

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

NOVEL 13

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Julius
"*Please* take it easy."
"I apologize for making you worry. But, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine!"
Chief Detective Wolf
"Hrmm… You took quite a spill. Are you sure you're all right?"
Mira


The cute yet loud trio swarmed around her.
Mira didn't particularly mind the situation, so she played along and answered their question.
"Uh, well, my friends actually made this for me."
"Wow! It's handmade!"
"They must've put a lot of work into it!"
"I'm jealous."

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

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WRITTEN BY

Ryusen Hirotsugu

ILLUSTRATED BY

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment



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Chapter 1

MOST PEOPLE CELEBRATED Fuzzy Dice as an honorable phantom thief who targeted only wrongdoers and donated colossal amounts of money to orphanages. Considering that, he probably knew something about the orphanage run by Wise Man Artesia.

With that in mind, Mira had finally made her way to the city of Haxthausen, situated in the nation of Linkslott, which bordered Grimdart—a city which housed a nobleman that Fuzzy Dice was after.

Passing through one of the gates that served as city entrances, one saw a broad street lined with shops and houses. The very first thing that came into view was a large half-moon-shaped plaza. There were gates in the north, south, east, and west of Haxthausen, but regardless of which gate one passed through, they all contained similar plazas. They were quite large; the main streets of the plazas inside were nearly a hundred meters from the gates.

According to a history-buff friend of Mira's, the plazas had been constructed for use in times of war. But these days, in peacetime, they mostly served as scenery. Shops and stalls bustled as adventurers, shopkeepers, and townsfolk shopped and haggled good-naturedly among each other.

Making its way through one plaza was a Guardian Ash-drawn wagon with Mira aboard—as well as Julius, who was navigating. Julius, an assistant at the Wolf Detective Agency, was bringing Mira to meet Chief Detective Wolf.

According to Julius, *no one* knew more about Fuzzy Dice than the chief detective himself. And considering that one was a phantom thief and the other was a detective, they were likely rivals of sorts.

"There...sure do seem to be a lot of women in masks," Mira noted. "Is a festival going on or something?"

Upon inspection, about half of the women in the plaza had eye coverings, and small stands selling masks were set up in the

middle of the square. At first glance, it almost looked like a Venetian carnival.

Mira had an inkling of what was going on. She turned to ask Julius—who was walking beside her—why exactly the women were wearing masks, all the while clinging to the hope that it was just part of some cultural event.

Unfortunately, her hopes were dashed as Julius confirmed the truth that she'd dreaded: The women were fans of the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice.

"For them, though, it probably isn't much different from a festival," he noted.

Julius explained that the women had apparently heard somewhere that Fuzzy Dice had sent a calling card and shown up in droves. Furthermore, they'd flocked here from all over the continent. It seemed—much to Mira's dismay—that the Fuzzy Dice fan club's intelligence network rivaled a full-fledged nation's.

At that point, Julius let out a chuckle. "I never would've expected that it'd be like this…"

Nothing was more soul-crushing than seeing firsthand how popular some guys could be, but that was a concern for another day. Now, Mira had a more pressing concern. Assuming everything went well and she apprehended Fuzzy Dice, would she find herself on the wrong side of the masked women? The fact was, she could feel quite a few icy gazes looking in their direction, perhaps owing to Julius' affiliation with the opposing Wolf Detective Agency. The onlookers were frankly paying Julius such close attention that she felt their eyes turn to her as well.

Mira suddenly felt uneasy as she realized that Fuzzy Dice's reputation as a gentleman thief would make a number of people see them more as foes than friends.

Weirdly enough, the cold stares seemed to be focusing more on *her* than Julius. Suddenly cognizant of that, Mira began thinking about her current circumstances. In addition to the legendary phantom thief Fuzzy Dice, and the affable detective's assistant Julius, Mira—a beautiful young girl—had suddenly appeared.

Visualizing the situation, Mira quickly became aware of just what role people would assume she played. She stealthily put some distance between herself and Julius. But given how little space there was on the wagon—and the fact that Julius was walking right beside Guardian Ash, who was pulling it—convincing anyone that she didn't know the detective's assistant would be a tough sell.

I'm in a tricky spot, huh...?

She'd become known as the Spirit Queen, so when she bested Fuzzy Dice, word would *definitely* get around that she was the one who'd done it. Julius had just confirmed that Fuzzy Dice had fans all over the continent. Those women were normally civil, but what would they do to the person who cuffed their beloved hero?

It wouldn't be the first unfortunate incident involving an idol...

Mira shuddered as she recalled all the times such incidents had played out in the real world. Getting stabbed from behind or something suddenly didn't seem far-fetched. In this world, where all kinds of people strutted around with swords at their hips, it was even easier to imagine someone coming up stealthily behind her with a knife in hand.

There was a chance that she'd have to spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder. Reflecting on her future assassin's possible presence, she smiled bitterly to herself, seriously considering whether finding a more peaceful solution would be better.

While it might only have brought temporary peace of mind, Mira tried to keep up the charade of not knowing who Julius was, despite following his directions as she guided the wagon down the main street jam-packed with Fuzzy Dice fans.

"I'm guessing this city has always had this convenient layout."

Here, too, Haxthausen's unique construction was on full display. First, outer walls completely surrounded the city. At the center of each wall was a gate, beyond which was a large half-moon-shaped plaza. Five large streets stretched from the center of

each plaza to the center, right, left, and diagonally in either direction.

If one gazed down at Haxthausen from above, it would look as if one had put a square tilted at a 45-degree angle within a larger square, then drawn a cross within them. Haxthausen was divided into northeast, northwest, southeast, and southwest quadrants. Each had a governor responsible for ruling that section of the city.

Mira was now passing through the large street directly across from the western gate. From a bird's-eye view, she was traveling through the cross-shaped part of the city.

That happened to be Haxthausen's prime real estate. Therefore, very expensive-looking shops lined the street. It was already apparent that this was the high-class part of town, but the closer Mira got to the center of the cross, the more opulent her surroundings became. The farther down the street they went, the taller the buildings on either side rose, and the more churches and public buildings they came across.

"Ah, that's..." Mira muttered unconsciously, glimpsing a particular shop as they moved. It was an expensive-looking jewelry store that fit that part of town perfectly. It was just the kind of place you'd expect to find women walking around, smiling merrily.

"Is it fair to guess that the Spirit Queen is fond of glamorous jewelry? If you like, we can pay you in that. We could even get something custom-made..."

As one might expect of a detective's assistant, Julius was attentive. Just from Mira's slight glance and mumble, he'd picked up on her interest in the shop. Still, he seemed unable to discern quite what she was thinking.

"No thanks. I've got no interest in jewelry that's only for show," said Mira, who was clueless when it came to accessories. Shooting down Julius's offer, she also addressed something that'd been bothering her. "More importantly, would you mind not calling me the 'Spirit Queen'? I cringe whenever I hear it." People using that moniker always made her feel a bit weird.

“I think it’s a wonderful nickname. But if that’s what you want, fine by me. I’ll stick to ‘Mira.’” Judging from his dour expression, Julius really thought it *was* a wonderful nickname.

Even worse than his sudden grimace was the sound of the Spirit King’s voice echoing through the back of her head. He seemed to think her request was tantamount to denying his existence. All Mira could do was explain to him that that wasn’t the case.

“Well, if you aren’t interested in jewelry, what caught your eye?” Julius asked, seemingly just out of curiosity. If she’d just been casually looking around, she wouldn’t have started commenting on something.

“Hm? I just happened to remember that the amber from here is pretty famous.”

“Amber?” He was doubtful that remembering such a thing was reason enough for her to speak up—even more so because she’d said she wasn’t interested in jewelry. Paying attention to such small details was part of his job, so he peered at Mira, unconvinced.

“Yes. Amber. But not just any ordinary amber. Specifically, rainbow-drop amber.” Mira pointed to a shop ahead. It also sold jewelry and had large windows full of rows of necklaces and bracelets.

Something different separated this shop from the last: the clientele. The shop she’d seen before was full of women, but this one looked to have plenty of men as well. Not only that, most seemed to be adventurers.

“I see. That certainly sounds like something a top-class adventurer would notice. I guess my eyes aren’t quite discerning enough…*yet*.” Julius peered at her with an earnest desire to continue improving. Being not just cute but a hard worker to boot, he’d seemingly figured out what Mira had inferred from the hints she’d given him.

The rainbow-drop amber Mira had mentioned was a beautiful gemstone full of iridescent flecks and was more than ten times as expensive as normal amber. Nowadays, it was only found

deep in forests alongside the fossilized remains of rainbow-swallowtail butterflies. The butterflies fed on sap, sucking down so much of it that their stomachs swelled. For some reason, they fossilized once in that state, and the sap in their stomachs became rainbow-drop amber.

"If you'd like, we could reward you with rainbow-drop amber. We're on good terms with specialists who work to process and refine it, so we could set you up with something much better than you'd find in a shop," Julius suggested casually.

Considering just how self-assured he looked, it was fair to assume that he could get his hands on just about anything.

"I'm intrigued, but I'll wait to discuss that with the chief detective in person," Mira said, deflecting his offer.

Right now, she wasn't in the mood to discuss pay. Her goal all along *had* been to catch Fuzzy Dice, but then to get him to lead her to the orphanage she was trying to find. And now, she was worried above all about how she'd fare afterward. Depending on how things went, it was entirely possible that she'd let Fuzzy Dice go. In light of that, she couldn't very well start discussing her reward with Julius.

That said, rainbow-drop amber was an intriguing offer. Owing to its beauty and scarcity, that material wasn't cheap. But that wasn't what was most special about it. Rainbow-drop amber was also extremely compatible with ability-boosting enchantments. Perhaps due to trace amounts of the magic used by the butterflies, rainbow-drop amber boasted dozens of times the enchantment capabilities of normal amber.

Ability-boosting enchantments were usually found on special weapons or accessories granting additional effects. To adventurers who made a living risking life and limb, they often made the difference between life and death.

The enchantments, as their name implied, boosted base abilities such as muscular fortitude, general physical strength, and mana. While rather simple, their effects were quite noticeable, so they were very much in demand. Furthermore, an enchantment's strength determined just how much it could boost an ability. And

the same enchantment could have different effects depending on the materials used. Using a material that could elicit powerful effects with a weak base buff would be a complete waste of time.

One critical factor was more important than anything else: the involvement of specialists like those Julius had mentioned. A base buff's strength aside, a specialist who helped to unlock the full potential of an enchantment was absolutely vital. Mira could extract and improve enchantments' effects using refining skills, but she couldn't *create* those enchantments. She wanted to make their effects as strong as possible, but without the enchantments themselves, she couldn't even begin doing that.

Still, wouldn't Solomon have his own personal enchanters? Although Mira made a mental note to check out the store later, she simultaneously mulled over asking Solomon about that the next time she saw him.

Unfortunately, however many enchanters there were, crafting enchanted goods was something that took time. For now, Mira simply enjoyed looking around and window shopping. She and Julius continued down the street for a while, occasionally chatting idly, until Julius stopped at last.

In front of them was an extravagant-looking mansion. Perhaps most eye-catching was the large sign hanging in front of it, which read THE BARON HOTEL. The opulent manor appeared to be the kind of place where one could enjoy a taste of the high life.

"Please wait in the lobby—the chief detective will call you. In the meantime, feel free to take your wagon to the stables over there. Show the stablemaster the card I gave you earlier, and he'll let you park," Julius said, hustling into the hotel. He seemed to have high expectations of Mira and was eager to let the chief detective know that the Spirit Queen had arrived.

"Well, I suppose I'll just hear them out. That's all…" Mira muttered as she drew closer to the stables, thinking about what to do.

First and foremost, she needed to get information on Fuzzy Dice. That was crucial. The issue was how to get the detectives to cooperate. From her conversation with Julius, she got the vibe that

they were dead set on capturing Fuzzy Dice. Perhaps they were driven by a sense of pride or simply obsessed. Either way, when it came to capturing Fuzzy Dice, Chief Detective Wolf—or whatever his name was—seemed extraordinarily determined. It reminded her of the Interpol inspector who famously chased around a certain master thief, third of his name.

That was a far cry from Mira's stance. She couldn't quite muster up that kind of enthusiasm. Her objective was just to get the location of the orphanage in the unnamed village out of Fuzzy Dice. She didn't even have any proof that he could point her in the right direction, but she felt it couldn't hurt to ask him. If he knew the orphanage's location, it'd be gravy. And if he didn't... Well, she'd just have to find another lead.

If she'd just been able to ask that day when they bumped into each other in the underground room, she might not have had to worry about this now. It seemed even worse that she now had to deal with Fuzzy Dice's fans. To protect her physical well-being, as well as her peace of mind, it was probably best not to antagonize them.

But I'd feel bad getting the info and then bailing...

Julius had said he'd hand over the information even if Mira didn't plan to cooperate, but that didn't mean that she felt good about it. If someone did you a favor, you ought to pay them back. That thought troubled her to no end.

But something else was troubling her as well.

Mira quietly opened the wagon's side door and inspected the interior. There, she saw the water spirit Anrutine still sleeping soundly. Even a spirit was vulnerable in such a state. The Spirit King had said she'd wake up in a couple days, but Mira wasn't sure how much longer it would take. Yet she needed to get ready to go after the phantom thief. She was pretty certain that she wouldn't be around when Anrutine finally woke.

For that reason, she summoned an ashen knight inside the wagon to act as a bodyguard, then left the spirit a note on the heater. It quickly explained what was going on and expressed

concern for Anrutine, letting her know that she didn't need to rush or push herself too hard.

As Julius had said, all Mira needed to do was flash his card, and she could park her wagon without issue. That said, the attendant got rather excited upon seeing that Guardian Ash was pulling the wagon. According to him, he'd encountered countless creatures pulling vehicles over his thirty years there, but this was apparently his first time seeing a gray bear doing so. Not only that, but documenting the creatures he saw pulling the vehicles was apparently his favorite hobby.

With parking settled, Mira got out of the wagon, reflecting on how niche that hobby was. She looked over at the older man fondly; he was busy eagerly photographing the bear.

Cameras were expensive commodities, so Mira suspected that the camera's owner wasn't just the parking attendant but the hotel owner himself. Or perhaps the owner knew about the attendant's hobby and had lent him a camera. If so, they must've been kind.

After letting the man take his fill of pictures, Mira airily dispelled Guardian Ash just as the man began to puzzle over where exactly he'd house the bear. When she did, the man gasped in shock—just as Mira hoped. Afterward, realizing that the bear had just been an evocation, he chuckled.

Having shown him that summoning was alive and well, Mira headed to the Baron Hotel's lobby.

"Wow. They really went all out with this place."

