Guardian Ash stood in their way—just deserts for their greed.

The children were unharmed, still sleeping soundly in bed, as they had been when Mira discovered them before. Kagura and Tyriel raced over to confirm their safety.

“Yeah. I think they’re okay.”

“I see no injuries.”

A more thorough check revealed no marks on the children that would affect them in the future. The duo’s tension finally faded, and they smiled in relief.

“Okay. We’ll start with these kids.”

“Indeed.”

They needed to find out a number of things from the kidnappers—for instance, what other dealings they’d been up to—but the kids came first. They took the sleeping children out of the basement, focused for the moment on easing their parents’ worries. Between Eizenfald’s good looks and how easily he carried the four children, he resembled a real hero.

When they reached the mansion’s lobby, they noticed a commotion had developed at the entrance. Quite a few people had gathered, but they weren’t foes. When Kagura told them that all was well, security personnel came through the door. There were over thirty of them, each well armed. Kagura had brought them, given the circumstances.

“Everyone, thank you for your support today,” the security captain said, watching as Alfina and the others brought the rescued children upstairs and piled criminals by the door. These crimes seemed to offend the captain personally, and seeing the kids moved him to tears.

“Thanking us is hardly necessary. We did this for the children’s sake.” Mira puffed her chest out proudly, insisting that she’d only done what was natural.

“We did it because wanted to,” Kagura agreed.

“Please let us look after the children,” the security captain requested. “We’ll return them to their families.”

“Of course. Thank you.” The security guards knew the victims’ parents and their whereabouts, so having them take care of the kids would be fastest.

“Oh, Katie! Thank goodness! Thank goodness you’re safe!” One member of the security team broke down in tears as they took a girl from Eizenfald’s arms. It seemed that victim was their daughter.

“Yes… Thank goodness indeed,” the security captain said, crying openly as well. He was overcome with emotion, almost concerningly so.

The first security team member hugged the girl lovingly, then bowed to Mira’s entourage. “Thank you so much. If I can do anything for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Um…well, we just want the kids to be with their families as soon as possible,” Mira responded. “That’s what matters.”

“We’ll see it done, I swear!” the guard replied, clearly fired up. With that, they left with ten cohorts in tow. It seemed perfectly fine to leave the kids in their hands.

Meanwhile, the other security guards set to work rounding up the remaining criminals to be taken away. They loaded one after another into a carriage outside. Naturally, they weren’t as gentle as they were with the children; they might as well have been stuffing in sardines.

While they worked, three people lined up in front of Mira’s group.

“Allow us to thank you again for your help today,” one said, then introduced himself as the head of Ligret’s security forces. “I’m Hayden, chief of this city’s security office.”

The other two followed suit. The man was the branch chief of the Warriors’ Guild, while the woman was the Mages’ Guild chief.

“I’m Mira. A simple adventurer.” After introducing herself, Mira glanced at the two branch chiefs, then looked to Kagura. “I

see you called guild personnel as well.” That seemed worth pointing out; earlier, Kagura had only mentioned security forces.

“Yep. The security chief suggested it, and I figured it’d make things smoother, so I had the guilds join us.” According to Kagura, this incident’s impacts would extend beyond the authority of the security office alone. They’d have to seek aid from adventurers, and involving branch chiefs would speed up such adventurers’ initial responses.

“Hrmm… I see,” Mira claimed, but she didn’t understand at all.

“You look like you actually don’t,” Kagura chuckled at her friend, then explained more simply.

What consequences would this raid have? That was impossible to predict, but they knew other children had gone missing from places outside this city. How involved in those cases were the kidnappers they’d caught today? What could they explain? How much more of this case could they solve? Those questions had yet to be answered. If this situation spanned multiple nations, the local security force here would struggle to exert influence in those locations. That was where the adventurers would come in.

“Oh…now I get it.” In short, Mira realized, this job suited mercenaries better than official forces. As she finally understood, one security guard reported that they’d finished loading the criminals.

The chief confirmed that their leader had been placed in a separate cage, then said, “Let’s get moving, then.” It seemed he’d personally interrogate the leader in his office.

While the security chief, guild branch chiefs, and Kagura boarded the carriage, Mira thanked her summons for their efforts and dismissed them. She kept Eizenfald there, however. Despite all that had transpired, a promise was a promise; she would spend the whole day with him.

When the pair tried to board the carriage, the Mages’ Guild branch chief spoke up. “Oh—this is a problem. This carriage only seats six…”

The vehicle had booth-style seating. The security chief, two branch chiefs, Kagura, and Tyriel were all sitting inside already, which left only one seat open.

“Hrmm… In that case, I’ll just have to get Pegasus’s help. Eizenfald, you—”

Before Mira could tell Eizenfald to sit in the carriage, Eizenfald protested, “I wanna sit with you, Mother!”

“Ugh… Very well.”

As Mira weighed the prospect of riding Pegasus together, Kagura offered a solution. “Here’s an idea…”

Chapter 17

THE CARRIAGE WITH MIRA and the others aboard arrived safely at the security office's headquarters shortly after.

The traffickers' ringleader was taken to the interrogation room. Meanwhile, Kagura, Tyriel, the security chief, and the guild branch chiefs disembarked. Mira tried to get out as well, but she faced a serious problem.

"Come on, Eizenfald. Time to go."

"Can't we do this a little longer?"

Mira had been sitting in Eizenfald's lap—or rather, she'd been *forced* to sit there.

That was Kagura's brilliant plan, her means of fitting seven people into a six-seat carriage. All they'd needed to do was sit tiny Mira on Eizenfald. Mira complained at first, but she'd been overruled, given the need to leave at once. As for Eizenfald, he was in pampered-baby mode, ecstatic to be so close to his mother.

"Don't act spoiled, please. We still need to save more children."

"Yes, Mother... I understand."

Recognizing the importance of that, Eizenfald gave up and let Mira out of the carriage. Still, his face betrayed sadness and loneliness.

"Good grief. Don't be so sad. I'll happily spend time with you another day. Anything for my adorable son." Mira stood up, turned around, and put a hand on Eizenfald's head.

Incredibly, that was all it took to light his face up with a sunny smile again. "You mean it, Mother?! You promise?!" He seemed ready to jump for joy.

"Yes, I promise," Mira replied firmly.

Watching in frustration, Kagura tried to hustle the loving parent and child along. The others present seemed much more confused by the interaction.

“Did he say…‘Mother’…?”

“A-and she said ‘son’…”

“What in the world is their relationship?”

The three wondered aloud. They refrained from asking, though, seemingly too scared of what the truth might be.

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Without further delay, the group finally entered the interrogation room. Near the front of the room, the ringleader sat in a chair with restraints as a doctor and priest treated him.

While the pair checked the condition of his skull, working to restore his consciousness, they discussed his condition, gasping over the man’s horrific state.

“How in the world does someone end up like this?”

“The fact that he isn’t on death’s door… I don’t know whether he’s just lucky, or if he’s got a cockroach’s ability to survive.”

The security and guild chiefs admired the use of force on the ringleader. He’d been subdued in a way that made resisting capture impossible but kept him in good enough shape to restrain and interrogate. At this rate, when he woke up, they could grill him quite *effectively* without resistance. That brought terrifying smiles to their faces. This was the leader of a child trafficking ring, and their joy no doubt stemmed from a hatred of that sort of scum.

Mira herself was taken aback by the ringleader’s state. *I can’t believe he ended up like this…*

Eizenfald had just brushed his hand lightly in the man’s direction. Granted, that had smashed the ringleader through a wall, but that *was* all Eizenfald had done. In light of that, the man’s injuries were worse than she expected. His shattered armor had stabbed his skin here and there, and many bones were broken. He’d incurred heavy injuries, but most shockingly of all, none were life-threatening.

Still, I’m not sure how much I can coax Eizenfald to hold back…

Teaching the dragon restraint would certainly be a difficult trial. That was clear from the state of his most recentopponent.

Eizenfald, meanwhile, was fascinated by human tools. He stood in front of the interrogation implements, wondering excitedly how they were used. Combined with the added knowledge of his inability to restrain himself, his excitement made for a terrifying sight.

Meanwhile, Kagura continued to hold and stroke First Pupil while she worked.

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“Shall we start?”

Once preparations were finally complete, the interrogation began.

Having regained consciousness, the ringleader quickly understood the situation he was in. Seeing the security and guild chiefs, he maintained absolute silence, but it was a wasted effort.

Mira smirked at Kagura. “I suppose it’s your turn, then.”

“Oh, fine,” she responded.

She approached the ringleader confidently, and rather than having the security chief use his various interrogation implements and techniques, she simply cast confession magic to drag information out of the man.

“My word. I never imagined such magic…” The security chief’s eyes widened. In this moment, he was witnessing a technique that made all his skills and experience seem obsolete.

The two guild chiefs were shocked as well; the Mages’ Guild chief looked particularly stunned.

By that means, Kagura extracted answers to every question they had. Through the interrogation, they learned who the trafficking ring had been involved with and where documents on their dealings were hidden. That revealed the other kidnapped children’s whereabouts. However, the kids had been sent all over the place, and it would be difficult to track them all down and

regain custody of them. In some cases, they might need to use force.

That was exactly why they'd brought in the two guild chiefs, however.

"I happen to have close friends among the adventurers there," one said. "Leave it to them. They'll rescue those children in no time."

"One of my junior officers handles that area," the other explained. "I'll pass this on to him."

As one would expect of people managing guilds in this great hub of trade, the branch chiefs were extremely capable. These two could handle saving the trafficked children since they could deploy numerous adventurers precisely to handle the task. Arrangements for tracking and reclaiming the children were made in no time.

After that, the group gained yet more information from the ringleader. His organization wasn't just involved in human trafficking; they planned to dabble in other organized crime too.

That meant the ringleader ended up revealing the names of many shady characters running rampant in Ligret. The security chief was overjoyed, of course. A wicked grin crossed his face as he imagined cornering the criminals.

Mira took the opportunity to ask about Fuzzy Dice—whether the ringleader saw him when he came to the Creek Company, how he moved, and how strong he was.

Unfortunately, the answers weren't clear. The ringleader had been keeping watch that day, but Fuzzy Dice's visit had already ended before he noticed it. The others present had essentially the same experience. Apparently, Fuzzy Dice had knocked them out.

He'll be no match for Eizenfald, but he is *strong. To be able to put this guy to sleep so easily...*

It seemed the phantom thief was quite powerful in his own right.

Security had already arrested the warehouse man who'd groped Mira and incurred her wrath. According to the guard in charge of him, he'd been writhing on the warehouse floor when

they arrived. He testified that a terrible, unworldly stench wouldn't leave his nostrils.

That was due to the stink magic Woofson had cast on Mira's orders. Of course, they were the only two who knew that.

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Once the general interrogation was over, everyone gathered in the chief's office. They began discussing another matter, for the interrogation had yielded one more piece of interesting information. It pertained to where the kidnappers planned to sell the kids in the basement of their mansion.

As the conversation began, the security chief and the Warriors' Guild branch chief spoke up in apparent understanding.

"To think we'd see Baron Ardoloris's name here, of all places."

"So he was guilty after all."

"That disgusting, lecherous rat," the Mages' Guild branch chief added. Her ladylike demeanor had evaporated.

Based on the reactions of those three, this baron seemed problematic at best.

"You three know of him, I see," Mira remarked. "Could you tell me about this baron?"

"Me too, please," Kagura added.

When they asked what sort of man he was, the three locals looked hesitant.

"Hmm… I don't know if that's a good idea," the security chief said, glancing at Tyriel. From how he and the others were acting, this was bound to be something they didn't want a little girl to hear.

"Hrmm. That gives me a clue, I think," Mira said. "Still, please share. We can take the ugly details."

"Yeah, we can handle it," Kagura added. "We need to know, especially if this baron is evil."

“I’m ready too.”

Despite their appearances, Mira, Kagura, and Tyriel weren’t *actually* little girls. The three had already read between the lines, and they urged the chiefs to speak without reserve.

“All right. Let me explain, then,” the Mages’ Guild branch chief answered. No doubt she thought this would be easier for them to hear from a woman’s mouth. “This has been a rumor for a while now…” she prefaced, before sharing all the dark hearsay around Baron Ardoloris.

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When she finished, the three listeners had one thing to say.

“Perv.”

“He’s definitely a pervert.”

“Pervert. For sure.”

Baron Ardoloris was, without a doubt, seriously perverted.

Eizenfald alone couldn’t really follow the branch chief’s explanation. He’d lived a sheltered life regarding these matters. Regardless, the rumors about the baron were as follows.

He’d proposed marriage to girls under ten years old dozens of times. After being rebuffed on a number of occasions, he tried to secretly arrange to skip past the whole “acceptance of proposal” part, but he fortunately failed.

There’d been instances of him giving candy to children—only little girls, of course. He’d urge them to eat it right there on the spot. He was found out when a little boy went crying to his parents about not getting any. His parents came running, took his sister home, and resolved the situation without incident. When the candy was examined, the shocking truth became clear: It was laced with an aphrodisiac.

Baron Ardoloris was also known to force people to offer their daughters as payment for debts, even fabricating debts to that end.

What would've happened if these kidnapped children were sent to the baron? It was a good thing they'd stopped this episode before it got out of hand. They heaved a collective sigh of relief.

After their initial discussion about the baron, the security chief excused himself for a moment, then returned. He placed a sheaf of documents on the table.

"I got a little curious," he said.

He began leafing through the documents, which they'd picked up in the base they'd seized. What were they?

"Get this," the chief explained. "It's a list of Creek Company customers!"

Former employees of the Creek Company and similar enterprises had formed a new human-trafficking ring, and their home base had contained a ledger listing the Creek Company's clients. Someone must've brought it there. As far as the investigators could tell, the traffickers used this list to identify and contact possible customers, successfully identifying people to sell children to.

"I think I see the name you mentioned." The security chief pointed at a list naming Baron Ardoloris. According to the ledger, he'd dealt with the Creek Company twice in the past. Both entries listed his purchase as "luxury goods," but given the circumstances, those goods were likely humans.

The chief presented another document. This one was the real problem. It was a recent contract. The baron's name wasn't written on it, but it was easy to identify his role from the ringleader's testimony and circumstantial information written on the contract.

"Cute girls under the age of ten," the document stipulated. "If I like them, I'll pay extra." It even bore the names of three of the four girls they'd found in the basement. They clearly hadn't just been chosen at random.

"I worry for those children." Mira shuddered.

They'd prevented anything worse from befalling the kids… this time. There could always be a next time, though. Worse, it

now seemed likely that the baron had purchased girls before. If so, they had to worry about those kids as well.

"Yeah. We need to resolve this fast," Kagura agreed, naturally, and asked the chief how long he thought it would take.

At this point, the security office and Adventurers' Guild Union would work together based on the information they'd gained thus far. They'd surely get to Baron Ardoloris soon enough. However, the thought of the girls he'd targeted—and those he'd purchased already—made it clear that they had to act sooner rather than later. To stop the children from being victimized, they needed to drag Ardoloris before the law. Their main concern was how long that would take.

The security chief's face clouded, and the two guild branch chiefs simultaneously furrowed their brows as they grumbled among themselves.

"We'd prefer to address this as soon as possible, but there's some trouble," the security chief explained. According to him, Baron Ardoloris was a high-ranking military official and was technically in charge of the security office. That made open action against him difficult. "Our positions could be on the chopping block at his discretion, you see. Even with this virtually certain evidence, we can't go any further. We'd only seal our own fates by trying to do justice. My people have people they must protect too."

Ardoloris was definitely guilty, but they lacked the smoking-gun evidence to prove it. On top of that, he could monitor all the security office's moves. If they forced an investigation based purely on suspicion, he'd squash any evidence and fire everyone who'd acted against him.

Having revealed these circumstances, the chief let out a solemn sigh and hung his head.

The guild branch chiefs added on to this, telling the story of a past incident with the baron. They said a number of security office members had been fired simultaneously one year earlier. At the time, the security chief and some coworkers were attempting to investigate the baron secretly.

The baron found out about their efforts, and as a result, dozens of guards lost their jobs. The chief only kept his because

someone had covered for him, pretending to have spearheaded the investigation.

"Things would've ended differently if they'd only had more concrete evidence," the Mages' Guild branch chief muttered at the end. They now needed not suspicion but real evidence that the baron had bought a little girl from human traffickers. If they just had that, even a big-shot military man like Ardoloris couldn't escape the law.

But the client list here didn't have precise details on the baron's transactions, leaving plausible deniability. Even the recent contract wasn't signed by the baron, so it had little value as evidence.

"The current case was resolved before the kids were sold, anyway, so it'd be difficult to tie to him," the Warriors' Guild branch chief noted. Crossing his arms thoughtfully, he added that it might be different if they'd apprehended the baron after the deal.

"From what I've heard, it doesn't sound like he's about to give up," Kagura remarked. Since the baron was a die-hard pervert, she warned, he'd try this again—and the girls he'd requested specifically would be in danger.

The situation made his obvious guilt clear, but the lack of conclusive evidence meant that they couldn't punish him yet.