When she entered the building, it really felt like stepping into a baron's residence. The top of the grand staircase was graced by a portrait, and a painting of an unfamiliar landscape hung beside the chandelier. There were also urns and other assorted decorations that looked quite pricey. Perhaps they'd been placed there to give that very impression.

Only a smattering of guests was present, including merchants, adventurers, and wayfarers. The reception desk was near the grand staircase, but there was no way Mira would be staying at this hotel, so she had no reason to venture over there.

Finishing her look around the lobby, Mira took a seat among several other guests and waited for Julius.

Chapter 2

“AH. THANKS SO MUCH for waiting, Mira,” Julius said from the top of the grand staircase, several minutes later, bowing as soon as he recognized her.

“Oh. You must be her. Sorry to have kept you waiting,” said the man who’d appeared in front of her alongside Julius. As he spoke, a warm smile broke across his face.

This was surely the Chief Detective Wolf that Julius had spoken of. He had the strong build one would expect of a former adventurer, and his grizzled face matched his steely voice perfectly. Moreover, a keen intellect radiated from his striking eyes. His entire being gave off the impression of someone with both brains and brawn, a man whose guard was utterly impenetrable.

What surprised Mira the most was that he sat in a wheelchair. It didn’t look like the kind she’d often seen used in hospitals. Rather, it looked as if a rocking chair had been fixed to a frame with treaded tires.

Mira’s heart pounded as she finally looked at the famed detective whose arrival she’d anticipated. As his job title suggested, the man before her was essentially the archetypal detective in a rocking chair—at least in terms of appearance.

“A-ah! You must be Chief Detective Wolf. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you,” Mira replied, then stood up and basked in his steely, investigator-like presence.

The grand staircase stood before the chief detective, so Mira made to walk toward him.

“Oh dear. Would you mind waiting right there, Miss Mira?” the chief detective asked suddenly, bringing her to a halt.

“All right, but…” Needless to say, she didn’t have the heart to ask someone in a wheelchair to come down a flight of stairs.

Seeing her hesitation, the chief detective laughed as if nothing were the matter. “It’s only proper that I come to you. I was

the one who asked to meet with you, after all." Before he'd even finished speaking, he pushed his powerful body out of the wheelchair and stood.

"Whoa!" those around them gasped, observing the display of vigor in astonishment.

However, it didn't seem like Chief Detective Wolf's legs could quite match his spirit.

"Ngh!" the chief detective groaned before his knees buckled, his disability impeding him visibly. The commotion he'd created when he stood had yet to wane as he clung to the railing like a bedsheet hanging on a line.

A moment later, everyone watching cried out as the detective slid down the handrail as if it were a slide.

"Hngh!" He let out a sharp cry as he slipped off the end of the railing, landing with a thud in the middle of the lobby. As one might expect of a former adventurer, he sat up quickly and hushed the worried voices around him, assuring everyone that he was completely fine.

"Good heavens, I'm sorry you had to see that. I thought I'd almost recovered—but not quite yet, I suppose!" the chief detective said with a hearty laugh, still sitting in the middle of the floor.

Judging from that display, he hadn't *completely* lost use of his legs.

"Ouch." Wolf moved his legs slowly, then muttered with a grave look, "Have they gotten worse...?"

"They aren't getting any better because you keep doing these kinds of things, Chief Detective. Haven't the doctors and healers told you that the best thing to do is rest?" Julius complained with a sigh, making his way down the staircase with the wheelchair. From his unconcerned voice, Mira guessed that this might be an everyday occurrence.

"I certainly botched that one." The chief detective smiled as he took Julius's hand and eased himself back into the wheelchair.

When Mira saw his abashed smile, the strapping and intellectual image she'd had of him a moment earlier vanished. Suddenly, he came off as affable and charming.

"Hrmm... You took quite a spill. Are you sure you're all right?" she asked, erring on the side of caution. As far as she could tell, he seemed totally fine, but she wanted to make sure.

"I apologize for making you worry. But, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine!" Wolf said, demonstrating that he was still perfectly capable of moving his entire body.

But hadn't he groaned in pain while barely moving his legs a moment earlier? Perhaps that pain had already gone away?

A grin spread across Chief Detective Wolf's face as he saw Mira's puzzled look. She guessed that his wheelchair was imbued with some analgesic effect. That would explain why he'd smiled so pleasantly as soon as he sat down in it.

"*Please* take it easy," Julius admonished the chief detective with quiet exasperation. While the chair's analgesic effect masked the pain, he explained, it wouldn't heal Wolf completely. If he kept overtaxing his body, it would never heal. Just how many times did the detective need to hear it?

"Yes, you're right. But I'm fine now." Having endured Julius' wrath, the chief detective slouched slightly.

As she witnessed this exchange, Mira smiled sheepishly to herself over just how off the mark she'd been about Wolf. It seemed he wasn't the gritty, hard-hitting detective that she'd imagined.

The guests watching around them broke out laughing. They weren't doing so derisively; rather, they seemed in on the joke. Amid the laughter, the chief detective smiled abashedly.

"May I ask what happened to your legs? If it's a small enough injury, my summoning magic might be able to heal it," Mira said.

"Wow. Summoning magic can heal as well? It really is useful for everything," the chief detective said with surprise. But he went on to admit that the injury wouldn't be easy to heal. The pain was the lingering effect of an old wound that had forced him to retire

from adventuring. Then the chief detective began to reflect on the magnificence of the battle in which he'd sustained that injury.

"If that injury really were nothing, it wouldn't have flared up, right?" Julius interjected reproachfully as the chief detective regaled them with his heroic exploits.

Apparently, the current injury stemmed from a few days earlier, when the chief detective was attempting to determine Fuzzy Dice's escape route. The phantom thief Fuzzy Dice always seemed to appear out of thin air. Then, after stealing whatever he was after, he'd leap onto a rooftop and escape.

That being the case, Wolf wanted to find out which escape route Fuzzy Dice would take here in Haxthausen. He figured that if he determined the route, it'd be easier to pursue the thief; he could also simply cut off his escape entirely.

The chief detective had hoped to get the jump on capturing Fuzzy Dice, so—fully convinced of this strategy—he'd apparently climbed to a rooftop to work out the escape route. Then he'd actually tried to *follow* the route he'd predicted to see whether it was viable. Just like Fuzzy Dice, he'd leapt from rooftop to rooftop.

"And here we are," Julius sighed, glancing at the chief detective. Sure enough, Wolf had ended up falling off one of the roofs.

Some people in this world had exceptional physical prowess. Aaron, whom Mira had worked with in the past, could land perfectly after falling ten yards. Judging by how muscular the chief detective was, he was no slouch when it came to training either. Perhaps he just hadn't been able to stick the landing.

When Mira questioned him further, he related crashing straight through someone's roof and waking up in a daze. Thanks to a healer who'd happened to be nearby, his wounds were fully healed. However, since he'd worked his body too hard, some *old* wounds had flared up. Now he had no choice but to use a wheelchair.

Healing magic could treat lots of different wounds, but it wasn't a panacea. It couldn't heal long-term injuries. That was also true of the healing that Mira was capable of.

“Hrmm. So that’s the problem. That’s a tough one…” she muttered.

Since she possessed enough skill to have become one of the Nine Wise Men, Mira could use higher-level restorative techniques than most healers. Still, none were effective on long-term injuries. Even if such injuries healed, they’d still leave a mark. That would have held true even if the healer in question had been Artesia.

“See, Chief Detective? Before you worry about manners, I think it’s a better idea to simply accept any assistance that’s kindly offered to you. If not, you’ll end up in a situation like this, where you’ve made someone worry about you unnecessarily,” Julius said in response to Mira’s dejected reply.

“Hmph…”

If Wolf had just recognized Mira’s concern and let her come to him, he never would’ve fallen down the stairs and caused all the onlookers to worry about his legs. In the end, he’d just made everyone more concerned about him.

As Julius continued to lecture him, the chief detective hunched his shoulders more and more. “By the way, since they call you the Spirit Queen, you must have pretty close relationships with spirits. I wonder…do you, by any chance, have the blessing of one of those elusive light spirits?” he asked in a bald-faced attempt to change the subject.

Behind him, Julius smiled wryly.

Mira, on the other hand, proudly answered, “But of course. I have *all* the main blessings a summoner can get!”

Since doing so was one of the specialties of summoners, Mira had linked with a variety of spirits, including at least one of every basic element. And now she had the illustrious Spirit King’s blessing. Since she possessed that, not many enemies could stand against her.

“That comes as a surprise as well. But I suppose I should’ve expected it, since you’re the Spirit Queen.”

Mira had been referring to the main blessings. Each corresponded to one of the eight basic elements, and receiving

blessings from all of them was no small feat. Everyone knew that only a mage as powerful as one of the famed Nine Wise Men could do that. Thus, the chief detective was genuinely astonished and impressed; this young lady greatly exceeded his expectations.

"By the way, are you a fan of sweets, Miss Mira? The pancakes here are exquisite." Flashing a satisfied smile, Wolf pointed to a restaurant attached to the lobby.

"Hrmm. Pancakes, huh?" Mira gave him a vigorous nod in confirmation. "I certainly don't dislike them!"

"Then what're we doing standing here talking?" the chief detective asked before deftly wheeling himself toward the restaurant.

Accepting his invitation, Mira trailed cheerfully behind him. That ended the brief exchange they'd begun when the chief detective flew down the stairs. Unbeknownst to either, though, they'd caused quite a scene.

"I apologize for the disturbance," Julius said quickly on their behalf, then followed Mira and the chief detective.

As one might've expected of a hotel with the word "baron" in its name, the restaurant was decorated so lavishly that no other restaurant could hope to compete. It almost felt *too* glamorous.

As soon as she stepped in, Mira heard people chatting. About half seemed to be complaining about the chief detective. They talked about how the phantom thief was on the side of justice, trying to shed light on the crimes of villains who hid in the shadows, while the detective was attempting to help those very villains! They seemed to consider the chief detective an antagonist.

However, Wolf paid them no mind. Julius must've heard the chitchat as well, but also betrayed no reaction. The pair actually looked quite confident, so Mira stopped worrying and began looking around the restaurant.

"This place is pretty...gaudy, huh?"

It was fair to say that it *was* rather overdecorated. It certainly looked luxurious, but Mira wondered how practical it was.

As she pondered this, the chief detective explained the entire hotel's theme. According to him, the Baron Hotel looked luxurious on the surface, but it wasn't truly a first-class hotel. It was the kind of place where someone could get a taste of living like a king for a reasonable amount of money, so it emphasized making everything *appear* opulent.

"But don't let the décor fool you. The food here is the real deal," the chief detective declared over the other customers' voices as they walked deeper into the dining area.

Mira got the impression that the guests and staff were smirking at them as they passed, but she pretended not to notice. They arrived at a seat near a window, outside of which sprawled a well-maintained garden.

"While there aren't any brilliant roses, king's dipper orchids, or other flowers a noble might have, they've created something on par with any aristocrat's garden with tender love and care. You may not be born extraordinary, but you can *become* extraordinary. That's how I feel when I look at this garden," the chief detective abruptly murmured as he looked outside.

Mira got the sense that this seat was a favorite spot of his. She wondered whether he was attached to it for some reason.

Just as that thought crossed her mind, the chief detective looked at one point in particular. Following his gaze, she saw a staff member tending the garden. Given the nature of the work, the employee's sleeves were rolled up, and her skirt was slightly hiked. The small amount of extra skin she had exposed was rather alluring.

The draw of the chief detective's spot suddenly seemed pretty lowbrow. Inside, Mira shook her head, but she had to agree; it was a fantastic seat. And while it was obvious that the chief detective was staring at the woman in the garden, Mira appeared to be a young girl simply admiring the pretty flowers.

"Take a look at the menu, Mira." Julius placed a menu gently in her hand, then turned to the chief detective and warned, "I'll tell your wife."

Wolf quickly snatched a menu from Julius and opened it up. Judging from his panicked look, Mira guessed that his wife must run a tight ship. But she was surprised that the chief detective wasn't a bachelor.

"Wait. So you're married, Chief Detective? I'd assumed otherwise, since you're always running all over chasing the phantom thief."

Visibly uncomfortable at Mira's honest assessment, the chief detective shifted his gaze and quietly muttered, "I have a daughter too." He explained that he'd left the house where his family awaited him after swearing that he wouldn't return until he captured Fuzzy Dice.

"Well, I suppose there are some things a man just can't back down from," Mira said.

She wasn't sure if he was justified in doing so, but she could attest that there were hills that men were willing to die on. She had her doubts about Wolf as a husband and father, but his belief in his cause was clear to her.

"Wow. This is the first time a woman's understood," he replied with a mixture of surprise and glee. Evidently, other women had said a few choice words to him about his oath.

The three continued chatting as they browsed their menus. In the end, they all ordered different pancakes.

"I'm glad you came along, Mira. If you hadn't, we couldn't have ordered these so shamelessly." Julius's comment was half a joke, but he also genuinely meant it.

The chief detective apparently also liked sweets, so occasionally the two ordered desserts like this. Unfortunately, even the people of this world passed judgment on an affable young man and a gruff ex-adventurer simply eating dessert together.

This time, however, Mira was around to make the whole thing less of a spectacle. Regardless of who she truly was, she appeared simply to be a young girl who liked sweets.

Since Mira did enjoy desserts as well, she began thinking that this worked very much in her favor. In the real world, she, Solomon, and Luminaria had once gone to an all-you-can-eat cake buffet that Kagura—a college student at the time—had recommended. The three of them huddling in a corner, eating cake, surrounded entirely by girls, was a memory that still haunted Mira. If only they'd had just a single girl with them back then.

"In that case, feel free to invite me along whenever," she casually suggested to Julius, knowing his pain full well.

Julius replied gleefully that he'd take her up on the offer. Looking at his smile, Mira wondered if he could just as easily have found a girl or two to tag along with him simply by asking. But that would be asking him to become a heartbreaker. Good-looking heartbreakers were unfortunately the bane of most guys' existences, so Mira gingerly pushed the thought away.

Chapter 3

MIRA TOOK ADVANTAGE of a post-ordering break in the conversation to change the subject. “So…I hear you’re the leading authority when it comes to Fuzzy Dice,” she told Chief Detective Wolf. “Mind if I ask a few questions?”

Once she’d finally broached the subject that she’d come to talk about, the chief detective leaned forward as if ready and waiting. “Sure. Ask me whatever you like.”

“To start, I want to ask about Fuzzy Dice’s abilities. Do you have any idea just how powerful he is?”

Her first question about her opponent’s strength was also the most important. It was prompted by the events of the day before yesterday. Imprisoned in an underground chamber below a baron’s estate, she’d run into a certain half-naked man whose face had been masked with a cute towel. Judging from the man’s actions and the situation, Mira firmly suspected that he was the phantom thief himself. His abilities were no joke; it had immediately been clear that he was extremely skilled.

That said, Mira hadn’t been able to observe him for long. The chief detective, on the other hand, had a long history of facing off against Fuzzy Dice in person. That meant he should be able to give Mira more information on the thief, which she could use to analyze his fighting capabilities.

“How powerful, eh…? All I can really tell you is that he’s *unimaginably* powerful.”

That wasn’t very helpful. Mira guessed that Wolf had faced off against Fuzzy Dice countless times, yet he didn’t seem to know the limits of the thief’s power.

In the past, despite having been surrounded by dozens of A-rank adventurers, Fuzzy Dice had apparently managed to not only break easily through their ranks but also put them all to sleep. The chief detective laughed dryly that, whenever he and Fuzzy Dice had faced off since then, he had awoken and realized he’d been

put to sleep. It didn't matter what plan he created; he always ended up completely unconscious.

"That's why I can't tell you how powerful he is. I honestly have no idea," the chief detective concluded. He was claiming that since he'd never crossed blades with Fuzzy Dice, or battled him properly, he really had no way of knowing such a thing.

"I see."

Fuzzy Dice always managed to break through crowds of guards to steal whatever he was after, but he seemingly had little skill in combat. In other words, his real strength was whatever he used to knock people out. The question now was how exactly he did that.

"Say…does Fuzzy Dice happen to be a demonologist?" Mira asked.

There were several ways to put people to sleep, including drugs, tools, and skills. Of those, Mira suspected that demonology was the kind of magic used by the perverted-looking, towel-wearing hero whom she suspected was Fuzzy Dice.

"Wow… So you seem to think so as well, Miss Mira," the chief detective remarked with delight. He continued immediately, "Would you like to know how *I* came to that conclusion?"

Before being knocked out, he explained, he *always* saw white mist. It had occurred to him that he ought to purposely inhale as much mist as he could to create a drug to resist its effects.

"Once we awoke, my assistant and I were examined by a proper medical team."

However, the team couldn't detect that any drugs had been used. There were seemingly no remnants of tranquilizers. Since Wolf and his assistant had been checked out immediately after being revived, and the medics hadn't detected anything, they concluded that only certain plants or monsters could've induced the effect. In short, the mist wasn't a drug or a poison.

Speaking more fervently, Wolf continued that this could only mean that Fuzzy Dice knocked people out via some sort of status ailment. "To follow that lead, I bought this book. It was published

in the so-called Land of Mages, famous for containing the continent's largest magical institution, the Linked Silver Towers."

As he spoke, the chief detective reached into the bag by his side and pulled out a single book. It was extravagantly—and sturdily—bound and was so massive that it looked like it could be used as a bludgeon. *The Definitive Guide to Status-Ailment-Inflicting Skills* was written across the cover.

"This book's fantastic! It breaks down everything in a way that even someone like me, a non-mage, understands. These explanations substantiated my experiment. It's fair to say that the book's full of great wisdom. It certainly wasn't cheap—it cost over three million ducats. But it was worth every cent!"

An ambiguous expression passed over Mira's face as she looked at the book the chief detective had just thumped onto the table. Its title was reminiscent of a series of experiments she'd helped conduct quite a few times in the past.

So…they made those into a book? And, on top of that, it costs three million ducats?!

During the experiments, they'd used various skills to induce status abnormalities such as paralysis, poisoning, sleep, confusion, and so on. They'd done the same for other status abnormalities such as "burn" and "bleed," which often occurred as side effects.

Furthermore, while the book's title only mentioned skills, it was an incredibly ambitious work that covered everything from demons and spirits, magic and divine beasts, to what kind of magic was best to seal away devils.

Mira couldn't help thinking about how, despite having collaborated so extensively on that project, she wouldn't see a cut of the profits. Still, as she reflected on her past, she also picked up on what the chief detective was saying.

"Fuzzy Dice's technique most likely produces a toxin from modified mana. The active effect expires beyond a time limit, and the toxin leaves the body, turning back into mana. Or something like that…" she said, deep in thought.

Since she'd collaborated on the status-ailment project, Mira remembered most of what was probably written in the book. All she had to do was follow what the chief detective was saying and remember the details regarding that particular topic. Then she could figure out what Wolf was getting at without having to listen to him beat around the bush.

Sure enough, Mira's surreptitious analysis was a bull's-eye. Chief Detective Wolf sat dumbfounded, looking as if she'd taken the wind out of his sails completely. In the next moment, his expression became admiring. "That's exactly right, Miss Mira. Have you read this book, by any chance?" His eyes had lit up as if he'd found a kindred spirit.

On the other hand, Mira felt that that expectation was a tad high. "I just happened to flip through a couple pages," she responded simply.

That wasn't technically a lie. Smiling wryly to herself, Mira wondered which of them knew the book better: the person who'd read it, or the person who'd helped create it.

"Incredible. It's just as you say...as soon as the toxin in the body turns back into mana, the status effect inflicted by Fuzzy Dice's skill disappears. It wouldn't have mattered how quickly we were examined after being woken—nobody could've found anything! Even if they'd examined us while we were still asleep, the toxin would just have disappeared during analysis," Wolf concluded precisely.

All in all, he couldn't imagine he'd been knocked out by anything but a skill. Once again, Mira agreed with him. In the game, she'd performed an experiment on the exact same kind of thing.

Status ailments' effects generally differed depending on how exactly the ailments were induced. The cause of that lay in the exact manner of production of the ingredients used to provoke the symptoms.

Two main types of poison caused status effects: natural poison and magic poison. The bodies of plants, animals, and monsters produced the former. The duration of its effect

depended on the strength and poison resistance of the victim. There were cases of people recovering quickly, as well as of people dying instantly. Such poison was characterized by its wide range of effectiveness.

Healing skills or antidotes could usually neutralize natural poison. However, some particularly terrifying types were impossible to cure without specific antivenoms. For example, the Venom of Eternal Demise, which belonged to the snake king residing in the Raisewood Bayou. That was one of the ingredients that Soul Howl needed to make the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light.

On the other hand, magic poison—created through skills or magic—was characterized by its imperviousness to its victim's strength and detoxification abilities.

That wasn't to say that it worked on everything. Resistance, or how well one could resist skills or magic, affected it. If a person's resistance was high enough, the poison wouldn't enter their body; it would instantly turn back into mana. However, if a magic poison's formulation overpowered a person's resistance, it immediately inflicted a status ailment.

But the higher a victim's resistance was, the faster they'd clear the ailment. Holy Arts could also fully cure poison created using skills or magic. The trick was to use natural poison on magic users and magic poison on physical attackers.

Ultimately, alchemy produced the strongest natural poisons, but nobody held a candle to demonologists when it came to inflicting magic status ailments.

"All right," said Wolf. "Let's get back to when Fuzzy Dice purposely knocked me out."

The chief detective's lecture seemingly over, they finally got back to the issue at hand: How had Wolf determined that Fuzzy Dice was a demonologist? Although quite a few skills induced sleep, he explained, he had guessed that the white mist was conjuring magic.

"Having analyzed us, the medical team concluded that our conditions bore a striking resemblance to the quick-acting effects of stropotoxin!"

Deep sleep caused by *stropotoxin*? A puzzled look floated across Mira's face as she wondered what exactly "stropotoxin" was.

Up to this point, she had appraised this situation as quite clear: Since Fuzzy Dice's poison simply disappeared once enough time had passed, turning back into mana, it had to be produced via a skill. And in terms of inflicting status ailments, none were more skilled than demonologists. But she tilted her head as the conversation veered into unfamiliar territory.

Sure enough, as she did, the chief detective's eyes glinted brightly. "Let me tell you about stropotoxin…" Just as she'd feared, the chief detective began expounding on this.

Perhaps accustomed to his verbosity, Julius feigned rapt attention as he grabbed the plates of pancakes being served. "We'll also have three hot teas, please…" he murmured, perceiving that the conversation could go on for a while. Having made another order, he passed everyone their pancakes, then turned to Mira and added quickly, "It doesn't really make a difference whether you listen, so feel free to dig in."

It seemed that, since the chief detective enjoyed the sound of his own voice, it wasn't a big deal if someone half tuned out.

"Now then, if you'll allow me to explain…" Wolf continued.

"Go right ahead."

The sweet smell of fresh pancakes tickled Mira's nostrils. It'd been torture trying to keep herself from tucking in. Not feeling the least bit guilty, she stuffed her cheeks as the chief detective prattled on proudly.

The exceedingly fluffy, moist pancakes overwhelmed her. Just like Julius said, they had an incredible texture, the result of mascarpone cheese being mixed into the batter. As Mira continued enjoying the still-warm pancakes, Wolf's lecture faded into the background.

She was only half listening, but the chief detective must've been good at explaining things. Despite his long-windedness, she got the gist of what he was saying. As Wolf went on and on at length, she learned that stropotoxin was often referred to as "the

sleeping compound." It was a potent sedative mainly found in the stropo flower. At that stage, it was a natural poison.

However, Wolf's medical team hadn't detected it in that form, so Fuzzy Dice *must* have used it in its magic-poison form. According to *The Definitive Guide to Status-Ailment-Inflicting Skills*, that was exactly the method used by the spirit beast Aktarkia.

The book was titled the "definitive" guide for good reason. It contained much more information than what Mira had learned while helping with the experiments. At any rate, while stropotoxin could exist as either a magic or natural poison, both forms were made from the same compound.

"Ah, I see..." Finished listening to the chief detective for the time being, Mira sipped her tea and smiled wryly to herself at having finally gotten this far with the conversation. Now they could determine which Demonic Art it was that Fuzzy Dice was using.

Mira wasn't like most people, who knew nothing of Demonic Arts and would soon find themselves out of their depth. Rather, she'd previously sat atop one of the Linked Silver Towers, the preeminent research institution for magical skills, as its top summoner and one of the Nine Wise Men. Summoning aside, no mage held a candle to her knowledge of other varieties of magic.

"Sounds like he's using the skill Ivory Mist of Eden," she noted.

Mira was certain about that. The main component of that skill was stropotoxin, and Aktarkia's Ivory Mist of Eden spell was one that demonologists used. Aside from techniques for manipulating others, demonologists could learn unique spells from monsters, magic beasts, spirits, or divine beasts and master them for later use.

Fighting fire with fire was a demonologist's way of life. If Fuzzy Dice had used [Demonic Arts: Ivory Mist of Eden], she *knew* that he was a demonologist.

"Exactly," Wolf replied. "Only a demonologist could conceivably use stropotoxin's magic form." Having said everything

he wanted to, the chief detective nodded with a satisfied look and dug into his pancakes.

“Hrmm… If he’s skilled enough to use Ivory Mist of Eden, this could be a bigger problem than I expected,” Mira murmured.

It was a testament to Fuzzy Dice’s skill that he’d knocked out a dozen A-rank adventurers in mere moments. That said, it wasn’t anything Mira couldn’t do fairly easily. The larger problem was the Ivory Mist that Fuzzy Dice was using.

“A bigger problem than you expected…? Can you venture a guess as to his hitherto-unknown true capabilities now?” the chief detective asked curiously. Having been knocked out each and every time he’d encountered Fuzzy Dice, he was truly in the dark.

“Well, you could say I’ve at least got an idea.” Mira smiled as if her turn to lecture had come and dove in.

While it wasn’t her field of expertise, Mira knew how one got hold of Ivory Mist of Eden. When demonologists learned skills, there were a few preconditions.

Monsters and magic beasts had internal organs that activated when using magic. The demonologists’ first method for learning skills involved harvesting those organs, then transferring the techniques in them to the user.

The second method involved completing a trial received from a divine or sacred beast. There were quite a few ways to clear those trials. Some simply required brute strength; others required you to solve exceedingly difficult riddles you could only figure out using your intellect. Some even required both.

While there were countless types of trials, they all had one thing in common: A person could only undertake them alone. Anyone wishing to gain a sacred or divine beast’s power needed substantial strength and commitment. In the past, some sacred beasts’ trials had been tough for even the highest-ranked players. Aktarkia’s trial was one of those.

Aktarkia was a sacred beast that stood over ten meters high and looked like a large black moose with snow-white horns. Its huge body was so massive that people had no choice but to look up at it, and its hallowed aura showed clearly why it was called a

sacred beast. It was also extremely intelligent and understood human speech. It had so much knowledge, especially about medicinal plants, that it was said to have been revered by famous alchemists in days long past.

Aktarkia was very friendly and forbearing to those who understood and communicated with it. However, it was hostile and utterly merciless to those it saw as foes. And when it came to strength in battle, the sacred beast was a foe that not even the Nine Wise Men could underestimate. Even a couple of A-rank adventurers wouldn't have stood a chance. A dozen *might*, but their win was by no means a foregone conclusion.

To gain Aktarkia's magic techniques, a demonologist needed to undertake a relatively straightforward trial: one-on-one combat. Thus, Fuzzy Dice was at least as capable in combat as Aktarkia. Having watched his battle in the underground room, Mira knew he was pretty powerful, but this meant he was on another level.

"From that, I've got a good sense of how strong Fuzzy Dice is," Mira concluded. Having spoken her thoughts, she gracefully took another sip of tea.

"I knew he managed himself pretty well in battle, but to think he's that strong..." This new information understandably took the chief detective aback, and he began to think deeply. They now had proof that Fuzzy Dice was powerful enough to take on a dozen A-class adventurers without resorting to tricks like knocking them out. "I guess we can't take him on directly. No... Wouldn't even stand a chance."

How would they possibly catch an opponent like that? Despite his foe far exceeding his expectations, the chief detective didn't appear to have lost hope. If anything, he seemed even more excited.

"Your words and your smile are at odds," Mira said. "Have you come up with some good plan?"

Maybe Wolf really had thought up some way to subdue Fuzzy Dice. At least, that's what she guessed from the look on his face. Unfortunately, that was very much not the case.

“Nope. On the contrary, I almost feel like throwing in the towel.” Appearing cheerfully defeated, he finished off his pancakes. Perhaps he’d finally given in to the indisputable truth.

But after just a moment, he suddenly looked at Julius, gave a slight smile, and said there was nothing to worry about. He seemed to be in a pretty good mood.

Julius explained that the chief detective had been a prodigious adventurer who overcame whatever was thrown at him without breaking a sweat. Toward the end of his career, he managed to reach the high A-class rank, and his quest-completion rate was 99 percent. That was because he never accepted quests beyond his capabilities; he only took ones that he could conceivably handle. He’d been a master adventurer who prioritized prudence and always erred on the side of caution.

Now, that wasn’t necessarily particularly uncommon. Being an adventurer meant putting your life on the line, so it made sense to be extremely cautious. In that sense, one could even consider the chief detective to have been a textbook adventurer.

But he’d taken cautiousness to an extreme. He’d *completely* avoided taking on quests with a high failure rate or ones which might be life-threatening if he failed.