A moment of silence ruled. What could they do?

After a while, the Warriors' Guild branch chief casually—yet pointedly—suggested, "If we could just get evidence of a deal, we might be able to wrap this up." He said it as if talking to himself, yet he clearly wanted the others to hear. He glanced at Mira.

Kagura caught on to his insinuation. "You mean...finish the deal instead of leaving it incomplete?" If there was no evidence now, they could *make* evidence. They even had the deal's details in hand already. Glancing at Mira, she decided the plan was workable.

"Ooh—I just realized something," the security chief added. "We can't move against the baron openly, but it'd be fine for us

to patrol the area for security's sake. And if a victim ran out of the mansion just as we passed…"

In the middle of patrolling near Baron Ardoloris's mansion, they'd stumble upon an abducted girl and take her into protective custody. If that incident was backed up by statements from any number of concerned citizens, even the baron couldn't squirm out of prosecution.

It seemed like the perfect plan. The security chief lifted his head, looking at Mira in anticipation.

You little… She chuckled, chagrined at how openly they'd backed her into a corner.

They basically wanted to continue the infiltration operation from earlier, posing as human traffickers and completing a deal with Ardoloris to create irrefutable evidence. They'd have a "victim" escape his mansion and be taken into nearby guards' protection, all in public, making the baron's actions impossible to sweep under the rug.

But to do so, they required a girl who had the looks and the strength to carry out the plan. Three pairs of expectant eyes gathered on Mira.

"Oh, I know! We just need to finish the deal ourselves!" Tyriel finally realized what they were suggesting…or, rather, genuinely believed she'd hit upon a stroke of genius. Then she even volunteered to play the faux victim.

The angel burned with a sense of justice; Kagura, on the other hand, was flustered by her repeated volunteering. So was Mira. The "victim" would be going into the belly of the beast, so to speak. They couldn't possibly send Tyriel and subject her to whatever the baron's wicked whims were.

"No, no," Mira said. "I'll go. Will that do?"

Just as the others had anticipated, Mira desperately volunteered in order to save her friend. She'd done this once; she'd just have to do it again.

This time, she begged for a cushion for her box.

Chapter 18

AN HOUR AND A HALF had passed since they'd begun the operation to complete the deal and use it as evidence.

A lone carriage headed toward the baron's mansion on the outskirts of town. They'd confiscated the vehicle from the traffickers' hideout, and a disguised Union member drove it. Inside the rattling carriage, Mira was dressed up like a maid.

Figuring she was free to relax until the carriage arrived, Mira stared at the getup she'd been forced to wear and sighed. "I never thought they'd make me dress like this…"

The confiscated contract had specified this maid outfit, since the human traffickers even added incentives to their disgusting sales. The contract included several additional services with delivery, such as a maid costume. Specifically, the maid uniforms were Victorian-style ones characterized by long skirts.

Hurriedly searching the mansion, the security guards had discovered the outfits prepared for the girls. Naturally, Mira had to wear one.

"Still, I never cease to impress. Everything looks good on me!" Mira clearly wasn't too bothered to see herself in the outfit. It was a shame how unladylike her grin was.

After she'd been jostled in the cart for a while, the driver called out, "We'll arrive soon."

"Right. Thanks," Mira replied.

She lay down on the mat inside her crate, preparing to feign sleep again. Thus, they finally arrived in front of Baron Ardoloris's mansion.

The driver spoke with the gatekeeper. He had to include a number of code words in the chat, but he handled them with aplomb. Thanks to Kagura's interrogation magic, they'd learned everything they needed for the deal and more, so the carriage got through the gate without rousing suspicion.

Entering the property, they circled around back. The baron had requested that the deal be finalized behind the mansion, not in front. In a place where no other eyes could see, one man awaited.

“Ooh! You’re here, you’re here. This way. Come, come!” He tried to keep his voice low, but his excitement was mounting.

The man was plump, and his face left much to be desired, but he was at least well dressed. He was none other than Baron Ardoloris. Given that he’d come to greet the carriage in person, he obviously couldn’t contain himself.

The driver bowed. “I brought the wine and flowers you ordered. Please ensure they’re to your liking.” This was another required exchange.

“Perfect, perfect. Let’s see…” Unable to bear waiting any longer, the baron ran over and peeked into the carriage expectantly. Displeasure immediately became clear on his face. “Hey! What the hell is the meaning of this? There’s only one box. I ordered three minimum! Where are the others?!”

They obviously wouldn’t endanger the other girls. Bringing the particular ones he’d named was especially out of the question. Mira was the only sacrifice, so there was only one box. But since the baron had ordered at least three children, requesting more than one by name, the discrepancy enraged him.

“Yes, we’re quite aware. Those items are prepared, but due to a recent burglary, security is tight in the area where they’re stored. Delivery posed too much risk. We’re working on a work-around, so we’d appreciate patience for the time being,” the driver replied readily, almost in a whisper.

They’d prepared this response to the baron’s complaints well in advance. The security chief came up with the script, hoping it would hoodwink the baron temporarily.

“Hmm…I see. Well, fine.” Ardoloris remained dissatisfied but seemed convinced for now. “When will that delivery arrive?”

“Tomorrow, I swear,” the driver said.

Although he’d told the baron to wait, he’d promised to deliver the girls sooner than Ardoloris expected, which returned

his mood to normal. “Ooh, good, good. I can hardly wait. What about this one, then?” His lips curled into a lascivious grin; he no doubt hoped to sate his needs with this girl until others arrived.

“Consider this an apology for keeping you waiting. We procured some of the finest flowers from another location, so I brought them to see how you like them.” The driver’s performance was excellent. His expressions and speech were truly like those of an actor, proficiently raising the baron’s expectations.

“Well, why don’t I have a look?” Ardoloris practically lunged at the box in lust.

The driver tried to take the lid off the crate properly, but before he could do so, the baron wrenched it open. When he saw Mira “sleeping” inside, his eyes widened. With trembling hands, he gently put down the lid and looked Mira over with bated breath.

“Exquisite…” he mumbled in an undertone. His eyes saw nothing but Mira now—the man was fully charmed. “Marvelous, just marvelous. Well done, getting your hands on such a product…and bringing her to me! I assure you I’ll patronize your business again. I’ll tell you what—name your price for this one, and I’ll pay it.”

He must’ve *really* liked Mira. He seemed over the moon. When the driver suggested ten million ducats, the baron swiftly replied, “Of course, my good man!”

That was pricey, but he apparently considered Mira worth it. There wasn’t a hint of hesitation on his face; in fact, he grew more elated by the second.

“I’ll have the money ready tomorrow. Come back then. I’m afraid I’ll be busy for the rest of the evening!” Rattling all that off quickly, the baron snatched Mira up and buried his face in her chest. He took a few deep breaths and smiled in ecstasy. “Aah, that’s the stuff!”

Overwhelmed by disgust, the driver clenched his fist, ready to strike. But when Mira opened her eyes slightly to look at him, he stopped himself. Raising a hand now would doom the entire operation.

“I understand your excitement, my lord, but would you please sign this now? My superiors won’t be happy with me otherwise.” The driver did his best to hold back, and once he’d regained his composure, he feigned calm and handed over a contract.

This document would be necessary to prove that the transaction had occurred.

“Gracious… Fine, fine. I understand.” With Mira in his arms, the baron accepted the pen and signed the contract. He didn’t pay his signature much attention, apparently too interested in what was to come. As soon as he finished writing, he stepped off the carriage and carried Mira away.

“There.” The driver gingerly stored the contract in a tube. Gazing at Mira for a moment and praying for her safety, he turned the carriage around and left the baron’s mansion.

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Baron Ardoloris entered the building and headed downstairs with carefree steps.

The stairs seemed to go downward forever. When he finally reached the bottom, he went through several doors. At the end of all those was the final room; the baron placed Mira in a bed at the center.

“Now we’re here… This is a special room for our love to blossom in. Nobody will interrupt us, and there’s no escaping,” he whispered ecstatically, lighting what looked like incense burners in the meantime. After a while, odd-colored smoke began to rise.

That explains why there were so many doors along the way: They prevent escapes. Ugh! He’s so disgusting, it makes my skin crawl.

An impenetrable, inescapable secret basement. No doubt the baron had it built just for these horrors. Disgusted by his awful tastes, Mira used Biometric Scan to search her surroundings for any other poor girls he might’ve victimized. No signals nearby fit the bill.

Upstairs, perhaps? Or somewhere else…? She wanted to save any others as soon as possible.

While she pondered, the baron continued his preparations. He chained Mira's hands to the bed to keep her from resisting. To make matter worse, he'd groped her many times by now.

You bastard. You perverted little baron. Remember what you did to me today. I'll kick your ass harder for every time you touched me!

Suppressing her rising disgust and rage, Mira waited for the signal that it was time to act.

The plan went as follows: Security guards would wait in front of the mansion under the pretext of patrolling. When they were ready, Mira would escape. Naturally, the baron would give chase. She'd flee the mansion and beg the guards for help. The baron would follow quickly after her, and since he'd be pursuing her, he couldn't deny what was happening.

They'd even asked another noble living in the city to help them as a witness. He'd "just happen" to watch the scene, making it impossible for the baron to use his authority to hush this up.

According to First Pupil's regular reports to Mira, however, there was a problem. It was apparently taking that noble time to ready his personal guard, forcing Mira to wait and withstand this torture. She was running out of time; the baron's breathing grew heavier, and his eyes looked crazier by the second.

"Good morning, my princess. Awaken, awaken!" He started shaking Mira back and forth.

Apparently, he wanted her to wake up now, which meant he was "ready." Based on this act, the baron liked to see girls struggle at his mercy as he violated them.

He's the worst of the worst. No doubt about it.

After he'd shaken her a few times, Mira naturally opened her eyes. She quickly surveyed the room, spotting an exit in no time.

"Meh heh heh… You look confused. It's fine, though. Everything will be wonderful soon." The baron's lips twisted

farther as he put something in the incense burners. Even more smoke poured out.

That sickly sweet scent… It's got to be some drug.

The more the smoke spread, the more lust reddened the baron's face. Mira had to assume the incense smoke was an aphrodisiac, but she was unaffected, since the drug would be classified as a status effect. Mira had a high resistance against those, and she'd downed a resistance potion from Kagura just in case. As such, she remained perfectly calm while she witnessed the baron going mad with desire.

He was now practically hyperventilating, and his eyes burned like those of a ravenous beast. When Mira saw that, she realized that she was running out of time. If she kept waiting for the others to be ready, she'd be in danger.

"Ooh, I can't get enough of that frightened look!"

Mira was actually more *disgusted* than anything, but maybe that looked like fright to the lust-crazed baron. He screeched as if he couldn't take waiting anymore and closed in to have his way with Mira.

She hadn't received the signal yet, but she knew that she had to act now. She bent her right leg, ready to kick the baron away when he approached.

Then, in a room which should've contained only Mira and the baron, a third person's voice echoed: "That's enough!" At the same time, all the smoke spewed by the incense burners blew away.

What?! Mira stopped her leg.

"Who goes there?!" the baron screamed, outraged by the disturbance.

Both turned around and saw a single man. He looked like a hero making a dashing appearance in the nick of time to save his heroine—except that he wore almost nothing besides a pair of white pants. His upper body was bare, save for a white cape and red scarf. A towel with a cute drawing of a cartoon character covered his face.



Okay, who the hell is that?! Mira screamed mentally. The intruder was no ordinary weirdo; he looked like he might even be a bigger pervert than the baron.

“Who are you?” the baron demanded. “This is our love nest, and you don’t belong. How did you even get in here?!”

The baron had claimed that *nobody* would enter, yet someone had, so perhaps that worried him more than the man’s appearance.

The half-naked man sauntered over dramatically. “As you can see, I’m simply an everyday ally of justice,” he declared theatrically. “I heard screams for help and came rushing to provide aid.”

He stopped in front of the baron, flipped his cape, and struck a pose. His bearing was incredibly smug, yet clearly backed by genuine confidence. Behind him, in the corner of the room, was a big hole Mira could just barely see from her perspective. No doubt he’d entered through that.

I don’t remember screaming for help, Mira thought. This wasn’t the time to comment, though, so she stayed silent.

The baron wouldn’t do the same, however. “Bah! Justice? You’re merely a pervert!” he said, expressing Mira’s thoughts as well.

The intruder’s outfit was so bad that even the perverted baron was calling him lewd. If someone dressed like this “hero” had been walking down the street, the police would probably have arrested him in no time. That was how weird he looked.

“Appearance means nothing in the pursuit of justice,” the interloper retorted, brushing off Ardoloris’s insult. Seemingly wanting to avoid being lumped in with the baron, though, he clarified, “Besides, my regular costume’s in the wash right now.”

So he *did* have clothes that suited a hero…or a man hoping to play one, at least. How much would those garments differ from his current indecent outfit? Mira couldn’t imagine, given how dire he looked at that moment. She ultimately decided that he’d be a weirdo either way.

“More importantly, are you ready?” Presumably trying to move the conversation away from his clothes, the half-naked

man struck another pose and issued a threat. “You’ll pay the price for the sin of making such an innocent little girl cry!”

I wasn’t really crying *either...* She hadn’t screamed *or* cried.

As the situation unfolded, Mira glanced at the man. He smiled and nodded back as if to say, *There’s no need to fear now*.

His eyes peeked from the gaps in the cartoon-branded towel; they had a trustworthy gleam, despite belonging to a pervert. It was just a shame that everything else about him ruined that impression.

“Damn you... Flirting with *my* girl now, are you?!” Apparently misunderstanding, the baron grew even more enraged and grabbed a staff from the wall. He pointed the tip at the half-naked man and roared, “Diiie!”

Intense light suddenly burst from the staff. It was no magic of the baron’s, however; rather, the staff seemed to be a magical weapon. Not a normal one either. Based on the quantity of mana pouring from it, it seemed powerful enough to fight a high-level monster.

The staff struck a direct hit, causing an intense boom as dazzling light shone forth. Taking such a blow without shielding herself might’ve been fatal even for Mira. Was the half-naked man okay? When the light faded, she looked for him.

He indeed stood there as if nothing had happened at all. The only change was that he’d calmly stretched his hand out in front of him. He hadn’t evaded; he’d caught the destructive beam of light in his hand.

“Fear not, young lady. I’m not so weak as to be defeated by such tricks.” Pervert Number Two clenched his outstretched hand, raised his index finger, and wagged it tauntingly. He even winked through his towel mask.

If Mira were a real child—and if the intruder weren’t dressed so outlandishly—she might’ve seen him as genuinely heroic. Unfortunately, his over-the-top act just exasperated her.

“It’ll be better for you in the long run if you just give up now,” he declared, striking another pose. Despite his appearance, he had impressive abilities indeed. “What will you do?”

Watching the confrontation, Mira planned her next move. Just now, she'd finally received a "ready" signal from First Pupil.

Circumstances had changed, however. If she continued with the strategy as planned, she could potentially get this well-intentioned(?) third party hurt. If Mira ran away, the baron followed, and the half-naked man followed *him*, things would look awfully bad for the latter. Given his current appearance, one could easily assume he was the baron's accomplice, and anyone could imagine what would happen to him next.

Hrmm. What to do...?

At this rate, their strategy would fall to ruin. Knowing that she couldn't discount this intruder's sense of justice, she explained what was happening to First Pupil and told him to put things on hold for now.

Meanwhile, the men's confrontation escalated. The half-naked one didn't back down. Far from it, he continued to defend himself flawlessly against the baron's myriad attacks.

"Damn you! Damn you! What is your problem? Who are you?!" the baron roared, even more flustered than before.

"As I said before, I'm simply an everyday ally of justice." The half-naked man struck another pose. Perhaps it symbolized his sense of justice? Unfortunately, to a third party, it only looked like he was egging the baron on.

Chapter 19

“WHAT’S WITH YOU?!” the baron cried. “Why can’t I hit you?!”

“It’s no use. You’re essentially doing nothing but standing still.”

The baron pulled out more and more magical tools to fight, but the half-naked man weathered each attack head-on.

Each time he defended himself, he showed off for Mira, as if to prove that this was nothing to him. Presumably, he was trying to reassure a scared little girl, but his composure showed that it was no bluff.

The panicking baron also glanced at Mira, his lust manifesting in ever-more-violent swings with his magical tools. It was easy to imagine what he was fantasizing about and what delusions spurred him.

This honestly just looks like two perverts butting heads.

If someone walked in right now, they’d probably think the same thing—that a pair of weirdos was duking it out for possession of Mira. That proved how absolutely bizarre this battle was. It wouldn’t last long, though.

“Damn you, damn you, damn you!” The baron had exhausted his magical tools’ mana, leaving him helpless.

“Seems that’s all you’ve got. It’s my turn to have some fun.” The half-naked man stepped forward. Now that the baron had run out of steam for combat, his defeat was all but inevitable.

Realizing this, Mira racked her brain. If she stopped the half-naked man, it was hardly likely that she’d pull off her task within the overall plan. But if the intruder defeated Ardoloris now, the people outside wouldn’t witness the baron’s crime and seal his fate. At this rate, the news would claim that a weirdo had attacked a noble in his home.

Mira wondered how to continue with the plan.

Meanwhile, the baron screamed, “I didn’t want to use this, but I guess I have no choice!” As if resolved, he struck the wall

next to him. There was evidently a hidden switch; with a dull sound, the opposite wall opened up.

Something crawled from behind it. It had a bizarre, sluglike appearance, with many tentacles extending from its body. It was certainly something such a pervert would be fond of. Though the baron had practically called it a trump card, the slug moved too slowly and heavily to seem dangerous. It didn't look at all strong, nor ready to fight.

In fact, it was now creeping *away* from the half-naked man.

Mira watched, worried that the slug might have some ultimate attack, but it seemed the creature *wasn't* the baron's trump card; Ardoloris, panicking, struck another section of the wall.

"Ack, wrong button. *This* one!"

The next dull noise was different. This time, the ceiling creaked and opened, producing a hole connected to the mansion's first floor.

"Now! Come, my dears!" the baron screamed upward, heralding the appearance of three beings.

What are these things? Monsters or animals? I've never seen anything like them before.

The strange creatures that appeared had doglike shapes, but their bodies were disfigured, and their eyes lacked willpower. They didn't rampage out of instinct, nor move based on individual desire. They just stood by the baron as if awaiting orders.

"I see... More villainy," the half-naked man murmured, glaring at the baron. He readied himself, taking a stance—not one of his heroic poses but a real fighting stance.

"Behold my most powerful guard dogs. Prepare to become dog food!" Clearly confident, the baron laughed and ordered his hounds to kill the man.

Suddenly, the air in the room changed. Following the baron's order, odious malice emanated from the three beasts. They leapt forth as if finally released from chains.

The dogs' bloodshot eyes betrayed no hint of reason, but through what could be called hunter's instinct, they coordinated perfectly without communicating. One attacked from the front, while the other two circled to flank the man's sides. It was difficult for the naked eye to follow them, and their fangs were far sharper than the average knife.

The baron's three beasts each had an A-rank adventurer's strength. They *were* worthy of being called trump cards—but only to people living ordinary lives, in ordinary circumstances, committing ordinary villainy. The baron was about to glimpse a world lying beyond the ordinary, inaccessible to most, observed by very few.

"Unfortunately, fangs as slow as those won't reach me," the half-naked man remarked.

Just before the three beasts could sink their teeth into him, they stopped. No. They *were* stopped. The beasts began to struggle, seemingly in the clutches of an invisible force. That only lasted a moment before they were immediately thrown back through, and above, the ceiling.

"May they rest in peace." The half-naked man raised his right hand theatrically and snapped his fingers.

Instantly, a ray of fire shot upward through the hole in the ceiling. A harsh explosion boomed somewhere beyond. Soon, three objects fell through the hole and crashed to the ground—the hounds' skeletons. What had happened up there? Whatever it was had enough firepower to vaporize their flesh in an instant.

"I-impossible... I bought those because I was told they'd be the most powerful guard dogs. What's the meaning of this?! They did practically nothing!" From the baron's perspective, the hounds had been defeated with ease. He kicked their bones in anger, screaming, "Useless beasts!"

But that assumption was incorrect. The hounds had been genuinely powerful; they were just nowhere near as strong as the half-naked man.

"If not for you...!" More furious than ever, the baron drew a hidden blade and charged the half-naked man.

His foe easily evaded this desperate attack. "Pitiful."

With that, the half-naked man produced rope from somewhere and looped it around his target. He rolled the baron over and had him tied up in no time.

The baron started shrieking, “Damn it! Release me! Do you know who I am?!”

The half-naked man didn’t listen; he simply dragged Ardoloris along and tied him to a stone pillar. “Now, I’m sure you recognize these,” he said, scattering a bundle of papers across the floor. “They’ll unveil your crimes for all to see. The time has come to make amends and repent.”

When the baron looked at one sheet, his rage disappeared, replaced with panic. “How’d you…?!”

As Mira wondered what the papers said, one happened to fall close enough for her to read. It documented some kind of transaction; based on the baron’s reaction, it must’ve been inconvenient to him.

Some sections of the sheet that she could decipher mentioned flowers. It seemed odd for someone to pay so much for flowers, though.

Wait a second…

“Flowers” had been a code word during the deal earlier. In other words, these sheets documented the baron’s previous transactions. Where in the world had the self-styled hero found them?

Something concerned Mira even more. The way this half-naked man was shoving evidence into an evildoer’s face reminded her of someone—someone she’d been hearing about recently. Could it be? Mira turned toward the intruder again in astonishment.

“Wait a second, are you—?” Just as she tried to ask what she was thinking, something slimy suddenly wrapped around her leg. “Wha—?!” she cried. “Nrrgh! Damn it!”

It was the sluglike creature that the baron had accidentally released before. She tried to pull it off, but her arms were bound. Her legs had been free, but the slug’s tentacles made them impossible to move.

Apparently finding a silver lining in this moment of despair, the baron squealed, “Oh hooo! Good stuff! That’s what I’m talking about!”

Seemingly attracted to her femininity, the creature had gone straight for Mira. As it crept close and crawled up her legs, a horrifying sensation assailed her.

“You disgusting little bastard…!” Realizing that the slug seemed more dangerous than the baron himself, Mira set a summoning point to conjure a dark knight. Someone moved even faster than her, however.

“Don’t worry, miss. Just stay still a little longer.” It was the half-naked man.

Though he looked more perverted than the baron, he actually *was* a hero. He touched the slug, and its tentacles dried up almost instantly; as he did so, the man looked away, apparently out of sympathy for Mira’s predicament.



The baron cried in despair.

“There.” Mira’s hero tore the dried-up slug away from her. “You can rest easy now.”

She didn’t know exactly what he’d done, but she realized it was some kind of spell—magic she had no grasp of. It must’ve been developed over the past thirty years.

What mattered now, however, was the half-naked man’s identity.

“That was close,” Mira said. “Thank you, friend. Could you possibly be Fuzzy—”

As she tried to ask, though, he interrupted, “Careful, miss. That’s a secret.” He put his index finger to his lips to shush her, punctuating the gesture with a wink. His motions were so natural, he’d obviously done this many times before.

“Uh…”

However cool he acted, his clothes—or lack thereof—just made him look like a weirdo. The contrast dumbfounded Mira.

Meanwhile, someone called out from beyond the hole in the ceiling.

“Hey! What’s the commotion? Everything okay down there?” Apparently worried by the explosion earlier, the guards waiting outside had charged in.

“Aha. The ever-reliable security guards have arrived. I’ll leave the rest to them.” The half-naked man looked up through the hole. Seeing the guards, he struck another pose. “Farewell, miss!” he said, then escaped through that same hole.

“Hey… Wait a second, would you?!”

If that man was who Mira thought, it would save her the time and effort of going to Haxthausen. She desperately tried to pursue him, but her hands couldn’t pull away from the bed. She remembered now that she was chained to it.

The half-naked man caught the guards above off guard.

“Whoa. What was that?!”

“Who the hell was that just now?!”

As things got livelier upstairs, Mira summoned a dark knight to cut off her chains, then stood to pursue the man.

Just then, the security chief jumped down from above. When he saw the summoner, he grinned wryly in relief. “Well… you seem fine enough.”

“Yes. Fine *enough*.” The half-naked guy had dried out the slug that attacked her, but its slime was still on her; her maid outfit was sticky and wet. Beyond that, though, Mira herself was all right. “Now, about that pervert who just left—where did he go?!” she demanded, ready to rush after and catch him.

Unfortunately, she was out of luck.

“Sorry,” the chief replied. “It all kind of happened too fast.” The man had come and gone like the wind, so the chief’s eyes couldn’t follow where he’d gone.

Chapter 20

“WHOA... THINGS WENT worse than I thought,” Kagura said immediately upon seeing Mira’s condition. Every time the summoner stepped closer to her, she backed away.

“Ugh. I feel gross,” Mira complained. “Do you have anything I can use to wipe this off?” She did have towels and the like on hand, but she didn’t want to soil her own things with slug mucus. It was Kagura who’d pushed this strategy; she ought to provide those supplies.

But Kagura didn’t want to ruin *her* things either. She steadfastly refused, avoiding Mira. Eventually, the summoner chased her into a corner, and she finally surrendered. “Okay, okay. Just change into this for now!” she pleaded, handing over a yukata.

Kagura was compromising; the black stockings and maid dress were dirtiest, so it’d be easier for Mira just to change out of them than to wipe the slime off.

“Hrmm. Very well.”

Some of that slug mucus would still be on her skin, but this was better than nothing, and it meant she didn’t have to ruin her own clothes. As such, Mira accepted the compromise and the yukata.

Meanwhile, the security chief and his entourage handled the situation overall.

“What a miscalculation. But who expected that guy to show up?”

“Uzume told us there was trouble, so we stood by. Still, that massive explosion came as a real surprise.”

As the security chief and captain exchanged thoughts, they looked at the tied-up baron.

The original plan had been for them to take Mira into protective custody once she escaped. The half-naked man’s interference had jeopardized that plan, but the baron had still

ended up in shackles, and plenty of evidence all around incriminated him. It was more than enough to bring him down.

In fact, this was far *more* convenient than the original strategy. The documents the half-naked man had scattered didn't just prove that the baron bought little girls; they attested to many more of his wrongdoings as well. Forget the trafficking-deal sting operation—this was a surplus of firm evidence.

"This was all fabricated! That bizarre man framed me! You understand, don't you?" The baron glared at the security chief as if demanding a cover-up. The threat in his words was evident.

Even if they exposed his crimes to all the world, he was still a nobleman. Stripping his authority would take time, even with so much evidence against him. He was threatening to use that time to strip the chief's own position and status. His ugly desire to use his power to distort the truth was abundantly clear.

Hearing the baron, the chief and captain looked at each other.

"Trust me, and I can give you whatever your hearts desire," the baron continued.

He wasn't just threatening them; he was trying to buy them off. However, they'd committed completely to this operation the moment they set it up.

"My lord, I think it'd be best if you resigned yourself," the security chief replied coolly. His dignified visage contained an upstanding determination to see justice done.

"If you hold that these documents are fabrications, submit them and request an investigation. The government can verify their illegitimacy in no time," the captain added with a cold glare.

Those investigative bureaucrats were superb; they'd spot forgeries easily. But if the documents were genuine, they'd be inescapable, conclusive proof against the baron. The captain knew that, and his words confirmed his determination to punish the baron for his crimes.

"F-fools! You'd trust that strangely dressed man over *me*?!"

As the chief and captain calmly picked up the documents, the baron became enraged, raising his voice. Why would they trust a perverted, half-naked stranger who'd come out of

nowhere over a man they'd relied on for so many years? They'd been given a choice between a nobleman's word and that of an obvious weirdo.

"We only trust the evidence," the chief and captain readily replied. It seemed that even they couldn't bring themselves to say they'd rely on a half-naked stranger.

At any rate, they had enough proof to bring the baron down. Thus, they wasted no more time and arrested him.

While the security chief led the baron away, the captain turned solemnly toward Mira. "I'm sorry that the security chief and union branch chiefs have put you in such a difficult position."

Since Mira had been the baron's victim, she'd be another vital witness. That meant she'd have to go with them to the security office, although unfortunately she was busy.

"It's fine, it's fine," she replied, poking her head out from a nook. "I didn't get the opportunity to give him a good kick in the rear myself, but things turned out better than expected. That's all that matters."

Mira was currently half-naked; she'd only put her arms through the yukata sleeves, and the garment hadn't been tied yet.

"Mira, come on! Don't flash people like that!" Kagura said, exasperated at Mira's shoddy yukata-tying. She rushed over, seized the summoner's wrist, and dragged her back into the corner. "We'll be out as soon as I'm finished with her. You go on ahead," she told the security captain.

Anyone who peeked toward them for a moment would see Mira changing. Realizing the state she was in, the captain rushed out of the basement. "U-understood. We'll wait outside!"

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Kagura dressed Mira carefully, without cutting corners. When she saw the result, she frowned to herself. "Hmm...I hate how good it looks on you."

A golden pattern, like stars shining in the night sky, adorned the yukata's black fabric. It gave Mira a sort of lunar-princess charm. She was a true, unblemished beauty. Kagura found that unfair, though, since she knew the person behind Mira's avatar.

"Hrmm. Well done!" Despite Kagura's irritation, Mira smiled, satisfied by how much better the yukata now fit compared to when she'd tried to put it on herself. "Now let's get going," she said before walking off. Since the yukata was too tight around her feet, she opened its hem, which promptly ruined any ladylike charm it might've afforded her.

Mira and Kagura left the basement and met up with the pair in the carriage outside: Eizenfald and Tyriel. They'd been trying to chase the half-naked man this whole time. Eizenfald had been waiting outside when the man escaped, and Mira had ordered her son to chase and peacefully detain him. Tyriel had seemingly decided to help.

The unexpected result was that, incredibly, the weirdo had shaken Eizenfald off.

"I'm so sorry, Mother. His presence and scent...they all just disappeared. He lost me in no time." Eizenfald was more dejected than ever at this failure to satisfy his mother's request. Tears streamed down his face.

According to Tyriel, it was as if the man had simply disappeared.

"There, there. He might've looked like a pervert, but he was actually pretty strong. And if he was who I think, he had more than a few ways of evading pursuit. No doubt anyone would've struggled," Mira comforted Eizenfald.

She didn't know why that man had been here, but based on his methods, she had a feeling he was the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice.

Baron Ardoloris's corruption was infamous, which gave Fuzzy Dice plenty of reason to show up. His half-naked status, and the fact that his clothes had been in the wash, must've meant he was only in the monitoring stage. Mira presumed her "sale" and apparent status as another victim had forced him to appear.

Fuzzy Dice was a world-renowned phantom thief, one who could sneak through security, steal evidence, and escape into thin air. On the other hand, Eizenfald was no expert at tracking, so hat task was beyond him.

While Mira gave him a gentle hug, Eizenfald clung to her and cried, “Motheeer!” To someone unfamiliar with the situation, that scene might’ve seemed worth an arrest as well.

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Everyone boarded the carriage and returned to the security office. Mira was again forced to sit in Eizenfald’s lap, of course. En route, she got a towel and wiped off the remaining mucus.

This visit to the security office was largely like the previous one, but this time, they’d taken the baron in to be questioned. When Mira arrived at the interrogation room, they’d already begun that questioning via Kagura’s magic.

Baron Ardoloris spilled a ton of information. The girls he’d bought so far were being held captive in a separate hideout of his. Upon hearing that, the security chief ordered the captain to rescue them at once. They’d no doubt be in protective custody that night. The baron revealed many of the people he did his dark dealings with too.

With Mira’s additional testimony, the baron would have no defense whatsoever. And soon, with the help of the Adventurers’ Guild Union, they’d arrest his fellow criminals one by one.

Thanks to Mira and Kagura’s efforts, the two great evils of Ligret—the trafficking ring led by former Creek Company employees, and the corrupt baron—had been squashed in one evening.

The chief bowed deeply. “Thank you so much for your help. We couldn’t have done it without you. Oh—and here are some Ligret specialties for you,” he added, handing them too many souvenirs to carry. As the man in charge of an entire city’s security, he could never thank the pair enough for what they’d done today.

On their way out, the captain and guards thanked Mira and Kagura as well.

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Before they knew it, it was awfully close to midnight. Since Ligret was a bustling trade hub, however, the city's streets of food stalls were still full of life. Merchants, adventurers, and sailors enlivened the area. They wouldn't know about tonight's big bust until they sobered up, no doubt.

"Good job, Gramps. And thanks."

On the corner of one such street, Mira and her entourage ate together at the area's biggest restaurant—in a private booth, at that. Kagura had offered to treat them for their efforts today.

"Oh, it was nothing. Anything for the kids." Mira had done what any upright adult would for children victimized by filthy grown-ups. Still, she appreciated the reward Kagura provided—her hands had yet to let go of the menu.

"Mother, what's 'leblanc messana'?" Peeking at Mira's menu, Eizenfald repeatedly read out the dishes' names and asked about them, unsure what they were from their names alone.

Every time, Mira said the same thing: "Order it and find out." She ordered her own food, making the most of the fact that she wasn't paying, although Eizenfald continued to ask about dishes out of curiosity.

The bill for the meal quickly exceeded tens of thousands of ducats. Surprisingly, Mira and Eizenfald weren't wholly responsible. Tyriel had joined their conversation about the restaurant's dishes, frequently making comments like "I'm curious about the 'angel apple pie,' myself."

"Hrmm, yes," Mira agreed. "I wonder what makes it angelic?" At this point, nobody could've stopped the trio's culinary rampage.

"You're always a bottomless pit when I offer to pay..." Kagura objected. "It's fine, though. I guess I can empathize with Solomon now."

When someone treated you, you had to eat lots; doing otherwise was rude to the person offering. Kagura recalled Mira mooching off Solomon the same way, back when they all went out to eat together in the real world.