“Considering what I’ve seen of you so far, that’s pretty hard to imagine…” Mira remarked.

She’d witnessed him fly down a flight of stairs, gaze longingly at a book he’d ordered, stuff his face with pancakes, and proudly retell his exploits in battle. She smiled bemusedly to herself at just how different he was from what Julius had described.

“I thought as much when I first met the chief detective. He seemed completely different from how I’d heard him described.” Again agreeing with Mira, Julius nodded and flashed a grin.

After becoming Wolf’s assistant and working with him on several assignments, Julius had come to understand how the chief detective had changed since he’d been an adventurer. His impression of the detective as a paragon of prudence and caution shattered within a month.

“The shift in him seems to be compensation for his time as an adventurer. Now, he only wants to take risks,” Julius concluded, glancing at the chief detective with an exasperated look.

“I was young back then,” Wolf sighed, before seizing the opportunity to launch into another story.

When he retired from adventuring, he explained, he’d found himself with lots of time on his hands. Listening to several of his juniors laugh while trading stories about their victories and defeats as adventurers, something had suddenly occurred to him. He began to wonder if there really had been contracts that made a person laugh like that.

“Back then, I only took on Guild Union contracts with high success rates. I’m obviously biased, but most of my skills were above average. What’s more, I was very proficient at determining what I could and couldn’t do.”

He’d only taken on challenges if he was certain that he’d succeed. And that wasn’t limited to his conduct as an adventurer—it extended to every aspect of his life in general.

“I never really knew what a sense of accomplishment felt like. I used to wonder why anyone celebrated completing a contract successfully…” The chief detective looked up and smiled bitterly. He must’ve found those memories unpleasant. His expression, however, was short-lived; he turned his gaze back to Mira and flashed a smile. “I have my wife and daughter to thank for awakening me from that dullness.”

It seemed that what the chief detective really wanted to talk about was his family. As if a dam had burst, he started chattering in minute detail about how he’d met his wife, as well as his daughter’s birth and upbringing. It sounded as if the turning point for him had been raising his child—although apparently that hadn’t gone entirely to plan.

He’d consulted experts on child-rearing, read books on it, and felt fully prepared for it. Yet his daughter cried unexpectedly, and he couldn’t take his eyes off her, since he wasn’t sure what she’d do next. In short, nothing went in the manner he’d mapped out.

The chief detective went to ask more experts about his experiences. They told him that everything he was going through made perfect sense. Indeed, they went so far as to say that their previous advice and the books he'd read were just guidelines, and that it was impossible to plan how to raise a child *perfectly*.

The chief detective was shocked. Child-rearing now seemed like a contract full of factors that could set him up for failure. He'd never accepted those contracts; they were exactly the type of thing he avoided. But that didn't mean he could give up. And so the chief detective and his wife did their very best despite failing time and time again. Then, one day, his daughter said she loved him. Joy sprung from the bottom of his heart, and he finally understood what accomplishing something felt like.

That forever broadened the chief detective's horizons.

"In the space between what was possible and impossible, I found something that outshone everything else. It was that very joy, as well as the feeling of my heart leaping in my chest at that moment. I realized then how those adventurers I saw that day must've felt. Suddenly, everything had become clear to me. I wanted to go off on adventures again, age be damned," the chief detective concluded.

That said, he added, he couldn't conceivably go back to being an adventurer. With an impish grin, he revealed that that was why he began working as a detective.

Chapter 4

HAVING LISTENED TO WOLF'S rather lengthy story, Mira responded brusquely, "Life's sure full of surprises." With a small grin, she added, "The most important thing is that you're enjoying yourself."

About halfway through, his story had started going in one ear and out the other, but Mira had caught why Wolf had become a detective. Everyone had a past, but what mattered most was whether they enjoyed the present moment.

"I now realize that all the time it took me to discover this joy was worth it," Wolf said, adding that his family was the reason he now liked pancakes and other sweets.

He was back to talking about his wife and daughter. He must really have loved them, to cram them into the conversation at every opportunity. At this rate, though, the threat of another long story loomed on the horizon.

Right at that moment, Julius intervened. "That's why he's doing this. It's something of a hobby to him," he said, steering the conversation back to the topic at hand.

"Well, yes, basically. But that doesn't mean I don't give it my all!" the chief detective continued, no longer talking about his family.

Considering how skillfully Julius handled the chief detective, he certainly lived up to his job title as an assistant. Still, Wolf ended up going on another tangent. This one was much better than having to listen to him drone on and on about his family, though: He went on to talk about what detective work usually comprised.

As Julius said, Wolf had become a detective to satisfy his newfound sense of adventure, and he was suitably bold when it came to what cases he took on. He did everything from standard cases, such as investigating infidelity and finding lost pets and missing persons, to more unusual cases. Those included, but weren't limited to, going undercover in large crime syndicates or cults and looking into unsolved crimes or bizarre murders grisly enough to make one's hair stand on end.

From what Mira was hearing, it seemed that the chief detective kept busy. One undercover operation in particular stood out to her. Wolf had been contracted at the behest of the International Bureau of Investigation—established by the Three Great Kingdoms—to discover the origin of an illegal drug operation. When he completed the contract, he'd even been offered a position as an agent with the organization, but he ultimately turned the offer down.

"Wow… So there are even organizations like that here, huh?" Mira reflected.

She truly was surprised at the breadth of cases the chief detective had taken on, but her current mission left her most interested in the bureau that he'd mentioned. According to Wolf, the International Bureau of Investigation was somewhat akin to Interpol on Earth. Since the bureau hadn't been around when this world was still a conventional game, it had seemingly been established about twenty years ago.

Mira felt her hopes rise as she asked the chief detective whether police agents or investigators had been dispatched to capture Fuzzy Dice.

"Well, their primary concern is large criminal syndicates," Wolf admitted. "I've never heard of them going after a single thief. I doubt they would now."

"I guess that's a no…" Mira sighed, her hopes dashed.

The chief detective hadn't lived up to her expectations, and now there was no prospect of a police agent arriving as backup. All she could do was pray that the phantom thief would be phantom-thief-like. Recalling the appearance of the figure she'd met under the nobleman's house, though, Mira heaved an even deeper sigh.

"Then, while I was taking on all those types of jobs, something happened," the chief detective said.

Mira had lost focus for a moment, but it seemed that Wolf still hadn't gotten his fill of talking and was ready to launch into another story. As Mira began thinking that she couldn't endure any more of his long-winded tales, she caught a piercing glint in his eyes.

“Oh dear. Miss Mira, are you already full? We can order more if you’ve still got room.”

Mira suddenly felt her heart jump as she looked down and saw that her plate was empty, although she still felt peckish. The chief detective had recommended the restaurant’s pancakes for good reason. They were so fluffy and moist that their deliciousness was truly unparalleled.

Unfortunately, the portion size hadn’t quite been enough for Mira. The restaurant had served the pancakes neatly on a single plate, and the stylish presentation was sure to impress female guests, but Mira didn’t much care about that. Most important to her was how the food tasted and whether it filled her belly and sated her hunger.

“Y-yeah? Hrmm… All right. Let’s have another round. After all, why not?”

She’d require at least two more helpings to fully sate her hunger with these pancakes. At least, that was what her stomach said. She reached out, grabbing the menu the chief detective proffered.

Once she finished ordering her next plate of pancakes, the chief detective could continue his story as they waited, just as he’d hoped. He talked about what he was up to currently and how he’d ended up pursuing the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice.

His voice swelled as he began describing how he’d confronted Fuzzy Dice five years earlier alongside a group of mercenaries. The phantom thief had knocked out the mercenaries per his usual strategy, aside from one who managed to recover impressively.

That mercenary and the detective had squared off against Fuzzy Dice in combat. They battled fiercely, using every ounce of strength, know-how, and skill they had. According to Wolf, it was a truly epic battle. Unfortunately, they fell just short of beating Fuzzy Dice and were defeated.

Suddenly, the forceful tone the detective had spoken in up until then weakened. He stared into the distance. “I’m not going

after him to bring him to justice. I'm going after him as a matter of pride," he said intently, in a hushed voice.

But, up until now, he said Fuzzy Dice always knocked him out immediately... When the hell did this epic battle take place?! How much of what the chief detective said had actually happened, and how much was clear exaggeration? Pondering this huge, sudden plot hole, Mira smiled slightly, preparing to shove more pancakes into her mouth. They were so delicious that she grinned ear to ear, no longer feeling the need to nitpick.

While this happened, the vibe of those around them began to change.

Wolf had been describing Fuzzy Dice's exploits from a firsthand perspective. Since Fuzzy Dice was famous as an honorable thief, it only made sense that he had lots of popular support. Thus, the cast of characters in the detective's story—the band of mercenaries, the group of adventurers, and the chief detective himself—should've seemed like villains.

"That's incredible, Mr. Chief Detective. I'm pulling for you!"

"Pretty stalwart. Yeah—that kind of thing is what makes a real man!"

"I understand now. Try your best to catch Fuzzy Dice."

What was going on? Fuzzy Dice had been the antagonist in Wolf's story, yet now people were beginning to support the chief detective. Moreover, as the story unfolded, some even began rooting for him outright.

"Thank you. I'll do my very best," the chief detective answered. Taking a sip of the exquisite tea, he looked into the distance with sadness in his eyes. Regardless of his personality on the inside, he at least *looked* like a proper chief detective—and that type of look was what made gritty guys so appealing. The high-pitched sound of several women's voices rang out.

Still chewing her pancakes, Mira shot Wolf a look that implored him to explain himself.

"The pancakes here sure are delicious, huh?" he said with a wink, feigning ignorance. From his expression, it was clear that

whatever he'd planned had gone off without a hitch. On the surface, he'd seemed to come up with all his stories off the cuff. But since he was a detective, he'd likely been angling for this all along.

Mira stealthily moved her gaze away from the newly popular chief detective, devoting herself to stuffing her cheeks with her remaining pancakes.

Wolf's heroic tale had shattered the quiet atmosphere in which they could chat, but there was still much to discuss, so once Mira finished her third plate of pancakes, they decided to go elsewhere.

Next, they visited a quiet café located in the same hotel. The establishment was divided into individual private rooms, making it the ideal place to talk without attracting unwanted attention.

"Well now, you certainly know how to spin a yarn," Mira said, sitting down and taking a menu from Julius. The café's most popular item, pudding-flavored soft-serve ice cream, immediately caught her eye.

"Well, I do what I must not to end up on everyone's bad side. Otherwise, it's difficult to get anything done," the chief detective said with a shrug. He didn't seem to feel the least bit of shame.

Although he acted like it wasn't a big deal, going after Fuzzy Dice—widely regarded as an honorable thief—couldn't have been easy. Smiling, the chief detective added that it'd been much easier than usual to bring up certain topics and manipulate the surrounding customers' impressions, since Mira was there to listen.

"Well, you're not wrong that Fuzzy Dice has a big fan club."

When Mira recalled all the Fuzzy Dice fans she'd seen in the city, Wolf's actions made a lot of sense to her. It was now much less likely that they'd get suddenly attacked, since they were seemingly going after Fuzzy Dice as *rivals,* not as *enemies*.

"So what's the truth?" Mira peeked at Wolf over the corner of the menu with a cheeky grin. She wanted to know just how much of his heavily embellished story about his first epic battle with Fuzzy Dice was true—and how much was false.

“That battle really happened,” he replied boldly in a low voice.

But although the part about them facing off was apparently true, the “epic battle” part was complete fiction. Shortly after confronting the chief detective, Fuzzy Dice had seemingly disappeared, and the detective suddenly got extremely drowsy. By the time he realized that he was passing out, he’d already awoken at a healing clinic.

“That meeting lasted about five seconds. He utterly crushed me. Frankly, I don’t feel as if there’s any way I could beat him,” Wolf muttered resignedly. That had to be the truth about how he felt, although strangely enough, a faint smile had appeared on his face.

“Your words and smile are at odds once again,” Mira pointed out.

Growing more excited, the chief detective explained that this meant that he’d found the perfect opponent in Fuzzy Dice. “I’m after the type of truly daunting challenge that I never faced in all my years as an adventurer. At this age, it isn’t too easy. Things are a lot more difficult for me now than back in my glory days.”

He chuckled to himself about how he’d never fallen off a roof as an adventurer, then dropped his gaze and looked somewhat forlornly at his feet.

“So have you decided what you’d like?” He looked over at Mira, grinned, and continued, “I’m thinking of trying the pudding-flavored soft serve.”

“Hmph! You stole my idea. I was just thinking of getting that too.”

There wasn’t really anything wrong with them ordering the same thing. Mira had an idea, though: She’d examine what everyone else ordered, decide whether it looked good, and remember it when she ordered next time. That strategy was particularly effective during one’s first visit to a restaurant, but it didn’t work if everyone ordered the same thing.

Perhaps the chief detective realized that she was considering changing her order in order to try that strategy. “In that case, I’ll order the almond soft serve. We can split it, and then we’ll both

get to try two flavors. If Julius here does likewise, we can all try three flavors at once. Yes—that's not a bad idea at all," he said, as if it were a stroke of genius.

Mira immediately shot him down. "That'd be pretty weird, wouldn't it?"

However perfectly Wolf resembled a steely, grizzled detective, and however kind and honest a youth Julius was, Mira couldn't abide the thought of sharing soft serve with other guys.

Julius apparently thought the same thing. "I wouldn't be against sharing with Mira, but with *you*...?" He added, "I don't think their servings are that big either. Just order an extra."

None of what he said seemed to reach Wolf, however. Mira's initial comment that it'd be "weird" for them to share had apparently wounded the chief detective to the core.

Maybe I could've been a little less harsh...

But wasn't it weird for a bunch of guys to sit around sharing ice cream?! If she'd said the same thing to Solomon and Luminaria, they'd surely have laughed in agreement.

Still, this situation was different. Her inner self didn't matter: There was no disputing that, on the outside, she was a cute-as-a-button young girl. Most older guys would doubtless feel hurt to hear a girl who looked like Mira insinuate that they were weird, so it must've come as quite a shock to Wolf. He hung his head like a father whose beloved daughter suddenly wanted nothing to do with him.

Mira exchanged glances with Julius, as if asking what was the matter with the detective. "Guess I said the wrong thing. My bad."

"No, someone had to say it," he replied.

After that brief exchange, they ordered three pudding-flavored soft serves.

After multiple attempts by Julius and Mira to patch things up by pleading with Wolf to share more awesome stories, the chief detective eventually came around. His two companions kept up their requests until his desire to talk overpowered any remaining dejection.

“That’s when, despite my current difficulties, I began looking for a newer, more exciting challenge to take on…” His expression suddenly brightening, he finally began describing the case that led to him meeting Fuzzy Dice.