Kagura chuckled at the fact that *she* was suffering that now, then gazed at Mira and sighed. The girl's appearance might've changed, but nothing else had.

At any rate, Kagura had also taken merciless advantage of Solomon's offers to treat them back then.

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The late dinner was a comfortable one. Mira and Kagura discussed everything that'd happened since their battle against Chimera Clausen. They also talked about the past, arguing over who was at fault in various mishaps.

"Actually, no. *You* messed up the timing."

"Do you even hear yourself? *You* jumped the gun, obviously."

After spirited debate, they settled on blaming Flonne for everything.

"If only she hadn't broken our landmark rock..."

"Uh-huh. That girl never listens."

Wise Man Flonne the Supernatural wielded Ethereal Arts. She was the only Wise Man who was a dark knight rather than a mage, but she chose to use magic rather than a sword.

The strength of Ethereal Arts was such that, with enough mana, even warrior classes could wield them. However, only Flonne had managed to develop that ability for practical combat. Knowing her, she was somewhere doing something incredible as Mira and Kagura spoke. Despite being worried about her, the two looked forward to the day everyone reunited.

Meanwhile, Eizenfald and Tyriel enjoyed their own conversation. Eizenfald was fascinated by angels and their special powers, especially the celestial magic only they could use.

Ever since learning draconic magic, he'd become a glutton for magical knowledge, taking after his mother.

Tyriel was extremely interested in Imperial Dragons too. Eizenfald wasn't like ordinary dragons, and she was curious about what kind of life such a special being lived.

"The Great Elder Dragon told me not to leave the dragon capital too often. Someone like me flying all over would ruin the...*ecosystem,* I think he called it. Usually, I just play with other dragons or practice draconic magic." Eizenfald patiently answered all Tyriel's questions.

Not only were the pair mutually interested in each other's races, they had things in common, such as a close relationship with humanity despite not being human themselves.

They especially agreed on how delicious the food was, packing away the vast majority of the dishes arranged on the table. Imperial Dragon Eizenfald obviously had a large appetite, but it came as a real shock that the tiny angel could match his stomach capacity.

Afterward, they also had dessert, emptying Kagura's purse even further.

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"Bye, Gramps. I'm sure we'll meet again before long. You too, Eizen."

"Good night."

"Right. See you next time."

"It was a lot of fun seeing you two today!"

After finishing their meal and leaving the restaurant, the temporary party disbanded. Kagura and Tyriel were going to stay at the Isuzu Alliance branch nearby. This was because Kagura had spent her funds for lodgings on the meal, although nobody but her knew that.

Parting with them, Mira and Eizenfald headed to a nice inn. Thanks to Kagura kindly picking up the tab, Mira's purse still contained plenty of money for accommodations.

“Now…” Mira sighed. All that remained was to bathe and go to sleep, so she prepared to dismiss Eizenfald.

Then she paused. The dragon seemed so interested in human settlements and culture. His eyes were sparkling in front of the giant inn, after all.

“I can’t wait to see what it’s like!” he mused.

“Come on. Let’s go,” Mira said, opting for a change in plan, and entered the inn.

The lodging had a semi-Japanese style. The building was made of stone and wood, and its interior had numerous Japanese-style details, such as curtains, sliding doors, and lanterns. The lobby was dim, but the lantern light created a warm, gentle ambiance.

“Gold suite…” Standing in front of the reception desk, Mira nearly picked an unnecessarily nice room but stopped herself. She’d normally have taken the opportunity to enjoy some luxury, but Eizenfald’s presence would increase the cost. That, she realized, would defeat the point of having off-loaded their food costs onto Kagura; she would waste the amount she’d saved in one night.

As Mira considered booking the silver suite instead, Eizenfald watched the large aquarium in fascination. “Look, Mother! This place even has *fish* swimming in it!” A minor water feature such as this was still a thrilling experience to him.

“Indeed it does.” Touched by Eizenfald’s ability to find joy in everything, Mira turned toward the reception desk again and exclaimed, “Gold suite for two, please!”

The gold suite had an aquarium as well.

“Wow! Mother, there are fish in here too!”

“Oh ho! Now, *that’s* impressive.”

Numerous colorful goldfish swam elegantly around the tank. No doubt a specialist maintained the aquarium; it looked as if they’d fit a small forest lake into the room.

“Ooh. This is wonderful as well!”

Since this was the *gold* suite, the private bath was nothing to scoff at. Again incorporating a Japanese style, it contained a

cypress tub. When Mira opened the door, the scent of the wood wafted forth, touching the heart of anyone born in Japan.

In terms of space, the bath was just big enough for two people. Thanks to the view out the big window, it wasn't claustrophobic; the simple, compact bathroom had a calming, homey feel.

Impressed by the bath's interesting combination of unpretentiousness and luxury, Mira promptly began taking off her yukata. "First things first—a bath!"

Hearing Mira's voice, Eizenfald broke his focus from the aquarium, running over with a childish smile. He likewise undressed. "I hear baths feel really nice!"

This would be his first time experiencing this aspect of human culture. He'd heard of baths, but never soaked in one himself, so he was excited to try taking one with his beloved mother.

"Ooh, will this really be your first one? Let's make sure it's good, then!" Eager to ensure her son's first such experience was the best, she stepped into the bathroom.

***

"Now, listen. There's a process to this..."

A cypress aroma filled the room, and hot water rippled in the full tub. Mira managed to suppress her excitement, however. She turned to tell Eizenfald about the steps of bathing etiquette, such as splashing water on oneself initially.

Immediately, however...

"Aah...! So this is a bath. Just sitting in the water feels so nice!"

Unable to wait any longer, Eizenfald had already slipped past Mira and jumped into the tub.

"Oh...forget it." This wasn't a public bath; it was a private indoor one, so Mira decided to be flexible. Abandoning the pretense of etiquette, she followed her desires and jumped in alongside Eizenfald. "Aah...paradise."

Water overflowed onto the cypress floor, spreading the scent even further. Mira happily stretched out her legs, savoring the moment. Eizenfald mimicked her. For someone as tall as him, this bathtub was small—even a little cramped. Because they were family, though, they enjoyed the trial and error of figuring out how best to fit in the tub together.

“Say, we don’t get this opportunity often. Shall I wash your back?” Mira offered.

When Eizenfald questioned what she meant, she had him sit down, and a common bath ritual began. Taking a towel in hand, she began washing his back gently.

“That feels nice. I sense your love, Mother!”

As Mira’s small hands washed Eizenfald’s broad back, the combination of the soft towel and bubbly soap made her actions even more comforting than a simple bath.

To Eizenfald himself, this felt less like a bath than a massage. He was normally covered in scales, so simply having his back washed was a truly new sensation for him. It opened up a new world of luxury.

“I want to make you feel good too, Mother!” Those words might’ve sounded questionable if anyone else heard them, but after Mira washed his back, Eizenfald took the initiative and picked up a fresh towel to return the favor.

“Oh, really? Why, thank you!” This had been Mira’s ulterior motive the entire time, and she was happy to note her son’s personal growth and selflessness. “Hey… Th-that’s a little rough. Mm, now a little harder… No, wait, you just had it… There, that’s a good rhythm…”

Given Eizenfald’s inexperience, his attempt to mimic Mira was initially clumsy at best. But he mastered the art at an impressive speed, eliciting a contented smile from Mira.

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After they got out of the bath, Mira and Eizenfald lay in bed. All that remained tonight was to sleep, and they’d do that

together as well. But Eizenfald just couldn't doze off. In fact, now that things had calmed down, he started babbling like an excited child. He mainly chattered about happenings in the capital he hailed from.

"Mother, Mother! They had a big draconic magic tournament last week!"

He talked about winning matches, receiving the Great Elder Dragon's praise, finding delicious nuts and berries, and so on—mostly random stories spurred by his emotions. More than anything, in every word, one sensed the heart of a child who loved his mother.

"Really, you say? Well done. That's my son." Each time Mira seemed impressed and praised him, Eizenfald's smile shone brighter, and he went right on to the next story. Thirty whole years of stories had piled up in Mira's absence, after all.

As the night gradually ended, Mira gladly hung on to every single word.

Chapter 21

AFTER A NIGHT in the gold suite, Mira awoke, looked down at the sleeping Eizenfald, and muttered, “Hrmm. Something’s really off…”

Eizenfald’s princely face—so beautiful that any man would envy him—nestled on Mira’s chest as he slept. He looked like a child happy to be in his mother’s arms, more innocent than manly.

Was this fallout from when his mother used to be his father? Had Eizenfald become so spoiled in rebellion against that former strictness?

“Well, I’m just happy that he grew up strong and healthy.” Mira smiled and stroked the young man’s hair while he slept peacefully. She was grateful that he’d grown up to be such a good boy.

Eizenfald woke later, while she was getting ready for the day, and they ate breakfast together.

The gold suite’s breakfast was obviously luxurious; not only that, it was all-you-can-eat. Eizenfald gleefully tucked in, devouring plate after plate. He was quite satisfied by the end.

After they’d checked out, Mira dismissed him.

“Well, son, it’s time to say goodbye. Be a good boy, okay?”

“Yes, Mother. I’ll look forward to our next day together!”

On the way out, he’d already been mulling over what he’d ask to do next time. No doubt his request would be more specific.

“Maybe he’ll ask if we can tour onsens,” Mira mused. “He loved that bath, after all.”

She began to plot ways to nudge him toward that; welcoming the challenge, she headed to the parking lot.

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Ligret was a trade hub, so its parking lot was massive. Hundreds of carriages were parked there, Mira's wagon among them.

Mira picked up on something odd, though. "Wha...? What in the world...?"

Something bizarre clung to the driver's seat. Mira stopped and stared more closely at it, shoulders trembling. The figure was humanoid, and its whole body was soaked. It almost looked like a drowning victim that had been fished up. It was an eerie, unidentifiable being—but it had one notable characteristic.

Inspecting the figure more closely, Mira saw that its translucent blue hair had the gleam of a spirit's. She sighed with relief and let her guard down. "Oh. Here already, I see?"

This previously unidentifiable stranger was indeed a spirit. With that in mind, Mira recalled her conversation yesterday. The sword spirit Sanctia and the spirit of stealth Wasranvel were friends with the water spirit Anrutine. She'd been left out of Mira's little contract-forming spree, sadly excluding her from the Spirit King Network. Upon learning that the Spirit King's power allowed Mira to overlap contracts without consequence, Anrutine caught up with the summoner as fast as she could.

It seemed she'd done so in just two days. That clearly took a lot of effort, however; she was now fast asleep on the driver's seat of the wagon, exhausted. That was why she looked dead.

"Hello? You still alive there?" Mira walked to the driver's seat, shaking the poor spirit by the shoulder first. That revealed the spirit's face; this clearly *was* Anrutine. Still, she was exhausted enough that there'd be no waking her anytime soon. "Well, what now?"

Since it was possible for Mira to make overlapping contracts at this point, she had no reason not to do so. This problem had nothing to do with that, though. When would Anrutine wake up? Was it all right to wake her?

While Mira pondered this, the Spirit King spoke. He told her that Anrutine had rushed so quickly, she'd depleted her spiritual energy. She'd wake naturally in time, and he asked that Mira take the spirit with her.

“The poor girl will be in for a shock when she wakes up.” Mira dragged Anrutine through the driver’s seat door and began drying her with bath towels. She used three whole towels before she made any progress, which probably proved how much energy Anrutine had spent. After that, Mira unfolded the futon in the corner and laid the spirit on it.

Anrutine would awaken inside the wagon, no doubt while Mira was midflight. How would she react? Mira looked forward to that moment as she departed from the city of Ligret.

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During her flight, Mira plunged back into Soul Howl’s notes.

“Oh ho. Fascinating.”

As she thoroughly absorbed the knowledge within, she happened upon a passage that caught her eye. It was about the commonalities between laborer mages.

Those were the mages who controlled beings other than themselves, such as summoners’ evocations, necromancers’ golems and undead, and mediums’ shikigami. Though laborer mages fell under a single umbrella, fundamental differences meant the subtypes were treated as unique. Soul Howl’s research, however, found a few shared points in the rituals used to cast laborer-mage spells.

“This is so intriguing…” Mira muttered.

While researching synthesized magic utilizing laborer mages’ commonalities, Soul Howl had run into problems. But upon detailed investigation of the systems behind laborer-mage magic, he’d found that the underlying class-specific foundations were akin to each other. Spells of similar function—such as buffs or healing magic—were mostly constructed in the same ways across summoning, divination, and necromancy.

Mira shuddered, quickly understanding what that meant. Basically, Soul Howl had started researching whether any skills *without* equivalent versions could be applied across fields. She recalled the abilities of necromancers and mediums, particular those that lacked equivalents in her own field, summoning.

Reading corpses' memories… Preserving corpses for long periods… Enhancing the five complementary elements' effects… Hrmm. All those are too specialized to use in summoning. What else…?

She remembered what had happened one day in Sentopoli—how she'd conversed with Kagura through Tweetsuke the Suzaku at an Isuzu branch office.

The name of the spell Kagura had used was Synchronized Senses, and it had allowed her to temporarily attach her consciousness to a being she created with mana. She'd mentioned that necromancers could use that spell as well.

If laborer-mage status made that possible for mediums and necromancers, then based on Soul Howl's research notes, Mira instinctively knew that it should be viable for summoners too.

Deciding to test that immediately, she took out a notepad. It contained details Kagura had shared regarding the technique.

Mira had been working on learning Synchronized Senses while studying the *Encyclopedia of Skills*. However, she couldn't use the technique yet. Far from it—even following the instructions word for word, she hadn't made any progress whatsoever. Before finding Soul Howl's notes, she'd started to think that perhaps it *wasn't* possible for summoners.

This calls for further research!

Laborer mages' commonalities and the differences in their learning requirements—she was right to think those factors contained an important hint. With Kagura's explanation and Soul Howl's research notes, she had everything she needed to make a quick breakthrough. So what had caused her not to achieve that previously?

Mira compiled a thorough list of each spell's characteristics, learning conditions, differences, and commonalities.

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“This difference must be what’s preventing me from learning the technique.”

About two hours into her work unraveling Synchronized Senses, Mira finally hit upon what she believed had kept her from learning it. The issue related to the ability’s Physical Manipulation aspect. As Kagura’s use of the ability to pilot Tweetsuke implied, Synchronized Senses allowed the user total control of their target.

A necromancer either controlled their golems’ every movement or ordered them to act a certain way. A medium imbued a shikigami’s base with their thoughts and principles of action. On the other hand, summoners’ weapon spirits and evocations grew and developed individually. A summoning target didn’t manifest from the summoner’s mind, so to learn Synchronized Senses, summoners needed to change the Physical Manipulation element.

“All right. One more push!”

Now that Mira had all the information she needed, learning the ability was only a matter of time. Armed with notes, research, and this new theory, she began speculating on how a summoner could master Synchronized Senses.

There were, broadly, three ways to acquire a new skill. The first was to get used to it through repetition. That was common among warrior classes. As one practiced, the skill’s effects grew stronger. Mira’s specialty, Shrinking Earth, was an example of one skill acquired in that manner.

The second method was a mental version of the first. Common among mage classes, it simply involved believing strongly that one was capable of some ability and not doubting oneself. Her Mana Perception and Mage’s Keen Eye fell under that umbrella.

The third method was to directly engrave a special symbol onto one’s flesh or magical power. Those skills were typically special. They rarely improved over time, but they began stronger than most skills; many could be considered overpowered in their own right. Of the skills Mira knew, Bound Arcana, Mark of the Rosary, and Shepherd to Refuge were in this category.

Nearly an hour passed as Mira speculated. “Hrmm… They didn’t make it easy,” she muttered to herself as she finally started to see the solution to her quandary.

She was adjusting Synchronized Senses’ composition to suit summoners, but that was no mean feat. She could only do so because Kagura had provided such detailed information on the skill’s foundational structure. Since the details were clear, though, Mira understood them well enough to fiddle with the ability.

Mira’s change to the composition of Synchronized Senses would allow her to share her consciousness specifically with someone she’d made a contract with.

“Now, I just hope it works…”

This skill was the kind learned by mental repetition. After firmly drilling the skill’s construction and flow into her brain, Mira gently closed her eyes and focused her consciousness inward.

Various elements mingled in her internal world. In a place impossible even to envision, Mira focused on a strong bond and reeled it toward herself. Soon, she felt a palpable response. She knew the ability had worked.

Though her eyes were closed, her field of vision immediately began to open. She saw the earth and horizon stretch on endlessly. Lush green prairies and deep blue rivers were fully visible to her mind’s eye. This was a different view from the one outside the wagon window; it was a literal bird’s-eye view, courtesy of Garuda.

Good, good. This is perfect! Despite her joy at successfully synchronizing her senses with Garuda’s, Mira realized something was wrong: *I can’t hear anything.*

She’d made a special effort to tweak the skill’s composition, but not its effects, so success would’ve meant being able to hear. Yet even the sound of the wind was absent. Garuda could control the wind, granted, but would struggle to make it totally inaudible. There could only be one reason for the silence, then.