By failing from time to time, Wolf began to feel more fulfilled than he had in the past when he always succeeded. Around that time, he’d encountered the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice. That encounter had been an unparalleled failure for Wolf. The difference in power between them was so great, he felt he’d never even stood a chance. But the chief detective relished the experience; that was why he was smiling.

“I’m still breathing, even though I’m up against an opponent like him. Such a thing would’ve been unthinkable during my days as an adventurer. The keen sense of defeat actually feels strangely wonderful.”

Defeat often meant death—especially on the battlefield. Yet after his first battle with Fuzzy Dice, he’d awoken perfectly fine. In fact, he was completely unscathed. He hadn’t suffered a single scratch. The same went for the others who’d been on guard duty.

“That really surprised me. Fuzzy Dice pulled off his heist without hurting a single person. In fact, he has yet to injure someone.” While executing his heists, Fuzzy Dice only ever incapacitated those on guard duty, as he had during his first encounter with the chief detective. “He only targets criminals and goes out of his way not to injure anyone. It’s easy to understand why he’s so popular.”

Mira was very impressed at the way Fuzzy Dice had stayed a true honorable thief. He never hurt his enemies and always left their punishment to the law. He was doing the work of a true hero. Yet the chief detective had chosen to go after that hero. In a way, it didn’t make sense.

“He always makes sure not to hurt anyone. That’s his MO—and it’s exactly why I started going after him so wholeheartedly,” the detective finished, with a devious expression unlike any he’d worn before.

Mira asked why that made the detective want to pursue him.

The detective answered as if he'd expected the question. Knowing the thief's MO full well, he could go after Fuzzy Dice without worrying about dying. In other words, he could fight his hardest against a high-level opponent without having to put his life on the line.

"This way, I'm taking on a tough challenge without really risking my neck. In that sense, he's my ideal opponent. Good heavens—he almost makes it seem like he's *indulging* me."

All in all, he was basically leaving his life in Fuzzy Dice's hands. He seemed to trust Fuzzy Dice quite a bit. Explaining all this in a refreshingly frank tone, the chief detective added that his current goal was to catch Fuzzy Dice by surprise.

"That's…a tad peculiar," Mira responded, pondering Wolf's rationale for targeting Fuzzy Dice. She smiled incredulously at the absurdity of the chief detective chasing the phantom thief solely because that was what detectives did.

"Yes, I think so too." The chief detective nodded as if he was well aware, then chuckled. "Lately, I've actually started to like that peculiar side of myself."

Just as the chief detective finished conveying his information on Fuzzy Dice, the soft serve they'd ordered made its way to their table.

"It's got such a rich pudding flavor."

The moment Mira ate a spoonful, an intense custardy flavor exploded in her mouth. It wowed her; she completely understood why it was the café's bestseller. The chief detective and Julius were on the same page. They agreed that it was delicious, and so their ice-cream break began.

Hrmm. Now the question is how we defeat him, Mira thought, continuing to enjoy her ice cream.

Fuzzy Dice was, at the very least, powerful enough to take on the sacred beast Aktarkia and come out on top. However, it was by no means clear whether that was the upper or lower limit of his power. And while Mira was one of the Nine Wise Men—the strongest mages around—the world was a big place. There was always someone more powerful.

The generals of the Three Great Kingdoms were prime examples. Those general-rank warriors were next-level. And others had abilities approximately on par with those of the Nine Wise Men. They included the Nameless Generals from the player-founded nation of Atlantis, as well as the Twelve Apostles from Nirvana. Both groups boasted some of the strongest players. There was also Kingsblade, who'd become a priest but had a storied career as a champion of the underground fighting pits, and so on. There certainly were heavy hitters. And when it came down to it, it was very possible that Fuzzy Dice was another player.

I should be sure I go in fully prepared, huh? Fuzzy Dice was no ordinary phantom thief. Depending on the situation he found himself in, he could very well decide to pull out all the stops.

But…he's a demonologist and a gentleman. Hrmm… He's not much different from a hero like Robin Hood. The capable demonologist was also a kind thief who punished the wicked. The masses viewed him as a hero.

All that caused someone else to suddenly pop into Mira's head—Lastrada, the Quirk of Fate. Coincidentally, he was also one of the Nine Wise Men.

I haven't gotten a single shred of info on him. It's possible that he *could be Fuzzy Dice…* Mira couldn't remember hearing anything about him on her adventure thus far.

For whatever reason, the Nine Wise Men all had idiosyncrasies. Still, Lastrada stood out among his peers. Mira smiled wryly to herself, reflecting on how he'd been considered a superhero otaku by both himself and numerous others. He'd taken the role pretty seriously. Above all, Lastrada loved children's sentai superhero shows.

In the real world, he'd actually gone on patrol in the dead of night, dressed up as a ranger-like hero. He'd claimed he was acting in the name of justice, but he'd been mistaken for a shady intruder and even dragged away by the police—multiple times. The police chief had given him a very stern talking-to, but Lastrada's desire to do justice was undiminished. And his sense of justice had extended to the VR world.

The advent of the internet had occurred in the late twentieth century, around the time Mira and her friends were born. Legislation pushed through continually during that period kept the VR world fairly peaceful. Even so, criminals sought to exploit a variety of loopholes and systems in bad faith.

That was the evil Lastrada had fought against. He created a program to spot malicious activity and reported whatever he found to the police. Sometimes his passion even yielded impressive results. After quite a few ups and downs, he got a big break and went from working as a superhero nerd to doing network security for the government. He'd become a true hero, protecting the online world.

Despite securing such a prestigious position, he'd still been the same guy. Even in *Ark Earth Online*, he'd been an ally of justice.

The more I think about it, the more I think he might be Fuzzy Dice.

Considering how righteous Lastrada was, there was little reason to think he'd have fallen so off the radar. Still, Mira hadn't heard anyone so much as mention him. Perhaps he'd tired of upholding justice?

As soon as that thought popped into her head, she dismissed it. Upholding his unrelenting brand of justice was as necessary to Lastrada as breathing. In that case, why hadn't she gotten wind of him or his activities? All the rumors she heard now about Fuzzy Dice were reminiscent of his behavior...

Finding proof of wrongdoings and exposing it to the light of justice, huh? Fuzzy Dice's MO matches Lastrada's perfectly.

The more she thought about it, the more it seemed that the phantom thief *must* be Lastrada. But Lastrada and Mira hadn't been very close, so she couldn't be completely sure.

And I can't really imagine him sending out calling cards or anything like that.

Mira remembered his brand of justice fairly well. He'd always made sure not to leave any traces of his involvement. As part of his commitment to justice, he regularly volunteered for charity work. But when he did, he never outright posted stuff like "off to

do charity work" or "just got back from volunteering." That was nothing more than his daily routine. The same went for his work defending networks online—he'd submitted police reports without telling anyone else.

When I first heard that, I couldn't believe how committed to justice he was.

Mira had learned all that secondhand while talking to her friends about Lastrada's real-life job. Up until then, she'd just gotten the impression that he was a superhero fanatic. But after looking over his career, she realized he had a long history of enforcing justice professionally, starting with his work in network security.

To Lastrada, there wasn't anything extraordinary about doing the right thing, so he never felt the need to tell anyone about his activities. As long as no one asked, he never said a word. His unique brand of justice rested on that quiet philosophy.

The way he saw it, justice and evil were two sides of the same coin. Where there was one, there must be the other. Justice could only be served in the presence of evil. However, there was no need to expose those living in peace to evil. Thus, Lastrada always upheld justice without telling a soul.

Delivering a calling card would be the exact opposite of that, so Fuzzy Dice is someone else, right?

Fuzzy Dice's calling cards were generally understood as marking a place where evil was being done and communicating that he was coming to deliver justice. Maybe that hadn't been their initial purpose, but it was what they now signified. Continually sending the cards seemed to contradict the style of the Lastrada she knew.

In that case, Fuzzy Dice must be some other master demonologist. What the phantom thief had pulled off indicated he certainly *could* be Lastrada, but the way he'd gone about things was quite different.

Just the calling cards in and of themselves now carried considerable weight. They attracted so much attention that the masses suddenly became the eyes of the law. Thus, it became

impossible for evildoers to operate while hidden in the shadows. Instead, they had to explain themselves to the populace, since the public became aware of the criminality of a calling card's recipient.

You couldn't argue that the calling cards weren't extremely effective. But at that point, Mira wondered, *Could that justice freak think so far ahead…?*

The more thought Mira paid to the calling cards, the more they stood out to her. The use of public attention, its effects, and its implications didn't seem like nuances a hero as simple as Lastrada would consider.

There was one other thing: To uphold justice, Mira doubted it was necessary for Fuzzy Dice to run off with valuables in addition to evidence. What reason would *Lastrada* have for that?

Mira puzzled over that for a minute, then gave her brain a rest. *Well, I'll figure this out once I capture him.* Regardless of whether Fuzzy Dice was Lastrada, all they needed to do was capture the phantom thief and pull off his mask.

Mira promptly quit her worrying and savored her last bite of ice cream.

Chapter 5

AFTER ORDERING HER SECOND soft serve, Mira asked the chief detective, “By the way, we’ve been talking for a while about chasing Fuzzy Dice, but do you have any other information about him? Like where he’s hiding, who’s conspiring with him, or where the money he stole is going?”

Ultimately, Mira was after the location of an orphanage where the Wise Man Artesia might be residing. If Fuzzy Dice knew it, Mira might very well cooperate with him. And if she knew where his hideout was, who he worked with, or where his money went, she might discover some link to the orphanage. Of those possibilities, the ability to track his profits would be particularly useful.

The chief detective considered Mira’s question for a moment. “Hmm. Other information, you say? What would you like to know?”

He seemed to think Fuzzy Dice was hiding in Haxthausen, but since the phantom thief changed hideouts after every heist, Wolf couldn’t pinpoint it. The chief detective had spent a very long time hunting high and low for the hideout before concluding that Fuzzy Dice likely used an inn as his base of operations.

“I questioned a young man who’d been awake in the dead of night. He said he saw a suspicious figure enter an inn from a window.”

That boy’s testimony was the only proof Wolf had, but the kid had apparently spotted the figure immediately after the chief detective had lost sight of Fuzzy Dice.

After visiting the inn room, though, Wolf didn’t find any signs of the phantom thief. He did get some information from the innkeeper, however. The guest staying in that particular room was a rather average-looking male adventurer. There was nothing out of the ordinary about his appearance, speech, or anything else. In short, the man Wolf suspected of being Fuzzy Dice could only be described as frustratingly ordinary and run-of-the-mill.

“Now that you say it, that *does* sound pretty suspicious.” It sounded almost like the man had been disguised, so Mira suspected that he had indeed been Fuzzy Dice.

“Yes. I thought so as well,” the chief detective agreed once more. The only way someone could look that ordinary was on purpose. “My guess is that Fuzzy Dice is disguised as an ordinary adventurer and already hiding at an inn somewhere in the city.”

Since he looked so ordinary, people would have a hard time remembering him. And because Fuzzy Dice pulled off heists in a signature mask and outfit, no one would suspect him when he wasn’t wearing them. He was pretty flashy during heists, but also highly proficient at blending in.

“If we could just find him, it’d be so easy,” Mira murmured. The easiest way, she added, would be to find wherever he was hiding and capture him *before* the heist.

Of course, it wasn’t that simple. “Well, adventurers pass through Haxthausen constantly, and we don’t even know Fuzzy Dice’s real name. He’d be impossible to track down.”

The chief detective had tried many times to determine exactly where Fuzzy Dice was hiding. He’d never had much luck, and so he’d concluded that it wasn’t any use.

Fixing his eyes on Mira, Wolf smiled and said, “If I had your skills, though, one day would be more than enough to track him down.” Noting that he’d never observed anyone working with Fuzzy Dice, the chief detective then switched topics. “That just leaves how he spends his money, eh?” For a moment, he sat silently, as if lost in thought, before cryptically adding, “Officially, it’s not quite clear.”

“That’s an interesting way of phrasing it.” Mira asked what exactly he meant by “officially.”

The chief detective explained that it was a bit complicated. “Rumor has it that he donates it all to orphanages, right? Have you heard the same?”

Mira had been told as much by Theresa, a Magical Knights representative who did the clothing brand’s PR; Mira had sat next to her while traveling by train. So it was possible that all Fuzzy

Dice's charity was somehow connected to the orphanage Mira was looking for. If that was just a baseless rumor, she wouldn't have any reason to continue going after the phantom thief. If it was true, however, then that remained a possible course of action.

More so than who Fuzzy Dice was working with or where he was hiding, it was the question of the orphanage that Mira most wanted to get to the bottom of.

"So you've heard as well, Miss Mira. Word sure does get around," Wolf responded with a knowing smile and shrug. It definitely seemed like he knew something.

"Personally, I'd prefer to think that the rumors are true." Having just taken a bite of ice cream, Mira smiled broadly.

"So long as you're all right with discussing it off the record, we can talk about what my investigation has uncovered," the chief detective responded.

She told Wolf that she had no problem with that, and he dove into his investigation—once again describing every tiny, insignificant finding, like some bird that wouldn't stop chirping. Apparently, after investigating that rumor, he'd concluded that it was true.

The most important clue had to do with how orphanages were financed. You could separate the continent's orphanages into three broad categories. The first ran off church donations and were known as church orphanages. These were common. Conditions in them varied greatly depending on the donations they managed to collect, and it wasn't unusual for the priests running them to get greedy.

The next type was noble orphanages, which were financed by investments from the nobility. Nobles invested in them for all kinds of reasons, sometimes out of the goodness of their hearts or purely for appearances' sake. The most notable feature of these orphanages was that they often trained the children for careers, so that when they grew up, they could work for establishments run by the nobility.

Lastly, there were independently financed orphanages known as private orphanages. Of the three types, these were

rarest; they also had significantly different conditions.

The chief detective had focused on private orphanages close to where Fuzzy Dice had first appeared. He'd drawn on connections he'd made as an adventurer to get his hands on the orphanages' financial records.

Upon checking those, he'd noticed that several private orphanages had raised at least 50 percent more donations than in previous years. They happened to be smaller, cash-strapped orphanages that were usually in the red. What's more, Wolf realized that they'd all received donations within a week of Fuzzy Dice executing a heist.

"I went and verified this with those orphanages personally. While I was at it, I asked them for details."

Ultimately, he'd never gotten the impression that anyone in or around the orphanages—staff or children—was hiding anything.

"I'm fairly confident in my ability to read people. Had they been acting, I'd have seen right through them. But none of them, not even the kids, appeared to be lying. If it was an act, they ought to start a theater," the chief detective laughed.

The donations had all come from an anonymous donor who delivered the money personally, Wolf continued. Furthermore, he'd delivered it in the dead of night so that no one got a look at him.

The staff said that, after waking up, they'd discovered a suspicious box with *for the children* scrawled on it. They couldn't say for sure who it came from, so no one could prove it was the phantom thief's work.

"Based on the evidence, though, it was most certainly Fuzzy Dice. I reported as much to my acquaintances in the church, but they wouldn't acknowledge it. And I agree with their decision not to. If it got out that those donations were stolen funds, the state would seize them from the orphanages."

Since Wolf's evidence wasn't definitive, the church had kept quiet about those huge donations, which most likely came from the phantom thief. The only ones who knew about all this were some higher-ups, as well as the acquaintances he'd mentioned.

“I’d appreciate it if you kept what we discussed here secret, just in case,” Wolf added. “Not everyone in the church is on the same side.”

There were greedy individuals in every workplace, including the church. One could only imagine what would happen if the wrong person learned of Wolf’s evidence or the results of his investigation.

“Mm-hmm. Got it. I’ll keep it secret.”

More important than the money that had been stolen, or whatever, was the children’s well-being. Mira smiled to herself; being no tattletale, she wouldn’t have trouble keeping Wolf’s evidence a secret, so she swore not to tell anyone about their conversation.

When she was in the midst of getting more information out of the chief detective, they heard a bell ring loudly twice outside. It rang *so* loudly that it was audible well into the café’s interior.

“Oh dear. Is it that time already?” asked Wolf. The bell apparently signaled the time.

He hurriedly pulled a notebook from his breast pocket and checked it.

“Unfortunately, I’ve got a few places I need to be. I’m sorry I had you come all the way here. If possible, I’d like to meet again at six to continue our discussion. Would that be all right with you?” he asked apologetically, returning the notebook to his breast pocket. It must’ve been important.

“Hrmm, I don’t mind. Six it is. I’d still like to ask you a few things as well.”

This had been a long conversation. In addition to asking the chief detective about Fuzzy Dice, Mira had been able to query him about other things she was curious about, such as the local orphanages. For that reason alone, she quickly agreed to his proposition.

After getting the chief detective to agree to foot the bill for dinner when they met to talk later, Mira strolled down the main

street. It was just after lunchtime, and—perhaps because they had full bellies—the people she passed all appeared content.

After walking a bit, Mira came upon the exact shop she'd been looking for: Dinoire Trading, a fantastic place that specialized in all kinds of supplies and gear for adventures. They had branches in most cities, often conveniently located near the local Adventurers' Guild Union.

"Now, I wonder how much I'll get for these...?"

Whenever Mira arrived in a city, she looked around the local Dinoire Trading and ended up buying things that she didn't need. But this time, she wasn't there to shop. She was there to sell the magic stones she'd collected so many of in the Ancient Underground City.

Her hopes sky-high, Mira opened the door and went inside.

Haxthausen itself was an old, rather large city that happened to be near several dungeons. For that reason, its Dinoire Trading branch was even bigger than most of the company's larger stores. Needless to say, they also had a much wider selection.

"Wow. This place is incredible!" Mira exclaimed, her heart leaping.

To sell the magic stones, she needed to go to a counter separate from the checkout. Having learned as much beforehand, Mira resolved to prioritize selling the magic stones. Somehow fighting the urge to check out the shelves chock-full of new gear, she made her way to the sales counter located in one corner.

She was hoping this would go quickly, but two other people seemed to be in line. A staff member handed Mira a ticket. The store seemed to be doing well for itself. The more Dinoire Trading thrived, the more products they'd sell. Mira thought that meant she could expect a good price for her magic stones. Heart pounding, she smiled and hoped she was right.

An employee called to her, "You're welcome to wait over there, if you'd like."

Looking toward where they'd indicated, Mira saw a small waiting area beside the counter. Some chairs and tables were set

up there, along with several varieties of presumably complimentary drinks.

"All right, I think I'll do just that."

Having decided to relax and take a seat there, Mira casually walked over, ticket still in hand. Overhead hung a sign saying CHILDREN'S WAITING AREA. Mira didn't notice that, however; she was already busy picking a drink.

The two customers before her were also in the waiting area. One boy looked strongly as if he were a mage's apprentice, and the other looked like a swordsman's. Mira wasn't sure whether they'd known each other beforehand or only just met, but the two were talking excitedly about their glorious futures as adventurers.

As Mira made her way over, their voices suddenly stopped. The two youths looked up and down every inch of her in complete silence. They'd fallen in love.

Filling a cup with vanilla rose au lait, Mira glanced at the tables. *Are they both waiting to sell stuff too?* The two youths were talking quietly about something under their breath. Perhaps afraid that she might notice this, they looked stealthily in Mira's direction while pretending to go through a Dinoire Trading catalog.

Hrmm. Looks like they've taken an interest in me. Wherever there was a cute girl, there was a guy stealing looks at her while pretending to do something else. Understanding exactly how the boys felt, Mira couldn't help being amused as she took a seat a little ways from them.

I hope I don't set too high a bar for them... Thinking back on her old self, she recalled a bittersweet chapter in her own youth. As she did so, deep down, she fretted about the two youths' boyish reactions.

Then she began to overhear bits of their conversation. It wasn't terribly clear, and seemed to be all over the place, but she got a general idea of what they were talking about.

Things had apparently escalated past innocently chatting about merely *liking* Mira or thinking she was cute. Rather, they were making plans to start families with her, discussing everything from how much they would need to save to how they would earn

livings, as well as their responsibility to provide for their children and, of course, how many children they'd have with Mira. Finally, they discussed how exactly they'd make those children.

Hearing the boys' surprisingly mature exchange struck Mira speechless. *Young people sure are a lot more mature in this world, huh?* Perhaps they grew up faster in this world, or their parents educated them that way. Either way, the boys seemed much more grown-up than their appearances let on.

As the pair began to discuss which of them would satisfy her the most, Mira turned away from them and sipped gently from her cup. The bold flavor of roses and vanilla struck her. Smiling to herself, she looked into the distance as she enjoyed the brand-new taste and smell of her vanilla rose au lait.

Shortly thereafter, the swordman's apprentice's turn at the counter came, and he was called over. He stood slowly and stole several glances at Mira, as if trying to get his fill. Hearing his name called a second time, however, he scrambled to the sales counter.

Only one person ahead of me now...

This was actually a much more comfortable waiting area than she'd expected. Making herself at home, Mira glanced casually at the boy in the mage robe. With his friend gone, he looked bored beyond belief. That said, Mira wasn't about to go over and chat with him. She didn't want to encourage the plans she'd heard him discuss earlier.

Just then, the boy looked up as if to get another peek at her, and their eyes locked. It only lasted a second. The boy sheepishly looked up and away, letting his gaze wander in midair before looking down at the catalog again. Despite his previous conversation's mature contents, he was seemingly still an innocent young boy inside.

I'm a wicked girl. For some reason, Mira felt a bit relieved. She struck a confident pose while leisurely waiting for her turn.

As she waited, a young girl came into the waiting area too, apparently waiting to go up to the counter after Mira. She poured herself a cup of orange juice and wandered around a bit before sitting across from Mira. The girl wore a long, simple robe and had

a short novice's staff at her waist. Judging from how she looked, she was a mage's apprentice as well.

She appeared around twelve or thirteen, about the same age as Mira, and was somewhat timid-looking. Staring at Mira, her eyes overflowed with curiosity as she sipped from her cup.

Sensing that gaze, Mira looked up. The girl shifted her eyes slightly before looking again at Mira, having made up her mind to speak.

"Um…are you by any chance the Spirit Queen?" she asked bashfully. Her quiet voice belied her incredibly expectant expression. It was the same look a person would have if they suddenly ran into a celebrity while walking down the street.

Oh ho… Even children recognize me now. I must be pretty famous!

In Grandrings, the city Mira had visited prior to this one, a lot of rumors had been flying around, and word of the Spirit Queen had spread like wildfire. Word evidently spread so far that even Haxthausen's children recognized her.

Realizing this, Mira attempted to calm herself down to contain her joy, then looked back at the girl with the most placid expression she could muster. "Hrmm. Just about everyone calls me that these days," she replied, as if they did so despite the fact that the title meant little to her.

The moment she responded, the girl's face lit up. "So it *is* you! For a moment, I wasn't quite sure."

The voice of the formally reticent young girl took on an exuberant tone; she must've been delighted. At the same time, the boy who'd been watching all this jumped in surprise at the sound of her voice.

"It's an honor to meet you," replied the girl, who now recognized Mira as the Spirit Queen. Quickly closing the distance between them, she plopped into the seat beside Mira. Eyes gleaming with anticipation, she began peppering Mira with questions. "You fought alongside Master Cyril, right?!"

By “Master Cyril,” she had to mean the man who led Écarlate Carillon.

“Hrmm. Yes, I did,” Mira answered, despite being uncertain as to why the girl was bringing him up. She cheerfully nodded at the girl, who was smiling at her innocently.

Mira soon discovered who the girl was really interested in. She immediately began asking everything she could about Cyril. She started by inquiring about the usual stuff, such as his favorite food and his taste in women, before moving on to ask what he smelled like, how Mira addressed him, and whether he was single. She lobbed dozens of questions.

She wasn’t interested in Mira, the famed Spirit Queen—only in her connection to Cyril. And while the girl was acting like any ordinary starry-eyed young fan, Mira got the feeling that this fascination might be unhealthy.

Thus, she needed to suppress a shudder as the girl asked her final question: “What’s your relationship with Master Cyril?”

“We’re just fellow adventurers who sometimes meet on the battlefield,” Mira replied.

That was how she spent her time with the Cyril-obsessed young girl.

Just then, the male mage’s apprentice was called to the counter. As he stood up, he looked over at Mira—whom the young girl was still hounding—as if some newfound feelings had awakened in him. He engraved the scene in his mind, then made his way to the counter.

Several children in addition to Mira and the Cyril fan now also awaited their turns in the waiting area. Making sure to sit away from Mira and the girl, they all discussed something quietly.

“Is that girl new here?”

“I haven’t seen her around before.”

“Me neither. She’s cute.”

“Maybe this is her first time here.”

“Seems that way. Poor thing.”

It seemed that they all knew the Cyril fan who occasionally appeared in the waiting area. They also knew that once she cornered you, she'd talk your ear off about her frenzied infatuation.

But since she'd managed to corner someone else, that meant she wasn't targeting any of the newly arrived children. Even if they mentioned an adventurer, they wouldn't have to worry about her barging in to bring up Cyril. Thankful for Mira's sacrifice, the other children chatted eagerly about their favorite adventurers.

"Wow. Amazing." Occasionally interjecting neutral responses to show that she was still listening, Mira clutched her ticket in her fist. *Please...* she prayed. *For goodness' sake, call my number!*

Having finished with her questions, the girl began talking about just how much she adored Cyril. She moved beyond simply fixating on him and began sprinkling in wild delusions as well.

Being an attractive celebrity must be tough, huh...?

The girl spoke eagerly, but with empty eyes that looked like they were gazing into an abyss. That kind of manic love was so pure, yet so deranged. She kept talking to Mira only because she knew that the Spirit Queen had fought alongside Cyril. What would happen if she learned that Mira had shared a meal with him? Had pleasant conversations with him? And even got invited to his room?!

Mira had to make sure not to say the wrong thing. On her guard to keep herself from letting anything slip, she continued to offer nothing but brief, noncommittal responses as the girl spoke. In the midst of this "conversation," the words Mira had awaited finally rang out. Her number was at last called.

"Oh dear. I do apologize, but it seems I'm being summoned," said Mira immediately, standing up as if she'd waited hours. She was glad to have a legitimate reason to extract herself from the situation.

"What a shame! There's still so much I wanted to ask you."

Mira's whole purpose for coming—her whole reason for being there!—was to get her magic stones appraised and

hopefully sell them. So the girl had to at least accept that excuse, even if she refused to drop the subject.

"Have a good one." With those brief parting words, Mira rushed to the sales counter as if death itself was behind her.

At the same time, she pointedly ignored Martel as the spirit said things like, *"Obsession's just another form of love."*

After Mira fled, the only ones left in the waiting area were the girl and the group of children sitting together. It was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. The children had been chatting eagerly about their favorite adventurers, but having lost Mira—their human shield—they'd fallen completely silent.

It went without saying that if the girl overheard them talking about that, she'd come over and start ranting about the greatest adventurer of them all, Cyril.

Still, it wasn't easy to stay dead silent, and children weren't usually fans of that kind of atmosphere. One opened their mouth and said a few words. It didn't have anything to do with adventurers, the topic they'd been excitedly discussing a few moments prior. Rather, they commented on the rumors going around about Fuzzy Dice.

The honorable phantom thief was popular with children. The boys talked about how he was a hero who punished evildoers, while the girls discussed how he was a hero who helped rescue the weak. The way they saw him wasn't quite the same, but both the boys and the girls looked forward to his next appearance, and they began chatting about him with a fervor equal to their previous discussion's.

Suddenly, a collective chill ran down their spines. While they chatted back and forth about Fuzzy Dice, a voice cut in, "Master Cyril rescued a lot more people than Fuzzy Dice does."

The children shuddered as they realized that the girl had, at some point, joined their ranks. And she'd instantly steered the conversation from Fuzzy Dice to the hero of justice, Cyril.

As they waited for an employee to call the girl's number, the children became robotlike. As Mira had before them, they responded only with occasional indifferent remarks.

Unaware of the disaster that unfolded after she left, Mira was getting an explanation at the counter. She'd told the clerk that it was her first time there, so the clerk explained everything carefully.

First of all, to sell anything, she needed a form of identification. An adventurer's license was acceptable and was what people most used. Second, appraisal took place in another room with the seller present. The price for magic stones depended not on their size but on how much mana they contained. Finally, if a seller accepted the price determined by the appraisal, the negotiation was over.

At that point, Mira could be paid by one of two different methods: She could simply receive cash, or she could get a payment deposited directly to her adventurer's account. The clerk mentioned that most children chose to have their payments deposited.

Finishing the explanation, the clerk said, "Now then, come this way." They ushered Mira toward a door near the counter.

The inside of the room where the appraisal would take place was plain but cluttered with several pieces of equipment, likely used for appraising. A girl in a white coat sat in a chair in the center, giving the room a laboratory-like vibe.

"Welcome. If you please, place your magic stones here," the girl said with a friendly smile, gesturing to a tray on the table.

Mira saw a faint pair of what appeared to be butterfly wings on the girl's back. *Maybe I should call Mariana tonight.* She couldn't help feeling a bit like a husband working far away from his family. She wanted to hear her wife's voice.

With that still on her mind, she opened her Item Box to retrieve her magic stones. *Now, I wonder how much I'll get.*

Her Item Box contained quite a few magic stones that she'd picked up in the Ancient Underground City. There were small pebble-sized ones and fist-sized ones; Mira presumed that the larger stones must contain more mana and be worth more.