I’ve got to keep training. Mira had thought she’d fully grasped the ability, but there was room for improvement.

She decided to continue in this state for a while, enjoying the sights from Garuda's perspective while she got used to the sensation of their synchronized minds.

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"Ooh. It's finally coming into view!"

Mira had practiced this new skill hundreds of times to really get a feel for it. Two hours had passed since she started, and the sun was setting. Through Garuda's eyes, she saw her destination—the city of Haxthausen—in the distance.

"That ought to be enough for one day."

Releasing the synchronization, Mira cracked open a bottle of yogurt au lait for a quick break. As she enjoyed its refreshing, tangy flavor, she made some quick notes on the results of her practice.

She'd felt definite growth. With each repetition, her senses grew clearer. Now, getting a visual feed after starting synchronization only took her ten seconds. When she'd started, it'd taken twenty. Through two hours of training, she'd cut that time in half, and she considered that a satisfying result.

However, she still only got a *visual* feed. She couldn't yet hear through Garuda. Much more training was clearly needed.

There was another issue—distance. She'd tested her maximum synchronization distance by sending Wise Popot through the window. How far off could they remain synced? That method taught her that the maximum range was about five hundred meters. Any further, the synchronization broke.

Kagura could synchronize with Tweetsuke in Sentopoli all the way from her headquarters... But I suppose I can't compete with a master when I just learned this ability.

Mira's current limit was only five hundred meters, while Kagura had easily exceeded a thousand kilometers. How much had she practiced this skill? Abilities that had to be grasped by feel often required a measure of raw talent.

Well, for a newly learned skill, I'd call this good progress. Mira had found an efficient way to practice; all that remained was to do so.

Reminded once again how difficult it was to best sheer experience, Mira grinned to herself. After all, that also meant that all she had to do was keep practicing, and she'd reach Kagura's level someday.

Investigating from the sky, sneaking in advance scouts… The only limit will be my imagination! Synchronized Senses was an incredible boon for gathering intel. Its uses were nearly boundless.

Imagining the sheer scope of the possibilities, Mira tried one last sync with Garuda. In less than ten seconds, she connected, and a closer view of Haxthausen greeted her.

Releasing the synchronization, Mira thought back. "In hindsight, it's odd," she murmured, referring to something that'd happened a long time ago.

Imagining something and then manifesting real effects—the power of one's imagination becoming real strength—was very much a fantasy phenomenon, although an exciting one.

Mira didn't often remember it—perhaps because it had been so long ago—but for once, she reflected on how she used to train back in the video-game days. The effects you imagined had manifested more fully as you practiced. The more used to them you became, the easier they were to use and the stronger they got.

Remembering that, Mira realized how incredible the game's technology had been. How did it accommodate player input based entirely on imagination, not just preprogrammed commands and actions?

Back when the game first came out, mental manipulation was cutting-edge.

In Mira's world, technology that read and reproduced thoughts had been the basis of immersive VR. She'd taken it for granted at the time, but she'd certainly enjoyed such wonderful technology, although technology-history textbooks claimed that

mental manipulation was more closely linked to medical advances.

At any rate, VR technology had finally burst onto the scene in the early twenty-first century. Back then, it was essentially a different product from what Mira knew. With goggle monitors and controllers you held in both hands, those VR consoles became known as “old-fashioned.” As the technology developed over time, their shape changed, but the fundamental concept of looking at a monitor and physically operating the technology didn’t.

About half a century before Mira’s time, VR had evolved into its current iteration, the immersive kind that input your thoughts directly into a device. Immersive tech perfectly synchronized virtual reality with a user’s thought processes, making it easy to think you really were *inside* a game. That tech was revolutionary, in a word.

The basis of that immersive tech was mental-manipulation technology. Another half a century before that—in other words, one century before modern times—mental-manipulation technology had only been capable of recognizing simple words.

Some decades later, VR technology saw greater evolution. It incorporated mental manipulation and, in the blink of an eye, reached its perfect form. Mental manipulation was indeed the key to VR’s rapid evolution.

As I recall, there wasn’t much progress in the forty years after the tech learned to recognize keywords. But in the decade after, it evolved to take thoughts *as input. Hrmm… Incredible.*

Technology rarely leapt forward at such a rate. While its potential was immeasurable, Mira felt there was something *off* about that. Wasn’t it suspiciously fast? Was ten years *really* enough time for technology to evolve from barely acknowledging simple words to perfectly reading brain signals for complex thoughts and the most minute physical motions?

Didn’t the textbooks mention a revolutionary VR researcher? What was their name again…?

Mira tried to remember, but history wasn’t exactly her best subject. Still, she recollected that that individual was a genius who’d found sudden fame yet had many secrets.

If not for them, would we still use old-fashioned VR? We definitely wouldn't have Ark Earth Online*. Even if we did, I don't know whether I'd have gotten so into it.*

Old-fashioned VR came with many limitations, especially compared to the absolute freedom of today's VR. Mira had been drawn to a world that, despite being a game, felt very real. Could old-fashioned VR replicate that feeling of "reality"? The longer she considered it, the less she thought so.

Remembering all the bonds she'd formed since coming to this world, she smiled. Things had worked out for the best. At the same time, another thought crossed her mind. Would *she* be here today without the revolutionary advances in VR technology? Even if so, this game's control scheme would've been so different. Would fighting have felt as satisfying as it did now?

It may be fair to say that I can only control myself in the game this comfortably thanks to immersive technology, Mira mused, ignoring the fact that she was in a little girl's body now.

She tried synchronizing with Garuda yet again. It went smoothly. On top of her practice, her mental training from the game era was working quite well in her favor.

Just what is this world?

Until now, she'd generally ignored that question in favor of just enjoying the present. After all, this world was beautiful and fun to be in. Still, it *was* once a video-game world. A fictional one, accessed through immersive VR consoles. When she considered that point, it all felt off again. Had this really been a fictional, virtual world, even back then?

Well…*surely* it had. Mira scoffed at the thought. Reality couldn't be playing out like a fantasy novel right now.

But reality as it *had* played out was just as fantastic. The research facility she'd found under the Ancient Underground City only added to the mystery. Frankly, at this point, almost nothing seemed too extraordinary to be true.

"Anyway, we're almost there!"

Navel-gazing would get her nowhere, and Mira didn't have the brain for such high-level concepts anyway. Leaving this world's questions and mysteries to the people in charge of

answering them, she refocused on what she needed to do here and now.

She gazed forward through Garuda's eyes. The sun had already set, and the moon and stars glittered in the sky. Beneath them, Haxthausen fast approached.

Streetlights lit up most of the city. The lights of homes sparsely dotted the outskirts; in stark contrast, the city's main street was brightly lit by the shops that remained open. Seen from the sky, the colorful display was like an endless, sparkling ray of light. The city's neatly divided light and darkness made it very clear which districts were still busy.

Well, this makes finding a place to descend rather difficult…

Mira had Garuda circle over Haxthausen in search of a clearing to land the wagon. Oddly, any spot open enough to land in was also crowded with people, leaving them nowhere to touch down. This city didn't seem to have any dedicated place for flying vehicles to descend either.

Well, there aren't many dungeons around here. I suppose comparing it to another city is unfair.

The Ancient Underground City had been big enough for adventurers of all skill levels to farm, with myriad valuable goods to be found. Meanwhile, there were only four dungeons near Haxthausen, all best for adventurers of moderate strength. They contained large monsters you could hunt for good money, but said monsters tended to travel in groups. A moment's carelessness could lead to disaster. As such, that activity wasn't especially popular among adventurers.

I suppose I better give up and go through the gate like anyone else.

Now that Mira looked around, nobody else was up here in the sky. It was also hard to see the ground this late at night. If she tried to land somewhere, thinking it was empty, and turned out to be wrong, that would be disastrous. She ordered Garuda to stop circling overhead and to land near the city's entrance.

Garuda chirped in response and changed its trajectory, making for the large gate at the end of the main street. Once they were outside the edges of Haxthausen, Garuda descended,

landing the wagon in a meadow some distance from the city road.

Mira desynchronized from Garuda, exited through the driver's door, and thanked her friend for its efforts. The summon proudly spread its wings, as if saying that it was hardly an effort at all. A warm spring breeze passed by.

"I'll need your help again soon, friend." Mira dismissed Garuda, thankful for its reliability. After that, she moved to summon Guardian Ash but stopped herself. "Hrmm... I think that's enough for one day."

It was already past 7:00 p.m., after all. That felt too late to go into town and search for information and lodgings, so Mira decided to camp here for the night.

She didn't camp like any normal person, however. She wasn't building a campfire and having someone stand guard at all times while she slept in a sad little bag. No, she was going to sleep in her cozy home with a roof overhead.

Next to her wagon, she summoned the mansion spirit and, as usual, smiled at it with immense satisfaction. Home ownership was a wonderful thing.

Chapter 22

MIRA RETURNED TO THE WAGON and looked at Anrutine, still passed out in the corner. The peacefully sleeping spirit hadn't woken at all yesterday.

"Now, what do I do about her...?"

Despite how soundly Anrutine was sleeping now, she'd probably wake up perfectly refreshed in a few days, so Mira decided to leave her alone. She took a towel out of the closet and put it over the sleeping spirit. Anrutine's hands moved a little, gripped it tightly, and pulled it close around her. Now, she didn't look much different from a human.

After confirming that the spirit was okay, Mira exited the wagon, then focused in order to summon weapon spirits to stand guard. Soon, she'd created two ashen knights through synthesized summoning and the Spirit King's blessing. They stood by, wielding holy swords.

Ashen knights were convenient summons—both for getting used to the Spirit King's blessing and for practicing synthesized summoning. Mira regularly chose them as her nighttime security team.

Mira looked the knights up and down, confirming that they were complete. "Mm, yes. Very well done." This spell was still new to her, so—unlike other evocations—it didn't come as naturally as breathing, despite her abilities. She needed to focus to combine and link summons.

She looked for defects in the summoning. Though she'd invented a new summoning spell, that didn't mean she didn't need to scrutinize those summons; she'd now have to apply trial and error until they were perfect.

Hrmm... Their armor's thicker, so now it's compressing the dark knight parts I adjusted. I'll have to take a closer look and readjust that sometime.

By repeatedly finding and resolving problems, she'd take step after step toward perfection. A standard process, maybe, but a certain one.

“Someday, I’ll perfect you. Let’s do our best together,” Mira told the ashen knights before opening the mansion door. As she disappeared behind it, the silent knights began patrolling the area outside the wagon and mansion spirit, as she’d ordered.

Apart from rare exceptions, like Sanctia, weapon spirits typically weren’t seen as sentient. But if one watched closely, they might notice that the patrolling knights seemed to have awfully light footsteps tonight.

As for Mira, she drew a bath right away. While the tub filled with hot water, she picked out a drink, then used the bathroom and waited, thinking about that evening’s dinner. Once her bath was ready, she immediately tore her clothes off and jumped in.

Tonight, her window commanded a view of Haxthausen’s towering walls. Though she couldn’t see it now, the city beyond was bursting with life. The sight of the walls, illuminated by the moonlight, was quiet yet steadfast. One almost felt the city breathing.

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Getting out of the bath, Mira opted to put on a full outfit this time instead of just her undies. Not because she’d finally learned to be a little ladylike, of course, but because of her current location.

The mansion spirit wasn’t far from the gates to Haxthausen. That meant, if they really looked, someone close to the gates could see something where Mira was.

So why had Mira summoned the mansion spirit in this area? It was yet another strategy to flaunt the power of summoning.

Someone would surely come to investigate a mansion suddenly appearing outside the city. When they did, she’d greet them with a smile and explain, “This is summoning magic. Train well, overcome adversity, make fortunate contracts, and you could do this too!”

She knew that summoning a mansion spirit was beyond the common person, so her pitch included an admission that it

was a rather difficult task. Still, all she needed to do was let people know it was *possible* for summoners. That was her goal.

After ensuring she was prepared to receive visitors, she had dinner. Tonight's meal was a fresh, piping-hot beef bowl. Thanks to her Item Box, it would've been hot and fresh *forever*. Thankful for that feature, Mira stuffed her face.

After dinner, she devoured more of Soul Howl's written research and perused the *Encyclopedia of Skills*, constantly increasing her knowledge. She also synchronized with the ashen knights as practice, taking the opportunity to see whether anyone was coming to check out the mansion.

I guess people won't really gather here at night...

About five hours after she'd summoned the mansion spirit, she was struggling to stay awake.

Mira was certain that this mansion seemed to have suddenly appeared beside the road. To be fair, though, it had already been nighttime when she set it up, and there was little foot traffic in the area. People might not even notice the mansion until the sun rose. And in fact, based on her looks through the ashen knights' eyes, not a single person had come near.

The only people she saw were gatekeepers at the city gates in the distance. It was probably time for their shift change; about ten had gathered and were discussing something. Before long, half went back into the city, and the other half remained.

It was midnight now. *Working this late? Goodness.* Mira desynchronized, mentally praising Haxthausen's night guards for their diligence. Then she put away the notes and encyclopedia, closed the mansion's shutters, and slipped into her special sleeping bag for a night's rest.

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Mornings in the mansion spirit were truly pleasant. Mira woke just past seven, used the washroom, opened the shutters, and greeted the morning. The early light was the perfect

stimulation to awaken her tired, foggy brain. As it did, she heard commotion from afar.

What an unusually loud morning, she grumbled to herself.

Instantly after, she realized something. The mansion spirit was still outside the city walls, some distance from the road, so wasn't it strange to hear commotion here?

Recognizing that, she chuckled; her scheme had borne fruit. When the sun rose and lit the world, people must've discovered the mansion spirit. Surely their interest had been piqued, and they'd wondered what it was. All according to plan.

Certain of her success, Mira took swift action to raise awareness of summoning. First, she dressed up—or so she thought. She just wore the dress the maids had made for her.

She'd learned one thing from her experiences so far: Defying expectations amplified the power of first impressions. Based on the reactions she'd received, using magic as a little girl impressed people much more easily than using the same magic as Danblf.

That made perfect sense. Which was more astounding? Someone who looked like an expert performing amazing feats easily, or a cute girl who didn't look the part whatsoever? Now that she was stuck in this form, Mira planned to make the most of it.

The sheer commotion... There must be a lot of people!

The mansion spirit's convenience, plus an utter beauty performing the ultimate summoning magic... Mira was certain that combination would improve summoning's reputation.

After dressing well enough to suit her tastes, she threw open the mansion door and gracefully stepped out, but then stopped in wide-eyed surprise.

"What the...?"

She didn't witness quite what she expected. She'd envisioned various people crowding around the mansion in sheer fascination, but those who'd actually gathered were guards and armed adventurers. When they saw her, they raised their swords warily, fully ready to fight.

Mira shuddered at the unexpected sight and looked around, bewildered.

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Mira wasn't the only surprised one. Guards and adventurers had been stationed to surround the mansion. Mira's emergence clearly shook them all, man and woman alike.

"Hey, what's going on? What just happened?"

"A cute girl just came out, right?"

Everyone was confused. This wasn't what they'd signed up for.

"What's the plan? She's scared," an adventurer asked the guard next to him.

That guard wore finer armor than any of the others. He must've been the captain in charge of this operation.

Perhaps because she was suddenly surrounded by an armed mob, the girl who'd emerged from the mansion jumped in surprise, then looked around in confusion.

Though very distressed by what he saw, the knight captain responded to the adventurer sternly. It was possible that the girl was the great phantom thief, or connected to him, so they had to remain wary until they knew what she planned to do.

Having communicated that to his cohort, the captain slowly approached Mira, hoping to find out just who she was.

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Mira herself was still pondering what the hell had brought this small army here. Then, amid the hushed whispers, she heard telling words exchanged.

Did he mention the "phantom thief" just now? Could he mean the same...? As she got the gist of the situation, she spotted the well-dressed soldier—seemingly the one in charge—walking in her direction. *If things are as they seem, then he must be...*

As the captain moved, the ashen knights automatically positioned themselves to remove an interloper.

“Enough. Stand down,” Mira told the knights. She intentionally said it audibly to show the guards that she had no ill will.

The ashen knights stepped aside as she instructed, waiting beside their master. Amazingly, that seemed to set the guard captain at ease. When he saw the knights’ movements, he sheathed his sword and approached Mira more comfortably.

Once he’d closed the distance between them to five meters, he stopped and asked, “Are you willing to talk?” His stern look was gone, replaced with an inquisitive expression.

“Of course. I couldn’t ask for a kinder offer,” Mira assented, facing him head-on. She knew that a conversation was the likeliest solution; after all, this was just a misunderstanding.

When Mira readily agreed, the captain relaxed and sighed in relief. “All right. Good.” But that relief was fleeting. He tightened up again a moment later, demanding, “First, answer this—are you in league with Fuzzy Dice?”

That was exactly what Mira had expected. They’d surrounded her suspecting that she was in cahoots with the phantom thief.