"All right, then. Here you are." She took out a small, medium, and large stone from her collection and put them on the tray. She

had no idea what any of them would be worth.

"Oh, wow. I haven't seen one that size in a while," the appraiser said cheerfully, putting the entire tray into an apparatus and flipping a switch.

Her interest piqued, Mira asked what the device was used for. The appraiser responded that it estimated how much mana the magic stones contained. The apparatus made a low rumbling sound as it worked for about ten seconds, then stopped. It was apparently finished checking the stones.

"Thanks for waiting," the appraiser said as she placed the tray in front of Mira. Gesturing to each stone, she explained their individual worth. The small one was worth a thousand ducats, while the medium-sized one was worth twenty thousand. Finally, the large one was worth a hundred thousand ducats.

Whoa. Even the small one's worth a thousand. That's a lot more than back in the day. The prices of the medium and large stones don't seem to have moved much, though.

Mira reflected on what magic stones went for now, compared to when she was still playing the game. She was happy they hadn't been appraised for less than what she'd estimated, but she was a bit let down they weren't worth slightly more. She'd heard that, with the advent of technomancy, demand for magic stones had skyrocketed—but aside from the small stone, the prices hadn't changed much since thirty years ago. Why was that?

Out of curiosity, Mira asked the appraiser. Specifically, she asked how the prices had remained stable despite the increase in demand compared to three decades earlier.

"To have an idea of what these would've cost back then, you must really know your stuff!" the appraiser returned with a smile, then began cheerfully, "Let me tell you about my appraisal…"

The truth, she continued enthusiastically, was that the variety of goods that used magic stones and were sold through Dinoire Trading—those relating to technomancy and magical tools—had now skyrocketed compared to thirty years ago. She explained that, despite the expectation that the price of magic stones would jump

to meet that demand, something had happened about thirty years earlier that helped to stabilize the price.

“According to my research, the quantity of magic stones necessary to make those kinds of magic goods is totally different now compared to then. These days, we only need about half as many magic stones!”

She pulled out some documents from somewhere and pointed to a hand-drawn graph. The expression that crossed her face invited Mira to look for herself.

Doing so, Mira saw that the graph was divided into categories corresponding to quantities of magic stones consumed. Apparently, the appraiser was prepared with research materials. Impressed, Mira noticed that the graph showed a steep drop in the number of magic stones used to produce weapons and armor.

The appraiser also said that, for whatever reason, a lot of top craftsmen had retired thirty years ago.

“Oh ho... I see.” Thirty years ago meant around the time when the game became reality and most players vanished.

Mira now understood one reason why the price of magic stones remained unchanged despite the jump in demand. The players who’d worked as craftsmen had all disappeared at once. Armorers and blacksmiths in particular relied on things like special kilns when forging powerful items—and those required large amounts of magic stones. About half the magic stones back then were used for that purpose.

However, thirty years ago, all the craftsmen vanished. Thus, the magic stones no longer being consumed by craftspeople were being used to power equipment and magic tools.

Mira understood that much, but the appraiser wasn’t quite finished. She moved on to describe the results of a study on what had pushed prices down even further.

The other reason the price of magic stones remained stable had to do with actions taken by the Adventurers’ Guild Union. Apparently, the number of people who made a living as

adventurers had suddenly increased, so the number of magic stones gathered also rose to meet the demand.

Furthermore, in recent years, craftsmen who'd formally been in "retirement" had begun to trickle back. Their tools and techniques had also evolved considerably, so they no longer needed quite as many magic stones.

The biggest contributing factor to the relatively stable price of magic stones was that special fuels and spirit assistance had become a lot of craftsmen's preferred methods over the past decade. Those yielded higher-quality results than previous crafting methods. They were extremely difficult to use, so only craftsmen of the highest caliber employed them. But those same craftsmen had previously used the most magic stones, so consumption hadn't increased.

For those reasons, the appraiser concluded, the magic-stone market had remained mostly unchanged.

"Ah. Now they can make even higher-quality stuff…"

Finished listening to the appraiser's explanation, Mira was more interested in what she'd said about improved crafting methods than in the magic stones. She began plotting how she could make the strongest equipment possible. The first step had been to get the highest-quality materials from the Machina Guardian. Next, she needed to find a craftsman. That wasn't a problem, since she'd heard from Soul Howl that there was a laboratory where several former players who'd been craftsmen had gathered.

She also had to consider the information she'd just gotten. Those craftsmen had previously crafted legendary-grade arms and armor. Now, with access to top-quality materials and new crafting techniques, what would they be capable of?

There's a chance I could get my hands on something mythic-grade…

Mira smiled to herself, picturing a brilliant future in which the Nine Wise Men all finally reunited and she could show off that mythic-grade gear.

Chapter 6

HAVING LISTENED to the appraiser's research on the pricing history of magic stones, Mira offered to sell off most of the numerous stones she'd gathered.

The appraiser reiterated that it wasn't the size of a stone that determined its value but the amount of mana it contained. She said that, for that reason, the prices might vary. Still, the appraisals Mira received on the other stones weren't much different from the initial ones. In the end, she sold about three million ducats' worth of medium and large stones.

She decided to hold on to the smaller stones, as she could use those just as they were on handheld arms and a surprising number of other things as well.

Suddenly remembering that she needed to provide identification, Mira handed over her adventurer's license as well as her rewards card. The latter gave her a 20 percent discount when purchasing goods at Dinoire Trading, but she didn't think it was much use when selling things. She was happy she'd tried, though, since she discovered she'd get a 10 percent bonus on whatever she sold.

Mira walked away with around 3.3 million ducats. She resolved only ever to sell magic stones at Dinoire Trading going forward—just like Cedric Dinoire had intended.

Her profits came to sixty-six gold coins, which were so heavy that she'd have trouble just moving with them. Still, she didn't want them deposited into her account; she preferred to have all her profits in cash.

But they might be too heavy for me to carry…

Having left the sales counter, Mira now sat in a waiting area, smiling contentedly at the bag full of gold coins in her hands. It actually felt nice to hold that much money, she realized.

After she finally got her fill of the sound of gold coins clinking against each other, Mira opened her Item Box. Then she recalled

something that Solomon had taught her when she first came to this world: Gold and silver coins were classified as *money*, not items, so they couldn't be placed in an Item Box.

Mira quickly figured out a workaround that solved that issue. The coins just needed to be put into a bag to reclassify them as an item. Then several of those bags could be stored in an Item Box.

If one had a User's Bangle's worth of carrying capacity, it'd be difficult to carry hundreds of thousands of ducats all the time, but former players like herself didn't have that restriction. They were free to save up as much as they wanted.

Setting aside six gold coins—three hundred thousand ducats—Mira put the rest into a leather sack and stored it in her Item Box. The three hundred thousand ducats were the bonus she'd gotten by using her rewards card. With that as her budget, she gleefully headed deeper into the store.

Dinoire Trading was quite large, and she wandered to and fro, making her way around the store. However many times she looked, Mira never tired of browsing the huge assortment of adventurer's gear. The passion for adventuring burned within her.

A survival set caught her eye, despite her having no use for it, as did other seemingly pointless things, including a detective's tool kit. It evoked childlike wonder in her, maybe because it looked like a traditional adventurer's tool.

She might've felt like a child in a toy store, but none of the gear was simply for children to play with. Rather, everything was the real deal. It was crafted using all the knowledge available to keep adventurers alive and adventuring.

Mira lost herself completely in checking out the products. She could use her summoning abilities and spirits' powers in place of most of the tools and gear, but she still couldn't help feeling strangely enthralled by all of it.

After about an hour had passed, Mira had added several things to her shopping basket. At last, she entered the part of the store she'd most looked forward to visiting: the new-product corner.

As one might expect of a place full of new adventuring products, the corner was packed with adventurers. Some carefully examined products, while others tried out samples. Others still pelted the staff with questions. Business was booming.

"Ooh. They've got stuff on sale, huh?"

Mira spotted the discount corner, which happened to be near the new products. It only consisted of one rack, and half the stock on it was already gone. The discounted item must've been pretty popular. It was something called a Magic-Powered Innerwear Cooling Conditioner.

Beneath the word SALE was a note saying the cooling conditioner was perfect for the coming season. Below was a description of the product: It was worn inside a person's clothes to cool down their entire body. It was basically a mini air conditioner placed inside one's outfit.

The cooling conditioner was about the size of a small notebook, and had *Off*, *Low*, *Medium*, and *High* written across it, as well as a knob that could be turned.

Just looking at it made Mira think of summer. "Wow, that's really something else!" They didn't even have something that small and convenient in the world she was originally from.

August was fast approaching. She could keep the temperature inside the mansion spirit nice and cool using the spirit's powers, but the moment she walked outside, she'd be hit with a wall of heat and slowly become drenched in sweat. That was precisely the time of year that had arrived, and since she could only take off so many clothes, it was particularly difficult to stay cool. If this one device solved that problem, she *had* to buy it.

Then the price caught Mira's eye. Despite being on sale, the cooling conditioner cost two hundred thousand ducats. Not only that, it had apparently sold for three hundred thousand ducats before. She'd end up spending two-thirds of her original shopping budget on just one thing.

"But I really do need it, right...?" After thinking it over for a minute, Mira decided to increase her budget.

There were several different cooling-conditioner models to choose from, so she grabbed the one labeled as for use with robes and immediately tossed it into her basket.

Mira felt that two hundred thousand ducats was a bargain price, if anything, to ensure that she'd be comfortable in the heat outside. At least, that was what she kept telling herself as she justified the purchase to no one in particular. She made her way back toward the new-product corner.

As she might've expected, the products weren't all completely new; she'd seen more than half before. Still, there were a few things she didn't recognize. She picked them up and inspected them one by one. One item in particular grabbed her attention, and she plucked it from the display immediately.

"Ooh. I bet Solomon would love this."

Mira had thought of him the second she saw it. After all, he was a huge war nerd who loved all things having to do with the military. The object had a peculiar shape, and, on the same shelf it was sitting on, there were written instructions on how to use it.

Upon closer inspection, the item turned out to be exactly what it looked like. In Mira's hands was a gas mask.

Hrmm. It's made using ivory-mist grass, huh?

The grass used in the item had air-purification properties. The manufacturers had put it into a masklike device and attached a magical tool that served as a light source. The result was an incredible product that allowed its user to breathe in environments that were poisonous or altogether devoid of air.

One might say it was more an *oxygen* mask than a *gas* mask, but it looked nothing like an oxygen mask in a hospital. Rather, it looked like a military gas mask that one might see a Special Forces soldier using.

That product was called the Amphibious Breathe-Easy Mask. Since it looked like you could use it underwater as well, it was getting more useful by the second.

"Let's see..."

Mira quickly put on the store's sample mask, wondering how easy it'd be to use. Unfortunately, the mask was too big; it wouldn't fit on her face. Every time she breathed, she heard her breath escaping out the sides. The creepy sound was reminiscent of a certain Sith Lord.

"Oh. Well, I look better in this than I expected."

Mira looked around through the goggles. Her vision was restricted, but considering what the mask could do, she gave it a pass. She thought she might as well use her own original system to grade such things. And honestly, since Solomon had exposed her to the world of war geekdom, Mira herself had gotten interested in military stuff.

Hrmm. This certainly wouldn't hurt our operational capabilities. Pretending to be a member of the Special Forces, Mira put the gas mask back on and relished feeling like some elite soldier.



She was very taken with the Breathe-Easy Mask, so several customers shopping at the same time witnessed a cute young woman dressed like a magical girl stealthily prowling the new-product corner while wearing a fearsome mask.

It was a tad heartwarming, but it was such an odd sight that no one knew what to say. At least, that was how those customers later recounted it.

Masks were odd things; when you wore one, it felt as if others noticed you less. Having gotten her fill of wearing the Breathe-Easy Mask, Mira checked out the other products one by one. She tested each as she made her way around. She was quite impressed at the variety, as well as all the products' impressive performances.

When she saw a cookbook standing in the corner, Mira puzzled over why it would be in the new-product corner of a place selling adventuring equipment. As she looked at the new product placed directly above the book, the answer became clear.

The product was called the Magic-Powered Freezer Bag. It seemed to be the follow-up model to the similarly powered refrigeration bag already sold in stores. Thanks to the technology's ability to transport frozen ingredients, travelers could now cook far more dishes than previously.

Taking a closer look, Mira noticed that the book mostly contained notes on what ingredients were freezable and how to prepare them, as well as recipes using those ingredients. That was why the shop had placed the book where they did.

"Hrmm..."

Whatever she put in her Item Box, unlike her User's Bangle, stayed in its exact original state. Mira never needed to freeze anything to preserve it, so she didn't have much reason to buy a bag to chill things. Yet after flipping through the recipe book, Mira muttered to herself, "Guess I'm buying them," then threw a freezer bag and a book into her basket.

She'd initially thought the Magic-Powered Freezer Bag only preserved food, but she saw from several recipes in the cookbook that that wasn't all it was good for. The book also mentioned

ingredients that were more delicious when frozen, as well as how to make things like sherbet or ice cream.

How delicious would handmade ice cream taste if she ate it while off on an adventure, staring up at the star-filled sky from the middle of some grassy plain? With that romantic image fresh in her mind, Mira resolved to buy the ingredients she needed to make ice cream too.

The next new product that caught Mira's attention was the Magic-Powered Adaptive Camouflage Cloak. At first glance, it just seemed like a dull gray robe. But as its name suggested, with the flip of a switch, its entire appearance changed.

The cloak was equipped with several types of camouflage, including camouflage for grasslands, forests, wastelands, deserts, and even beaches and oceans. It was apparently fairly popular with adventurers focused on ranged attacks, as well as with clerics and other adventurers specializing in support. It was also apparently popular with those who hunted for a living.

The Magic-Powered Darkness-Dispelling Night Vision Goggles caught Mira's eye next. Again as their name suggested, the goggles were a nifty piece of merchandise that let anyone see clearly in the dark. Not only that, they could be mounted right above the mask that Mira had tried on earlier.

Because they didn't require any light, they allowed one to hunt in the dead of night without being spotted. They were also great for keeping watch, as they allowed one to see in places where light couldn't reach.

I wonder just how well fantasy-world night vision goggles work.

Her interest piqued, Mira noticed a nearby door. Perhaps because the goggles were one of the most highly recommended new products, the store had set up a special room just for testing them out.

A former player must've come up with these too. Just looking at the design, they practically scream "real world."

Wondering whether whoever had developed the goggles was a military nerd like Solomon, Mira picked up a test pair. First the gas mask, then the camouflage cloak, and now the night vision

goggles—the more tactical gear she checked out, the more she thought about the time she'd spent with Solomon. Specifically, that she'd borrowed a whole set of that kind of stuff to play survival games.