“No. I’m a simple adventurer. I heard rumors that Fuzzy Dice was arriving in Haxthausen soon, so I came running to apprehend him myself.”

Mira showed her adventurer’s license as if it were a police badge. It was still in the cute card case she’d been given. The captain came closer, scrutinizing it from two meters away.

“I see… Whoa! An *A-rank* adventurer at that!” Confirming that the license was real, the captain was stunned to see Mira’s rank.

When the other guards and adventurers heard that, more chatter rose among them. That was to be expected; A-rank adventurers were among the best of the best. They held a rank worthy of admiration.

“And you’re here to help rid us of the phantom thief to boot? Ah, it’s very reassuring to have an A-rank adventurer on

our side! People like you don’t visit us often these days, so this is a big help.”

It seemed Mira’s license and rank earned her a whole lot of trust. The captain’s wariness faded entirely; he was fully welcoming now.

“Oh ho, really? I thought this event would lead to a gathering of high-caliber adventurers.”

Why hadn’t other A-rank adventurers come out for this? Mira’s curiosity was piqued.

A Fuzzy Dice appearance was a major event that resounded in even faraway cities. The Adventurers’ Guild Union had posted an urgent request to apprehend him. The reward was extremely generous, attracting even more attention. It was certainly a perfect opportunity to seize fame and stand out even among A-ranks—or so Mira thought, subconsciously equating the situation to a video-game event. But reality was seemingly quite different.

“From what I hear, those adventurers flocked here in droves at first. When they arrived, they attracted spectators. Someone there told me that it was like an annual festival.”

The captain recollected his acquaintance’s experience with Fuzzy Dice. The event had been vivid and overwhelming. Ten A-rank adventurers had arrived, either in response to the Adventurers’ Guild Union’s request or because they were personally called in. Even if a fiend that could level a city had appeared, that combined force would’ve fought it off. Everyone looked forward to their exploits, trusting that they’d win.

But when it came down to the fight, they’d been overwhelmingly defeated. Those ten up-and-coming A-rank adventurers hadn’t stood a chance in hell against Fuzzy Dice. To add insult to injury, he’d wrapped them in bamboo mats and thrown them onto the union’s doorstep.

“Such an easy victory against ten A-rank adventurers… He’s clearly a formidable fighter.”

The man she’d met at the baron’s mansion had been immensely strong. Just watching him fight, she’d known she only saw a fraction of his power. If he *was* Fuzzy Dice, then according

to the guard captain, he'd easily defeated ten A-rank adventurers at once. He and Mira might just be evenly matched.

"Yes. I hear he's incredibly tough. Those poor adventurers had so many expectations on their shoulders, and after that, all trust in them was lost. Worse, there's a bit of a problem with pursuing that thief now…" Sighing, the captain added with a sad chuckle, "It makes *us* the bad guys."

"Right, right. Since he's a noble thief, and all."

"Exactly."

Back when Fuzzy Dice first appeared, people considered him a simple criminal. But he became a star as he racked up heists and a trend became clear. The pattern that emerged was that he only targeted villains—people ceaselessly surrounded by rumors of wrongdoing that he personally verified.

That had happened the day before yesterday too.

Baron Ardoloris was an evil man. No wonder the noble thief had gone after him. Indeed, Fuzzy Dice had a sense of justice that spurred him to Mira's aid even when his clothes were in the wash. His state of undress and misunderstandings aside, his strength and sense of justice were genuine. Of course people hailed him as a hero.

What did that make people who stood against him, then? Villains, of course.

Opposing him gave an A-rank adventurer a negative image, undercutting their influence. As a result, almost none took missions to arrest him. The only ones who did were testing their skills or observing Fuzzy Dice's work; few at best wholeheartedly attempted to imprison him.

To be fair, I'm *not really interested in bringing him to justice either.*

Mira's objective was to question the thief and find out whether he knew where Artesia's orphanage was. She was ready to apprehend him, but hardly interested in jailing him. In fact, she planned to release him as soon as she had what she wanted.

Not that she'd say that now, of course. Mira spoke with the captain as if she genuinely planned to turn Fuzzy Dice in.

Chapter 23

"GOODNESS. I'M JUST HAPPY you're here to help. For a second, I was really worried," the captain said with a sigh of relief. This situation must really have stressed him out.

"Well, apologies for startling you," Mira replied. "When I found myself suddenly surrounded, it threw me for a loop. I say we call it even."

Now that the suspicions had been cleared up, the two laughed together. Still, Mira found herself curious about how this had happened; mobilizing such an armed force took a lot of work. She asked the captain why he'd thought she was working with Fuzzy Dice.

"Last night, we received reports of a giant, suspicious bird circling over the city," the captain began.

He then explained how they'd responded. When they looked up at the sky, they saw that a giant bird was indeed soaring in circles overhead, evidently searching for something. The captain had wondered if it was performing recon on Haxthausen for Fuzzy Dice. The thief was the talk of the town right now—two days were left before his predicted arrival—and they were preparing various countermeasures against his impending heist. It made sense for the phantom thief to start recon, or so the captain thought.

Not wanting to let the chance slip, he'd summoned every available guard and pursued the bird. After a while, it landed outside the city walls. Checking the area carefully, they found that a mansion had appeared out of thin air. On top of that, two powerful-looking knights guarded it.

While surprised, the captain instinctively knew that the building must be Fuzzy Dice's hideout. His instincts were wrong, of course, but one could hardly blame him for thinking so. A mansion's presence implied the presence of an owner.

An arrest would be a major breakthrough, whether of Fuzzy Dice himself or a cohort. With that in mind, the captain

summoned adventurers who'd undertaken the request for Fuzzy Dice's capture, never taking his eyes off the mansion.

He'd found many takers, as Mira could tell at a glance; they now surrounded the mansion. They'd tried to question Mira's knights and gotten no response. Finding that even more suspicious, the captain had unsheathed his sword and demanded the knights tell him whether they were with Fuzzy Dice. It was then that they counterattacked.

Remembering that moment, the captain chuckled. "Oh boy. When you get trounced and tossed around that easily, you have to laugh."

"Uh…sorry about that," Mira said with a dry grin.

She'd given her guards a few orders. First, they were to cut down any monsters that approached. If humans approached, they were to remain cautious. If the humans showed malice, they were to counterattack. However, they were *not* to use lethal force.

"No, no. You don't need to apologize. I just jumped to conclusions. Besides, they held back."

It really was Mira's fault for plunking down her mansion right outside the city gate, obviously, but the captain seemed not to mind that at all. He was even grateful for the knights' restraint.

"Thank goodness for that. Jeez," he muttered, glancing again at the ashen knights' blades. "Anyway… Some stronger adventurers among us challenged them, and you can tell how that ended up. Surveilling your mansion was the best we could do."

The mob tried taking on the knights a few times, but they were quickly deterred. In the end, they gave up even trying to converse with them and just waited for someone to emerge from the mansion. That was when Mira came out.

After the captain explained this, he looked expectantly at Mira's knights. "By the way, your guards still haven't said a word. Are they A-rank too, perhaps?"

He sounded hopeful; perhaps the forces currently assigned to deal with the phantom thief weren't up to it. Unfortunately,

the ashen knights weren't even human, let alone adventurers.

"No, no. Those are my summons," Mira replied, dismissing one knight as proof. It disappeared like an illusion, its valiant and reliable figure vanishing into thin air.

There was commotion among the onlookers, but the captain was speechless. He just gazed at the place where the knight used to be.

Finally, he managed, "I thought they were quiet. Now I see. They weren't human after all. *Summoning* magic, at that..." Shock still evident, he stared at the other ashen knight. After muttering that he'd never seen summoning magic of that kind, he turned to Mira and asked, "What sort of spell is it?" His eyes were again expectant.

"It's just a weapon spirit, really," Mira answered. "Though I did modify it a little."

Her reply clearly confused the captain. After all, weapon spirits were elementary summoning magic, but the ashen knight had the air of an advanced evocation. A summoner's individual level could produce differences, yes, but that knight was far removed from a simple elementary summon.

Perhaps as a result of Mira's claim, the crowd heckled her. She was obviously exaggerating; the ashen knight was clearly advanced summoning.

"That's...a weapon spirit?" The captain stared at the knight in disbelief.

Looking back and forth between him and the crowd, Mira chuckled to herself. *They're certainly impressed.*

Her answer had been no lie. The ashen knights were indeed real weapon spirits. Through the power of synthesis, Mira had fused dark knights and holy knights, then armed them with Sanctia through the Spirit King's blessing.

After another long look at the knight, the captain pressed Mira further. "Hmm... Is it really one of the weapon spirits I'm familiar with? I have summoner friends, and I'd remember if I saw them summon such a thing..."

Mira was more than excited to answer. "They're real, genuine weapon spirits," she declared before simultaneously

summoning three more.

The crowd instantly exclaimed in astonishment, and the captain's eyes widened.

"If you have summoner friends," she continued, "you've surely heard that summoners can only duplicate artificial spirits like weapon spirits, right?"

Simultaneous summoning, and duplicated summoning for that matter, were unique to weapon spirits. Summoning a spirit like Eizenfald or Wasranvel produced the target themselves, and naturally, only one of each existed.

Weapon spirits were special in that regard; their existence resided within the caster. Thus, as long as the caster had mana to give the summon form, as well as summoning slots, they could conjure as many of the summon as they wanted.

Things differed somewhat for Sanctia, but Mira had found during her research that her summoning spell worked much the same. When she summoned Sanctia, she didn't summon Sanctia the *person* but Sanctia the *holy sword*.

"Yes, I've heard that. So that really is a weapon spirit." The captain knew how those spirits worked thanks to his friends, so despite his surprise, he was convinced.

Meanwhile, the adventurers' jeering ended abruptly. Some started whispering, those who knew about summoning explaining things to those who didn't.

After a while, the onlookers' exchanges ended, and they cheered. Perhaps this time, they could best Fuzzy Dice. Perhaps they could get one over on him. The adventurers were reassured, and the captain gazed with great interest at Mira's ashen knights.

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"Ah. By the way..." Since she currently had the onlookers' attention and goodwill, Mira judged this the perfect opportunity to dismiss the mansion for now. "This building is summoning magic too."

The mansion behind her disappeared instantly; now, the area was meadow as far as the eye could see. As Mira expected, the crowd erupted again. They could hardly believe their eyes.

“Incredible… I wondered how you built that in the space of an evening. Yet another summon…” The captain approached the mansion’s location in disbelief. He reached out his hand and stepped inside. Confirming that nothing was there, he just repeated, “Whoa…” like a child.

That put Mira in a good mood, since she was working hard to bring summoning back into the public eye. “Of course. Isn’t it incredible?”

The others around them spoke up as well.

“You can summon *houses* too?!”

“And here I figured she summoned a carpenter.”

“Does that mean we won’t need to camp anymore if we bring a summoner?”

“Hell yeah. A summoner could broaden our horizons like never before!”

“This is huge!”

As she listened ecstatically, Mira remembered something she’d forgotten. Flustered, she interjected, “Listen, you must understand…”

She explained the difficulty of summoning a mansion spirit. Because of its mana cost, you either had to train hard or be blessed with naturally high mana reserves. You also needed to treasure your bond with spirits. Most importantly, you needed to *find* a mansion spirit first. In short, you couldn’t summon one as a matter of course.

Mira made that very clear; she didn’t want the onlookers to expect the impossible of new summoners. Still, she wanted to show aspiring summoners the field’s *potential*.

“I figured it had to be an incredible spell,” the captain agreed. “It is an entire building, after all.”

The others indicated that they understood too. The mansion spirit was small for a proper home, but quite large for a

summon. Anyone could understand that conjuring something so big was sure to be difficult.

“Summoning a house, though… That must help a lot during your travels. Being able to spend the night in a proper house rather than camping is a charming prospect,” one adventurer remarked. Words of agreement spread through the rest of the group.

The spirit allowed for comfortable rest, even on rainy or windy days. By setting up weapon spirits as guards, like Mira had, you could sleep tight. You could even save on lodgings, if necessary, and you wouldn’t have to pitch a tent when you were tired. The adventurers practically clamored over this new potential use for summoning.

Then, Mira brought up another opportunity. “There’s more to summoning. For example, you can do this.”

She cast [Evocation: Undine] in front of the onlookers. Undine emerged from the magic circle, glanced around, and sidled closer to Mira. She was surprised by the sudden crowd.

“Sorry for startling you. Don’t worry, they’re not bad people,” Mira told her gently. Then, ready to show off both the utility of summoning and her bond with the spirit, she took a cup out of her Item Box.

“Undine, may I have some water, please?” she requested, holding out her cup.

Agreeing, Undine happily put her hands over the cup. She held them together, as if forming a bowl. Water poured from her hands into the cup, filling it in no time, and Mira chugged the water all at once.

“Mm, refreshing!” she cried. “Obtaining a mansion-spirit contract may be difficult, but water-spirit contracts aren’t. If you love, honor, and are willing to walk alongside a spirit, they’ll repay your feelings. That’s the kindness of spirits. Summoning magic turns your bond into power. With a water spirit’s power, you can drink clean water anywhere you please!”

Mira proudly advertised the power of summoning, further extolling its utility. She detailed how summoning a water spirit cost very little mana; how the water they produced was

permanent, unlike that created by sorcerers; and how the mana cost was far lower than that of the equivalent Ethereal Art.

While it varied depending on the spirit's type, it was true that summoning primordial spirits didn't cost much mana. On the other hand, the caster expended mana every time they used the spirit's powers. That procedural limitation was necessary to keep a single summoner from defying the natural order.

While using a spirit's power did consume a caster's mana, it was far more efficient; generating the same amount of water with Ethereal Arts would take twenty times the mana.

After Mira's detailed explanation, the captain said, "Wow. Very interesting." Although he was apparently impressed and probably thought summoning sounded convenient, he didn't seem to think much more about it.

The adventurers around him saw much greater potential in summoning, however.

"That means we could free up the luggage space we allotted for water..."

"If it's really that mana-efficient, we'd carry fewer mana potions too."

"Safe water, anywhere we want... Man, that'd be something else."

Water was an indispensable resource when exploring dungeonsand traveling. A summoner with a contracted water spirit could easily fill that need. When they learned that, the onlookers were shocked.

For summoners, however, that was common knowledge. Why wasn't it better known?

A few adventurers muttered to themselves.

"I didn't know you could use summoning that way."

"They don't just bait monsters and haul luggage, huh?"

The only summons they seemed familiar with were dark knights, which could carry much more than they looked able to, and holy knights, which drew enemy attention. The decline in both the quality and quantity of summoners was no doubt the reason knowledge of them had also declined.

However, Mira was disrupting that. Her incredible summons and knowledge of the field made an overwhelming impression on this crowd, publicizing her peers' potential.

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Mira's outreach was surprisingly successful, and its effects became evident quickly.

"A whole lot of dungeons lack water, and lots go deep underground. Those ones are usually where the money's at, so this could be real helpful."

"Yeah. How much water you can carry directly affects how long you can stay in a dungeon, after all. If we secured an easy water source…"

The significance of accessible water, and the increased exploration time it would allow for, became the main topics of conversation.

Back in the video game, players hadn't needed food or water, so they farmed large quantities of loot in the depths of high-value dungeons. There were fewer former players in this reality, and all their actions were more cautious, so loot from dungeons' lower depths circulated in much lower quantities.

That wasn't due to the difficulty of dungeons but the dungeon environment itself. No shortage of adventurers could traverse a dungeon's deepest depths, but without potable water, it was impossible to stay there for long. After all, adventurers still had to use resources to *get* there.

Summoning had the potential to solve that problem entirely. Experienced adventurers especially understood how attractive that prospect was.

Mira took the opportunity to extol summoning's allure even further. "There's more to water than drinking it, of course. We have lots more bodily needs we struggle to meet in dungeons, especially without water," she said pointedly, focusing on the female onlookers.

Water wasn't just for hydration. Clothes needed to be washed; more importantly, *bodies* needed to be washed. She'd experienced this problem firsthand in the Ancient Underground City, so she knew it would be an effective selling point. When she explained how to do laundry and shower through summoning, the girls practically jumped for joy.

Mira's strategy had been a success. She smiled, knowing she'd successfully brought these women to the side of summoners.

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The adventurers' discussions intensified. They'd witnessed incredible potential, after all. Their conversation quickly shifted from summoning's utility to how to secure a summoner.

The first problem was, naturally, finding a summoner who could summon a water spirit. On top of that, they raised the point that summoners themselves were rare. Even if the adventurers were lucky enough to find one, would that summoner be capable of summoning a water spirit? If they *couldn't*, wouldn't they have to wait for their next chance encounter with one? If they waited all that time, who knew when the adventurers could finally take the summoner into a dungeon?

Once their discussion advanced that far, the adventurers naturally looked to Mira, all as hopeful as could be.

"Uh...erm, I'm rather busy, I'm afraid," she said, crushing those hopes.

All the onlookers grew disheartened at once. However, perhaps because they'd expected that answer, they quickly recovered. One asked Mira a question: Mira had claimed that water spirits weren't hard to make contracts with, but what did the process actually entail?

In the end, the adventurers decided they'd simply need to prioritize meeting a summoner, even if that summoner lacked a water-spirit contract. Then they'd just help the summoner grow

until they *could* summon such a spirit. This crowd was forward-thinking indeed.

This is going exactly how I wanted!

Whatever their rationale, nothing made Mira happier than seeing adventurers willing to find a summoner and help them grow. If that summoner progressed well and stood out among the crowd, demand for summoners would increase, which would lead to greater supply. A positive cycle, if there ever was one.

“All right, let’s discuss water-spirit contracts, shall we?”

This was the deciding moment, Mira realized. She gave the most complete explanation of water-spirit contracts possible. Making sure to be realistic for the average adventurer, she recalled the likeliest methods and locations for obtaining a contract.

As she did so, some adventurers realized how important her lecture was and immediately whipped out pens and paper.

Chapter 24

“ANYWAY, ALL IN ALL, compatibility matters most. The desire to be friends, the joy of being together... Such things are more important than anything when it comes to summoning. Contracts are about creating bonds, after all. Summoners are often called laborer mages, but I don’t think that’s accurate. We don’t force spirits into labor; we work together with them. Like me and Undine here, for example.”

Summoning contracts were based on various circumstances, conditions, restrictions, and expectations, but compatibility was vital. It was all about teamwork, as Mira said in summary.

At that point, it was time for questions. She gave the adventurers precise answers; though she forgot simple things like people’s names, she had a surprisingly good memory when it came to summoning. Receiving more information than they could’ve hoped for, the adventurers were equally surprised and happy.

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“Thank you! I’ll look into this as soon as I can!”

“Thanks for teaching us. Summoning really is incredible.”

Once Mira finished passing on the knowledge she wanted to, the female adventurers who’d listened most intently thanked her and ran off. They headed straight for the Mages’ Guild, naturally.

The Adventurers’ Guild Union had numerous support services to help adventurers form parties. Adventurers could search for compatible members based on rank, class, age, gender, and many other factors.

The women planned to use that service to find freelance summoners. Their first choice would be a summoner able to summon a water spirit, but they’d settle for someone with the

potential to gain that ability. No doubt the Mages' Guild would be busy tracking down summoners for a while.

"Um, could I ask a favor?" someone asked.

Mira turned toward the voice addressing her and saw six women who seemed to be from the same group. Based on their outfits, they comprised three front liners, a mid-liner, and two back liners. The back liners looked especially young.

"Oh, a favor? What is it?" She couldn't help smiling at the lovely team. Whatever the situation, she was happy when girls sought her aid.

"Our friend Layla here is a summoner," the stranger said, introducing a girl wearing a green robe. "But she can't use any evocations."

Upon that introduction, Layla greeted Mira cheerfully. "I'm Layla!" She gazed directly at Mira with hopeful, perhaps envious, eyes.

"R-right. I'm Mira." The impure thoughts Mira experienced upon the girls' approach made her flinch away from Layla's innocent, expectant eyes, though the thoughts obviously weren't realistic. Clearing her throat and collecting herself, she urged the girls not to beat around the bush. "Now, what's the favor you're asking?" Why were they introducing her to a summoner who couldn't use evocations?

"Well, we'd really like you to teach Layla to use evocations."

"To use them? Not *learn* them?" Mira cocked her head in confusion.

When she'd heard that Layla couldn't use evocations, Mira assumed that meant that the girl couldn't learn the most basic evocation, weapon-spirit summoning.

To make summoning contracts with weapon spirits like holy and dark knights, a summoner had to defeat those spirits using their own power. By defeating them, they earned the spirits' respect.

However, as weapon spirits were *spirits*, they were quite strong. Even the weakest were D-rank, and C-rank status made someone a veteran adventurer. A summoner just starting out

couldn’t defeat such a foe easily, especially not a summoner as young as Layla. She looked hardly thirteen years old.

Still, it was no exaggeration that a summoner’s journey began with weapon spirits. Those spirits were used as a standard, both in terms of forming bonds and contracts, and in proving one’s power as a summoner.

As artificial spirits, weapon spirits couldn’t progress on their own. They literally resided in weapons created by human hands and given meaning by human use. Therefore, a summoner had to train such evocations from the get-go, which made the spirits good indicators of skill.

An inability to use them would greatly restrict a summoner’s future contract options. Some might be lucky enough to encounter and befriend a spirit, but that was exceedingly rare—and usually more challenging than learning weapon-spirit evocations.

Thus, newbie summoners sought ways to overcome weapon spirits, even if it entailed considerable expense. Mira had helped many figure out how to do just that. After working with a number of them, she’d gathered enough information to devise one reliable solution. She’d intended to teach it to Layla, but it seemed that wasn’t necessary this time.

The girl who’d first addressed Mira was Layla’s big sister, Sara. According to her, Layla had already learned a weapon-spirit evocation. “Um…about two months ago.”

Sara told Mira what had happened eight weeks prior. Back then, the young summoner had yet to make a contract with a weapon spirit, which naturally troubled her to no end. Then the group bumped into a summoner of incredible skill. That summoner, a middle-aged man, declared that he was working to popularize summoning throughout the world.

“Wonderful!” Mira was deeply moved to learn that someone else out there was fighting for the future of summoning. Who was the man?

When she asked, the girls replied that they only knew his name—Bruce. They explained that they’d started off cautious. After all, when Bruce saw Layla struggling with her magic, he suddenly approached her and offered to help, unprompted.

“Well…one can hardly blame you for caution,” Mira muttered, shooting a glance at Layla. She was still just a little girl. How come a grown man wanted to help her? Alarm bells would obviously ring.

“Bruce was actually really kind, though.” Sara smiled broadly. He must’ve been quite the man.

“Yeah!” Layla chimed in. “He taught me lots of stuff.” She explained that, as they spoke with Bruce, they’d gradually dropped their guard. The main reason was his summoning skill; he showed them a ton of evocations.

As a result, Layla began to admire the man. She gladly accepted his offer to help her learn a weapon-spirit evocation, and they began their journey together. As for *how* they planned for Layla to defeat a weapon spirit, incredibly, they chose the same tactic that Mira had come up with so long ago—Bruce had indeed taught the girl the blasting-stone method.

Mira had devised that method for contracting weapon spirits in her Danblf days. It was a very reliable strategy for newbie summoners, although using it definitely required blasting stones. That was due to weapon-spirit characteristics Danblf had learned about during his research.

To contract a weapon spirit, one had to defeat it alone. Furthermore, while doing so, long-range attacks such as those from bows didn’t count. But how could weapon spirits tell the difference?

Focusing his investigation on that point, Danblf managed to discover the determinant. It was mana. A weapon spirit remembered and distinguished the mana of whoever it fought. That mana detection had a roughly two-meter radius, which was why bow attacks didn’t count.

Blasting stones were perfect for such battles. They could be called long-range attacks; you had to throw them, after all. However, one thing distinguished them from arrows and bombs. To activate a blasting stone and render it usable, you had to infuse it with your own mana, which would detonate it.

That caused a weapon spirit to detect the mana within the blasting stone and recognize the mana that defeated it, resulting in a contract. It might’ve seemed like a cheap trick, but most

summoners shrugged that off, since the task was Herculean without it.

There was also another special work-around method—a protracted battle. A long fight could cause a weapon spirit to remember someone. It would recognize the victor even if they finished it off with an arrow or bomb.

That method wasn't realistic, though. Spending hours fighting a tireless husk wielding a sharp weapon was difficult even for a trained warrior. It was practically impossible for an up-and-coming summoner unless they brought a veritable fortune in restoratives. Blasting stones could help summoners overcome that hurdle.

The latter method was extremely efficient, but not flawless. Producing blasting stones was a problem. One needed the crafting skill Refining, so only Danblf and a few people to whom he'd imparted his knowledge could make them.

In other words, blasting-stone supply was a serious issue. Worse, the number of blasting stones with enough power to safely defeat a weapon spirit was even lower. Yet the summoner who'd offered to help Layla had given her one. Generous indeed.

"Oh ho, a blasting stone! I don't know the man, but that was very kind of him!" Skill aside, manufacturing blasting stones was expensive, so Mira praised the stranger as a model summoner for future generations.

"I'm grateful to him to this day. Thanks to him, Layla smiles much more lately." Sara gently patted Layla on the head. No doubt she'd worried, and no doubt this had made her very happy.

Layla acted a little embarrassed, but there was determination in her eyes. She wanted to use summoning to help Sara from now on.

"Yes, yes. That's wonderful to hear." Mira couldn't read minds, but she could tell at a glance that Sara and Layla were very close. Seeing such loving siblings warmed her heart.

"I could never thank him enough! Not everyone would give away a treasure like that to a stranger they'd just met. We

couldn’t bear to waste that opportunity, so we thought of a way to make sure we used it!”



At that point, the topic abruptly moved away from their gratitude toward the skilled summoner. Perhaps because of how sincerely Mira listened, Sara's tone became more and more excited. She was recounting all this like a heroic tale.

Bruce had sat in on their meeting to discuss how to use the surefire strategy, but he offered no input beyond outlining previous success stories.

It wasn't school, after all. Coming up with things themselves was important.

According to Sara, the summoner had only provided them with one blasting stone and information on past successes. Had they devised a plan of attack from that alone?

Bruce had tried to promote their growth as a team, Mira realized. That only made her more curious about him. She was sure that, if they ever met, they'd have a great time drinking together.

While Mira reflected on the kind of man Bruce seemed to have been, Sara continued her story. "He said he wouldn't help with the battle, but he'd gladly aid us as much as we wanted in our preparations."

After using the past successes as points of reference to brainstorm with the group, they finally settled on a strategy: a trap. By capturing the weapon spirit in a hole, they could limit its movements. Then, Layla would throw the stone in.

They couldn't afford to let anything go wrong, so the summoner advised them that they needed to practice. They rehearsed several times.

The contract condition requiring a solo kill didn't extend to the prep before the fight, so it was no problem if Layla's friends helped her prepare. When the team learned that, they immediately began setting the stage for the fight.

They needed a hole of the proper size and a route that guaranteed the spirit would be lured into it. Those apparently took an entire month to prepare.

They made the route by piling sandbags, creating a narrow corridor, and dug the hole at the end of that. Bruce also helped

them prepare that path. Thanks to him, it turned out even more perfectly than they expected.

"We tested it on a monster first to make sure it'd work."

They couldn't afford to let anything go wrong, so they needed to practice. So the summoner had advised them, and they rehearsed several times. Their results were spectacular. As long as they could herd a target into the corridor, it always fell into the hole.

Their preparations complete, the day finally came. After all the time they'd put into the plan, it went off without a hitch, and they drove the spirit into the hole. The only thing they hadn't practiced with was the blasting stone, given its value. However, Layla calmly activated it as directed and scored a direct hit. Thus, she managed to defeat the weapon spirit alone.

Sara noted that the blasting stone was much stronger than they'd expected. The others laughed. It seemed the elder summoner had given them a particularly high-quality one.

To guarantee a kill, one had to aim for some measure of *over*kill. Since she'd done similar things in-game, Mira was even more impressed with this "Bruce" man. He indeed knew what he was doing.

After seeing that they'd defeated the weapon spirit, Bruce quickly departed. Many other summoners were struggling at the start of their careers, and he wanted to help as many of them as he could, as quickly as he could.

"What a wonderful attitude. I wish I could meet the man." Mira was amazed. Bruce was truly a guiding star for summoners.

But she'd forgotten what the girls had said earlier. Despite how proudly she'd told the previous story, Sara was sad now. "So as you've heard, she already has a weapon-spirit contract. But now we don't know how to actually…"

Despite possessing that contract, Layla just couldn't properly summon the spirit.

Bruce had given her some training after she'd learned the spell, but when it came to actually performing it on her own, things were different. She couldn't grasp the feeling of it, and she'd been failing ever since. Worst of all, the general lack of

summoners meant that there was nobody they could beg to teach her.

"Hrmm. I see..." Now understanding what Sara had meant about learning to *use* the evocation, Mira looked back at Layla.

When their eyes met, Layla bowed deeply. "Please!"

From appearances alone, the girl looked older than Mira; her honest pleas despite that proved her sincerity. More importantly, it was Mira's policy to help anyone who needed assistance with summoning.

Thus, she confidently replied, "Leave it to me."

Chapter 25

"I'D LIKE TO SEE THINGS for myself. Could you try to summon something?" Mira asked.

"Huh?" Layla looked up, confused. They'd just finished explaining that she couldn't summon anything. Now Mira was asking her to summon. Wasn't that contradictory?

Mira didn't expect Layla to summon *successfully*, though. "I want to observe how you construct the spell. That'll show me the problem," she said nonchalantly.

Her confidence had a solid foundation. Teaching wasn't one of Mira's specialties, but summoning was her ultimate area of expertise. During her time as one of the Nine Wise Men, she'd been hailed as the foremost summoner. People had asked her questions, naturally, and her answers became sharper over time. When someone told her what aspect of summoning troubled them, she could pick out the general cause in no time.

"Um, okay..."

Mira's powerful ashen knights and mansion spirit had demonstrated her skills; if she requested this, she had to have a rationale. Recognizing that, Layla tried the method Bruce had taught her. Her mana spread, but rather than forming a magic circle, it vanished into thin air after a few seconds.

"Erk..." The failure depressed Layla. "Why does it do that?"

After watching Layla's results, Mira looked at the other girls. The three front liners were a knight, a warrior, and a samurai. The mid-liner was a hunter, and the other back liner was a priestess. Priests were the most common mages, and summoners were the least common.

Based on that lineup, Mira knew the problem. Taking into account their formation and how the spell had failed, she asked, "Layla, was it? You're used to casting Ethereal Arts, aren't you?"

"How did you know?! Yes, I am. And I'm pretty good at them too!" The girl beamed. Sara and the others praised her Ethereal Arts as well; they were indispensable to adventuring, after all.

Knew it. Hearing that, Mira was certain that she understood why Layla's evocations failed.

She'd predicted Layla's aptitude for Ethereal Arts based on her position in the party. Ethereal Arts was a special field of magic that anyone with mana could use. The group's priestess could use it too. It was a convenient field; as long as you learned the spells, you could employ their myriad useful effects.

When Mira looked at the group, she saw the priestess helping out with support and healing; on the other hand, she saw a summoner who couldn't even use her basic summon. It was obvious which of the two the party would expect to take care of any required Ethereal Arts. Layla finding herself in that position had caused her failing evocations.

"As a mage, you should know that different magic schools use different processes," Mira said.

That prompted a nod. Bruce had taught Layla that, yet while she'd tried summoning the way he instructed, she still couldn't do it. She'd started to worry that either Bruce's teachings were wrong or she misunderstood them.

But Mira told her something different. "You can't use summoning because you're *too* focused on the process." When summoning, the spell process wasn't the only important thing.

Mira had seen many people suffering from this problem in-game. Most had switched fields to summoning after being impressed by Danblf. In other words, they'd all been other types of mages beforehand.

Of course, that was in the video game. Layla was no gamer. In this reality, talent—an individual's innate magical quality—was important. There were people best suited to being sorcerers, priests, and even summoners. When they picked a field, their magic changed to suit it, leaving them unable to wield anything but their chosen magic and Ethereal Arts.

However, if you were talented in multiple fields, a skill called Endogenous Sense let you awaken powers you hadn't chosen. It decreased your aptitude in both fields but increased your adaptive capacity greatly. Used well, the benefits outweighed the costs.

Still, in an age when summoners were such a minority, would anyone willingly adopt that class? As much as it stung, Mira had to doubt that. Thus, she surmised that summoning had been Layla's only option, which made her even more interested in the girl.

"Ethereal Arts and summoning differ not just in process, but in how they use mana as well."

Layla couldn't employ evocations because she'd gotten too comfortable using Ethereal Arts. To cast a spell, you went through several steps. Selecting the spell, aligning it with a target, concentrating your mana, deciding things like trajectory, speed, and range... Truly countless processes could be required, depending on the spell involved.

That was fundamental magical knowledge. The problem was one of these steps, an element common to all spells.

Layla listened carefully, as if Mira were a professor. "Common to all spells... Hmm. Um...oh! You mean concentrating mana!"

"Correct," the "professor" replied. The girl's studiousness improved Mira's impression of her even further.

Concentrating mana was an important part of spellcasting. In doing that, you isolated the mana necessary for a spell. That step also influenced the state of the mana.

Most experienced mages controlled their mana's state subconsciously. The state to release flames was "expulsion." To heal someone, it was "activation." Every spell had a state that suited it. Mira never really paid her mana's state much mind, though. With proper mana concentration, you could cast a spell even if your mana's state was neutral.

But when you deepened your understanding of magic, and became an expert who sensed its flow automatically, you changed. When envisioning a spell, you could change your mana's state to suit it.

People commonly referred to that as "breaking their limit." More precisely, they just subconsciously shifted their mana to a state they could use more efficiently. Mira explained this proudly, as it was something she'd learned through her own research.

How valuable was that research on subconsciously assigning and changing mana states? Well, when they heard it, Layla and her party's other mage were both shocked.

"Her mana state? How's that related?" asked Sara, who'd been listening from next to Layla.

She didn't know much about magic, so she had no sense of how important this was. Her sister was still a summoning novice. If people could cast spells without changing their mana's state, why couldn't Layla do so? That was Sara's real question.

Mira's pupil wondered about that too. How did Mira's explanation connect to her current problem?

"It's related to Ethereal Arts," Mira replied, then asked Layla to cast the spell she was best at.

What would Mira learn from this? Though confused, Layla could tell that the girl had a wealth of knowledge, so she quickly assented. "Okay!"

She cast an Ethereal Arts spell. It was Illumination—and no ordinary Illumination. The ball of light flew around in accordance with her will, even brightening and dimming as she pleased.

Mira was genuinely amazed by what she saw. *Well, well… She looks young, but she's got experience.* The girl had reached a level of mastery already.

The only mages Mira knew who could do that with Illumination were players who could go toe to toe with raid bosses, and those hailing from the Tower of the Ethereal. In short, in terms of Illumination specifically, Layla was already among the best casters—and Mira was now certain that skill level was why she struggled to activate evocations.

"Your skill is genuinely incredible," Mira told her. After praising Layla's magic, she added, "That's exactly why it's become an obstacle to your progress."

Acting as much like a professor as she could, she explained Layla's predicament. Despite being a novice summoner, the girl was an expert Ethereal Arts user. When she cast Ethereal Arts spells, she subconsciously changed her mana's state. Otherwise, she couldn't have controlled that orb of light as well as she did.

“Wow… I had no idea.” Layla was surprised, but happy as well. After all, she’d done something that only an expert could. That made all the effort she’d put in worthwhile. The thought that this made her unable to summon worried her, though. She awaited Mira’s next words with bated breath.

“Your skill is astounding. Still, your subconscious change in mana state is the problem.” Mira continued her explanation with a dignified demeanor, obviously getting into this “professorial” act.

When trying new things, including spells, a person typically didn’t know how to do them. Therefore, they tended to rely on their other experiences. Through much research, Mira had found that that especially applied to mages. When trying to cast new spells, they compensated for a lack of experience by imagining the sensations of other spells. Spells of the same type or function might share features, but summons were somewhat special in that regard.

“The Illumination spell you showed me had mana in the state of ‘change.’ But there are other states, like release, fixation, flow, diffusion, condensation…” As she spoke, she showed off more Ethereal Arts—a fire art for “ignition,” ice for “cooling,” water for “extinguishing,” wind for “drying,” and drilling for “digging holes.” Finally, she asked Layla, “Now, what state do you think is most apt for summoning?”

“What state…? Um, ‘release’?” Layla answered weakly. However much she thought about it, she had no idea.

“Unfortunately, no. The correct answer is ‘fixation.’”

Evocation spells summoned contracted allies. Their effect could be more precisely described as creating gates for said allies to travel through. There were vital formulas engraved on those gates that couldn’t be disturbed by surrounding influences; as such, a “fixation” state was critical for summoning.

Smiling, Mira reassured her student. “To be fair, this is my field of research. It’s natural that you don’t know this yet.”

Then she got to the core of the problem. When Layla attempted evocation, she groped for the feeling she got when she used Ethereal Arts. That shifted her mana to the “change” state, the state *most* incompatible with evocation.

“When you excel at one kind of magic, you tend to reach for the feeling of it when you condense mana. As a result, compatibility worsens, causing the spell to misfire. Incidentally, a ‘release’ state is also a poor match for summoning.”

“What should I do?” Layla understood that her Ethereal Arts aptitude was the problem, but she couldn’t go back in time and undo it. How could she fix this issue? She watched her teacher uneasily.

Mira flashed a cheerful smile back at her. “Come now, it’s easy. If you do that subconsciously, all you have to do is consciously correct it. Now that you know how it works, it ought to be easy.” She moved to stand next to her pupil. “First, designate a summoning point.”

“All right!” Layla immediately replied.

Under Mira’s guidance, she progressed through the steps of summoning. Having designated a summoning point, she had to decide what to summon. Naturally, she chose a dark knight, since that was her only option.

“Now, this is the most important part,” Mira said. “Forget all about Ethereal Arts, and focus only on summoning. Envision an unchanging gate and sturdy armor. Imagine the mana you pour in giving them form. Do that, and concentrate the necessary quantity of mana.”

All spells shared the mana-concentration process, which made it the step likeliest to cause an overlap in imagery. Mira gently yet precisely guided Layla’s consciousness, careful not to disturb the mana-concentration process. Once the mana stabilized, Layla was finally ready to summon. Now, she just had to manifest an evocation. Would she succeed, or would this be another failure?

Worried about what she’d do if she failed despite all this guidance, Layla turned toward Mira for a moment. The master nodded confidently, as if certain that her teachings would never result in failure.

Layla felt an odd relief. Her teacher was younger than her, yet seemed so much bigger in this moment. She felt as if she was being watched over by the god of summoning and could do

anything. With the confidence Mira's gentle push provided, Layla finally cast the spell.

[Evocation: Dark Knight]

Perhaps because this felt so different from anything she'd experienced before, Layla gazed in surprise at the summoning point she'd designated—the place where her mana gathered and became a magic circle. From that black circle emerged a suit of armor. Compared to Mira's ashen knights, her underling's physique and armor were simple. Still, its figure was the very symbol of a summoner's beginnings.

Once upon a time, Mira had started with that summon. Feeling a tinge of nostalgia, she congratulated Layla on taking this first step. "There you have it. Success! That's a dark knight if I've ever seen one."

As for Mira's pupil, Layla had a grin on her face as she gazed at what she'd done.

"You did it, Layla!" Sara cried. Her wish—Layla's first summoning!—had come true. Even happier than the person who'd summoned the dark knight, Sara hugged her sister and sobbed. "You did it! Great job," she repeated over and over.

Ah, sisterhood, Mira thought, smiling in satisfaction at her work.

Chapter 26

“THANK YOU SO VERY MUCH!”

“Thank you!”

Sara and Layla voiced their gratitude in unison. Their friends behind them also thanked Mira.

Mira simply responded that she’d only done what was right as a fellow summoner, then offered some tips to hone Layla’s operation and development of her dark knights.

Layla was happy to have finally succeeded, but Mira’s lecture now began in earnest. “Listen, the true value of a dark knight lies in its versatility and growth…”

She touched on many points. Weapon spirits had the capacity to learn, so one could teach them swordplay. Showing them how to maneuver and fight let them act on their own judgment as well. Most importantly, as long as the summoner had mana, they could produce as many weapon spirits as they wanted.

Mira couldn’t stop herself from talking about magic, especially when it came to her favorite field. Layla might’ve felt good about herself after her successful summoning, but the endless teachings left her a bit confused. Still, she could tell from Mira’s earnest tone that this was important. Before long, she took out a pen and paper to take notes.

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“Now, the trick of simultaneous summoning is to treat multiple summoning points as one. Don’t divide your concentration, but also, don’t fixate on one point. It’s like you’re forming a single whole…”

Perhaps because she’d found prey—er, a *worthy student*—for the first time in so long, Mira’s lecture had only picked up steam. She reached her favorite topic, simultaneous summoning, in no time. She summoned two, then three, then

ten evocations at once, showing off the technique she'd cultivated.

Angling to imitate Mira, Layla tried to produce a couple of the dark knights she'd now learned to summon, but they appeared far from simultaneously.

That wasn't her fault, of course. Simultaneous summoning was difficult to master; those who did were welcome in the Linked Silver Towers. It wasn't a technique someone would learn overnight, even taught by the greatest summoner of their era. And naturally, a beginner who'd just learned to summon dark knights could never conjure two simultaneously.

Layla's mana pool soon dried up. "Aaah... I'm starting to feel dizzy..."

"Layla, are you all right?" Sara gently caught the girl before she fell.

"Yeah. I just used a little too much mana..." Layla tried to stand straight on her unsteady legs, but her low mana made it hard for her to even keep her eyes focused.

Oh ho. I've heard of this before... But now I see this is what happens when you run low on mana.

Vitality—measured in HP—affected bodily functions when it ran low. Likewise, mana—measured in MP—affected the senses. That had been a major change in the game's shift to real life.

Mira had such abundant mana reserves that she had never used enough to exhaust them. She'd spent a lot of mana during the fight against the Machina Guardian, but she'd never felt dizzy. Mana usage had a fair amount more wiggle room than vitality, which began impeding bodily function when reduced by 30 percent.

I wonder whether I ought to test my own limits sometime, Mira thought as she watched Layla.

Then Sara spoke up. "Thanks again for all you've done. I think she's exhausted, so we'd better be going. I hope we can repay you someday."

Having expressed her heartfelt gratitude, Sara headed back to the city, Layla in her arms.

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“Ah, wonderful. A good deed, done so early in the day.”

After seeing the party off, satisfied that she’d saved one lost summoner, Mira dismissed the dark knights she’d popped out as examples. Then, she finally prepared to enter Haxthausen.

“That’s an A-rank for you,” someone called to her. “And your knowledge is incredible. You’re reliable indeed.”

Once Mira had confirmed that she wasn’t working for Fuzzy Dice and finished demonstrating the power of water spirits, almost all the gathered adventurers had cleared out. When she looked backward, though, she saw that a few guards remained. They’d been listening to her summoning lecture the entire time.

“Oh. Still here, I see.” She’d spent so long engrossed in her lecture that she’d forgotten them. She was surprised they’d hung around.

Realizing that Mira had just remembered him, the captain chuckled. “Yep. You see, my friend here wanted to talk to you about Fuzzy Dice.”

He presented a young man who apparently knew a lot about the phantom thief. The young man had gray hair and wore a black trench coat. He looked wise for his years, kind of like a scholar.

“Pleasure. My name’s Julius.” The young man introduced himself and bowed, then immediately observed Mira with evident fascination. His gaze wasn’t malicious or lascivious; it held intellectual curiosity. “By the way, your summoning skills were very impressive. Things might’ve been different decades ago, but these days, summoners like you are extremely rare. The only famous summoner I’ve heard of lately is the one who’s become the talk of the guilds.”

Julius’s words seemed to remind the captain of something. “Hm? A summoner…with silver hair…” he muttered, gazing at Mira.

Heedless of that, Julius focused sharply on Mira's most distinctive features. As the captain mumbled to himself, Julius described those features one at a time. "Long silver hair, blue eyes, a trendy magical-girl-style outfit, and outstanding summoning skills." Finally, with a grin that said he was certain, he slowly opened his mouth to continue, "You must be the one who was just active in the west—"

Before Julius finished his sentence, the captain yelled, "You're the Spirit Queen?!"

Although the captain had cut him off, Julius's triumphant smirk remained on his face.

"Well, I suppose that's what people call me these days," Mira acknowledged.

"Spirit Queen" was a title she'd received after the fight against Chimera Clausen, so she told the honest truth—partly because she thought getting intel on Fuzzy Dice would be easier if she used her fame a little.

"Really?! Wow. I didn't truly put two and two together until Julius here said something. You see, the rumors state... I mean, wow! Having someone like *you* on our side might really clinch a victory after all!"

Gossip about Mira's beauty had seemingly spread even here. Unfortunately, rumors also tended to be exaggerated. The captain knew that well. He was going to say that she was much younger than the rumors indicated, but he was too excited by such a powerful ally's arrival to care.

The other guards were reeling too. Could Mira really be the Spirit Queen, the topic of the hottest gossip in the nation? Some seemed disappointed; no doubt they'd expected a voluptuous beauty.

Still, several of those quickly changed their minds. Mira wasn't what the rumors claimed, but she was still overwhelmingly beautiful. Some even seemed to prefer the real version.

As the guards behind him got louder, Julius seemed a little annoyed. "Honored to meet you, Your Majesty."

Though it was her first time seeing Julius, Mira quickly guessed why his face had clouded. The young man's flexible brain had managed to discern fact from fiction amid the rumors, but his long-winded phrasing had backfired on him. The captain had cruelly taken away his chance to show off his insight.

"Uh... Look, er... You figured that out first, right?" She did her best to reassure him, then urged him back on topic. "More importantly, can you tell me about Fuzzy Dice? Please?"

"Right. That's a good idea," he replied, forcing a smile. "Um, well... Nice to meet you. As I said, my name's Julius. I work as an assistant at the Wolf Detective Agency."

After introducing himself fully and again bowing, Julius held out a small piece of paper. It was a business card, and it indeed read *Wolf Detective Agency: Assistant Julius*. Mira graciously accepted the card, though she was surprised to come across one again in this fantasy world.

The back of the business card listed the agency's address and displayed Grimdart's seal of approval. Trust was important in detective work, and forging the seal of approval was an extremely severe crime, so detective agencies often displayed it proudly to win trust.

A detective agency. I see. No wonder he belabored the point. After all, detectives and the like always talked in an elaborate, long-winded manner. Such was Mira's flawed understanding, at least.

She deposited the card in her cute card case. Inside was another business card; that was the first one she'd received in this world, alongside the discount coupon she used so appreciatively, from Cedric Dinoire.

"Hrmm. Wolf Detective Agency..." she said. "And what does this assistant want to tell me about Fuzzy Dice?" A detective agency, a phantom thief—the tension in that combination was virtually palpable to Mira, who watched Julius expectantly.

"Well, first, I want to thank you for your help with this matter."

After that, Julius gave what sounded awfully like an elevator pitch. According to him, nobody knew as much about Fuzzy Dice

as Chief Detective Wolf. Back when the thief first sent someone his calling card, the victim had consulted that detective. As a former adventurer, Chief Detective Wolf was both strong and mentally sharp. He was also well trusted. Everyone was excited to see him take on the elusive phantom thief.

Fuzzy Dice was undefeated, and public opinion now hailed him as a hero, but the chief didn't give up. Despite his losing streak, he'd pursued Fuzzy Dice to this very day. This time, he had a special plan. It required help, so he was searching for collaborators.

"I'm sure your abilities will impress the chief. Even if you can't help the agency, we'll tell you everything we can about Fuzzy Dice. Having another ally will never hurt us. What do you say?" Julius gazed directly at Mira. His eyes betrayed no ulterior motive, yet the glint in them made him seem certain that she'd accept.

"Hrmm. Very well. Tell me what you want from me, and I'll decide after that. But you should introduce me to the good detective first." Frankly, Mira had no intention of refusing. She'd just arrived in town, and info on Fuzzy Dice was what she wanted most.

Even in a direct confrontation, knowing your enemy could swing a battle. In the game, Mira had charged headlong into combat without knowing a thing. She'd learned from experience and struggled to seize victories. In reality, though, that'd be risking her life for nothing. *Know thy enemy, and so on.*

"Thank you. I can take you to him right now." After a moment's relief, Julius bowed again and began walking toward the gate.

Jumping into the driver's seat of her wagon, Mira summoned Guardian Ash. The gray bear was excellent at pulling the wagon on land, after all. It stood excitedly in front of the vehicle and attached the harness of its own volition. The guards watched in silence.

"Apologies for the commotion," Mira said to them, then followed Julius in her wagon.

"See you later!" someone called out from behind her. "We'll try to look after things!"

She just waved without turning back to face them.

Ah, I've matured.

Like Solomon, she'd gather information before a fight. Remembering how impulsive she used to be, Mira praised herself for her own growth.

Afterword

HOW WONDERFUL! It's Volume 12. My utmost thanks to everyone who picked up a copy!

As always, I can't thank you enough for the lovely art you bring in, fuzichoco. It's great to have you! Also, dicca*suemitsu, you're doing an amazing job with the manga. Every single chapter is just so beautiful! Thank you too. Really, thank you to everyone involved in this book's publication!

Anyway, this is our Volume 12 afterword. Looking back, I think I mentioned moving in the afterword for Volume 11. If you're curious about what happened... It went great! We signed the contract at the end of May, spent all of June moving in, and have lived in our new home since July!

The real work came when we had to move all my manga. I have so many volumes that trying to count would drive me crazy... But we moved around twenty boxes of them altogether.

You know, I've got so many books, and a lot of them ended up stuffed in the closet, still in boxes. I'd love a bigger apartment. Of course, it can't be that easy, but I can dream. I can dream of a manga room that fits every single book I have. If my home had a room where I could relax and read like I was in a manga café... that'd be the best!

One of my dreams is to relax in my manga café room and binge-read a certain dozens-of-volumes-long manga in one sitting! When that series is done, of course. There are lots of other manga I love too, and it'd be great to reread them at my own pace.

In the distant future, when I'm old enough to be a grandpa, I'll reread manga from this era. How will I feel when I do it? I can't wait to find out.

I'm also curious about how advanced games will be when that time comes. Will there be a PlayStation 10 by then? What games will it have? Will VR be mainstream? And which games will I be playing?

I can only speculate now, but someday, today will be the past. What does the future hold? I'm certainly interested.

—RYUSEN HIROTSUGU



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