Playing a VR survival game really was quite different from actually moving around in real life. Mira remembered how the fatigue she'd felt back then had almost been pleasant.

"Hrmm. I already came this far..."

Mira threw on the cloak, strapped on the mask, and attached the goggles. Fully equipped, she stepped into the dark room. The store must've been quite confident in the goggles, since the room was pitch-black. Despite waiting a moment for her eyes to adjust, Mira couldn't see the faintest thing.

Hrmm... Is there anywhere to walk?

At first, she moved blindly, groping around in the darkness. As she did, she discovered a narrow pathway through the room. The room was so dim, it was darker than even the blackest night. Fully realizing that her naked eyes wouldn't be any use, Mira flipped the switch on the goggles.

She immediately gasped. Up until then, she hadn't even been able to see her hand in front of her face. Now she saw *everything* in front of her clearly. The green color characteristic of night vision filled her field of vision as the path before her suddenly became clear as day. As she might've expected of a Dinoire Trading product, these night vision goggles were the real deal.

Not only could she see everything clearly, the dark room's entire layout was apparent. The pathway through it was full of obstacles as well as twists and turns. If one went far enough, there was even another small room. The space that stretched before Mira in the darkness looked like an indoor survival arena.

"This is pretty cool."

The more she thought back on her survival-game days, the more into this she got. She flattened her back against a nearby wall, holding her hands as if carrying an airsoft rifle, and peeked her head around the corner of the pathway. She felt completely as if she were a Special Forces soldier on a mission.

“Clear. No sign of the target,” Mira reported to an imaginary fellow soldier, making her way through the room cautiously. She continued along the intricate pathway and began to clear the small room. Before a low obstacle, she lay down on the floor and began army crawling forward. Dragging herself across the ground, she once again felt like an elite soldier carrying out a nocturnal assault.

Continuing to follow the path, she turned a corner. Then a man’s head peeked out from a corner farther ahead. The passage must only have been about five meters long, yet—being so close to the ground—Mira never noticed the man, whose face was barely visible.

A look of fear passed over the man’s face. He stopped in his tracks, watching Mira in full Special Forces mode. He’d come into the room before her to try the goggles as well, and he’d been admiring their capabilities when he heard her.

In the pitch-black room, he’d listened to something being dragged across the ground; then he saw a figure wrapped in a camouflage cloak, with night vision goggles mounted atop a gas mask, crawling across the floor.

That was a sight that even the bravest man would’ve trembled to behold.

After freezing for a moment, the man ran as quickly and as quietly as he could from the room, stepping as softly as possible so as not to be heard.

Having overlooked the man, Mira continued to delight in her imaginary mission, then eventually left the room. Thus concluded her time playing hide-and-seek as a Special Forces soldier in the dark room.

At that point, another man flung open the door to Dinoire Trading and hurriedly leaped inside.

A staff member happened to be right at the entrance, perhaps on his way to leave. “Oh my. Mr. Furio,” he called. “Can I help you with anything?”

The man rushed over to him. The first words he said were, “I heard that the Spirit Queen’s here.”

Furio was part of the sales staff at the Grimoire Company, which manufactured the *Legends of Asteria* card game that was popular with children as well as adults.

Furio had several different responsibilities, and one in particular was very important: He negotiated with the people who appeared on the cards. That job was necessary for releasing future expansions. It was also crucial in order to provide players with opportunities to obtain the characters they most desired to see in card form. The most important part of Furio's job was getting permission from both famed adventurers and new rising stars to use their likenesses on the cards.

"The Spirit Queen? You mean the one who's not actually a bombshell but a petite girl?" the employee answered in a voice full of inadvertent dejection. He must've been more a fan of buxom beauties.

"Yes, exactly. *That* Spirit Queen! I heard she visited the sales counter here, and I came over as fast as I could. Do you have any idea where she is now?!"

Sweat poured down Furio's face as he grilled the staff member. It seemed he hadn't exaggerated when he said he'd hurried.

The source who'd alerted him to the Spirit Queen's presence was none other than the Cyril-obsessed girl that Mira had met in the waiting area. Furio had just so happened to overhear her telling her friends that she'd learned a lot about Cyril from the Spirit Queen.

"Hmm. I'm sorry. I was doing paperwork in the back until just now, so I have no idea who's in the store." The employee adjusted the documents he held and looked around the store, muttering, "But if the rumors are true, she'll be pretty easy to find…"

"Very true. She's a cute young woman with long silver hair and blue eyes, dressed like a magical girl. That narrows it down quite a bit." Furio also surveyed the store.

The two stood near Dinoire Trading's entrance, so they had a good view of the interior. The store's superb layout allowed

customers to see the entire floor as soon as they entered, as well as everyone shopping inside.

Furio and the staff member began scrutinizing all the customers. Most were adventurers, and more than half were garbed in robes or very light armor. The others were either townsfolk who'd come for everyday goods or trendy girls dressed in the magical-girl style. Given how popular such clothes were these days, quite a few customers were wearing them.

But this wasn't Furio's first rodeo. He quickly looked at each customer dressed in that fashion and checked whether their appearance matched the Spirit Queen's otherwise.

One woman had silver hair but was too busty. It couldn't be her. The second had silver hair that only went down to her shoulders. Not her either. Another was petite, but she was a fairy, so it definitely wasn't her. Someone had long silver hair, but was actually a man in drag... So that wasn't her.

"She doesn't seem to be here."

"No, she doesn't."

Having taken a good look, the two concluded that they didn't see anyone matching the Spirit Queen's description from where they stood.

"If she came here to sell something, how about asking over there?" the employee suggested after thinking for a minute, no doubt guessing that it'd be smart to check where the Spirit Queen was first spotted.

"Good idea. I'll do it!"

Perhaps the staff at the sales counter knew something. It was also possible that someone near there had seen which direction the Spirit Queen had gone in. Drawing that conclusion, Furio thanked the staff member and wasted no time rushing to the sales counter.

As he walked, his gaze shifted toward the store's new-product corner. *If negotiations with the Spirit Queen go well, I'll get a bonus. If I do, I'm definitely going to pick up a cooling conditioner!*

Furio wiped sweat from his forehead as he gazed fixedly at the new goods lining the shelves. As someone working in sales, he often had to walk around outside. Thus, summer was by far the most difficult season for him. But if he got his hands on a cooling conditioner, he wouldn't have to endure summer's scorching heat any longer. Having tested the product out about a month ago, Furio was eagerly awaiting the opportunity to buy one. But even on sale, it was two hundred thousand ducats. For someone working a normal job, that was no small amount of money.

The goods sold at Dinoire Trading were all extraordinarily useful. That said, they were developed for adventurers who made tens of millions of ducats by constantly putting their lives on the line. So, for someone working a normal job, they were like luxury goods. Homemakers, especially, saw owning multiple pieces of kitchenware from Dinoire Trading as a status symbol.

"I should've been saving up for times like this..." Furio muttered to himself, taking a step forward in an attempt to resist being tempted any more. At that moment, he glimpsed a truly bewildering figure and came to a halt in complete shock.

Beside the new-product corner, a separate room connected to the store. From that room's back door, a figure wrapped in a camouflage cloak, with a gas mask and night vision goggles strapped to their face, slowly emerged.

Furio could only have described the figure as "bizarre." He basically couldn't see their appearance or where they were looking, and the cloak shrouded their entire body. That said, Furio glimpsed the figure's barely visible head.

"Silver hair..."

The figure that had emerged held its hands in some uncanny pose, leaning against the wall. They peered out from the doorframe, then continued their peculiar behavior. As they did so, they acted more suspiciously than ever, leaping in and out of the room as if trying to storm it.

"No, it couldn't be."

From the looks of it, the only thing this person had in common with the Spirit Queen was silver hair. Furio couldn't see

whether they were wearing magical-girl-style clothes or even discern their gender, since their face was obscured.

Above all, he couldn't risk the Spirit Queen finding out that he'd mistaken a shady creep like that for her. He had a friend who'd botched a negotiation because they misidentified the person they'd wanted to speak with. Remembering that incident, Furio concluded that it'd be best not to incur the Spirit Queen's wrath. At any rate, his first order of business was to ask the sales-counter employee what she'd looked like.

If my top target signs off on a card, I'll definitely get a nice, fat bonus!

With that goal locked in his sights, and thanking his lucky stars that the Spirit Queen had come to Haxthausen, Furio continued walking.

Chapter 7

"THESE REALLY ARE HANDY," Mira murmured to herself as she stepped out of the dark room. Still decked out in tactical gear, she took a moment to look around.

Night vision goggles normally just helped one see clearly in the dark; they made bright things blaze white. That wasn't true of the night vision goggles at Dinoire Trading. It had to be done manually, but as soon as they looked at something bright, the user could flip a switch and turn off night vision mode.

After testing the remarkable technology by entering and exiting the dark room, Mira was satisfied. Returning to the new-product corner, she took off her gear. Then she put back the sample goggles, mask, and cloak where she'd found them, picked out one of each product, and threw them into her basket. Of course, she got them all in size small.

The night vision goggles were five hundred thousand ducats, while the mask and cloak were both three hundred thousand, which came to just over 1.1 million ducats. Then she got the freezer bag and a few other things, bringing everything to a grand total of 1.3 million ducats. Naturally, Mira didn't forget to use her rewards card, so she got a 20 percent discount.

"Looks like I ended up spending a little too much!" Mira said as she walked out of Dinoire Trading.

Chuckling, she checked how much money she had left. Her budget had been three hundred thousand ducats, but she'd blown past that and gone a million ducats over budget. Far from being upset, however, Mira smiled contentedly at having gotten her hands on such good gear.

She was a bigger spender than she'd thought, but a thought crossed Mira's mind that convinced her that she didn't need to worry about that: If she ever ran out of money, she could just sell more magic stones.

She still had tons of the magic stones she'd gotten in the Ancient Underground City; she simply hadn't sold them. She

probably had enough of them to fetch tens of millions of ducats at the current market price. Thus, she saw nothing wrong with loosening her purse strings.

Mira stepped into a shop selling amber, but she wasn't looking for mere jewelry. She was hunting for amber marketed toward adventurers—the kind modified for use with magical tools or enchantments.

Hrmm. It certainly seems more expensive than before, huh…?

Mira just wanted to get a feel for the market price of rainbow-drop amber, which was primarily used to craft refining gear. But after a cursory look around, she'd discovered that the material was about five times as expensive as it once had been.

But considering that I'll need it to apply high-level buffs, it's probably worth it…

The only thing on Mira's mind was to get her hands on the strongest gear possible, and the only way to do that was to make full use of all her skills.

Rainbow-drop amber was particularly good at imbuing physical abilities. In other words, a magic specialist like Mira could use it to compensate for physical weakness and boost Immortal Arts' effects. Ultimately, she planned to extract all those effects via refining techniques and bundle them together. Then she'd imbue gear made from the materials dropped by the Machina Guardian with that collection of effects. She'd be able to make gear that gave *insane* buffs.

They've got pretty good stuff here, don't they?

Dreaming of the day when her gear would be complete, Mira closely inspected the amber goods on display. She spent about an hour at the shop, leaving just before four o'clock.

Jeez, I thought I needed to hurry up for some reason.

Pondering where she'd check out next, Mira noticed something. This was one of Haxthausen's main streets, and tons of passersby were headed back and forth on the shop-lined thoroughfare. The place was always busy, but something seemed different this time.

So what was different? Mira examined her surroundings to see if she could locate the source of her unease. As soon as she did, she heard several voices.

"Have you found them?"

"Nope. They're not over here."

"Gotcha. Where could they have gone?"

The speakers seemed to be looking for someone.

As she glanced around to see where the voices were coming from, Mira saw several people running back and forth, frantically searching the nearby area. Judging from how they looked, they were adventurers. Noticing that, Mira studied what was going on around her a bit further. As she did, she realized why she'd felt uneasy.

At first glance, this seemed like a peaceful street, bustling yet tranquil. But looking more closely, Mira noticed even more adventurers meticulously searching for something. They were scouring the area, leaving no stone unturned and occasionally running up to people on the street. Looking upward, Mira even noticed nimble-looking figures on the rooftops.

For whatever reason, a ton of adventurers were seemingly running around the city looking for someone.

What's going on…?

Given the adventurers' behavior and the state of current events, Mira guessed that Fuzzy Dice had done something. But the date specified on his calling card was the next night; it was still too early for him to show up. Still, the adventurers were definitely searching for someone.

Since the phantom thief always sent a calling card and always stuck to the time and date on it, Mira doubted he'd attempt a heist a day early. But the more she thought about it, the more clearly she realized that the date on each card was only the day he *executed* his heist. In other words, it wouldn't be strange for him to case the scene or otherwise prepare for his heist the day before. Maybe the adventurers had caught sight of Fuzzy Dice working on his preparations.

As she contemplated this, Mira guessed that—rather than making vague presumptions—it'd be a whole lot quicker just to ask.

"Excuse me, could I ask a quick question?" Mira asked a man surveying the area from a nearby rooftop. She'd used Air Step to quickly spring up to him.

"Yeah, I don't mind…" Turning to look Mira over, the man shouted in surprise, "Wait! You're the girl from this morning!"

"Hrmm…this morning? That would mean… Were you one of the people gathered outside?"

The man was an adventurer, and he'd seen her earlier. From those two facts, Mira realized that he'd been involved in the incident in which her spirit mansion was surrounded. Whoever he was, he'd been there.

"Yeah, that's right. I couldn't believe you managed all that just through summoning. Then I heard you were *the* Spirit Queen, and that was an even bigger shock. It's an honor to meet you again." He casually shook Mira's hand with undisguised joy at meeting a celebrity.

"Come on. I'm just another run-of-the-mill adventurer." Despite attempting to sound humble, Mira broke into a small smile as she tried to hide her satisfaction.

"So what did you want to ask me? I'll tell you whatever I can!" he said, changing the subject. All the while, he continued scanning the area carefully, just as he had been doing before.

Mira was impressed. "Okay, that's good to hear. I appreciate it. So I wanted to ask…" she began, then asked him about what was on her mind: All these adventurers seemed to be looking high and low for someone. Who exactly were they searching for?

"Ah, well, let me tell you…" the man said, before explaining why so many of them were running around and how that began. According to him, the adventurers were all pursuing a water spirit.

Water spirit? Mira tilted her head.

It all had to do with Mira's summoning publicity stunt that morning, he continued. Having learned how useful summoning

could be—and excited at the prospect of contracts with evocations—several female adventures had sprung into action.

They'd managed to recruit a couple summoners and then begun preparing everything necessary to make contracts with spirits. Apparently, they'd been running around buying spirit crystals and deciding when and how to get to the locations where spirits resided. Unsurprisingly, their main focus had been obtaining a contract with a water spirit, like the one the Spirit Queen had demonstrated.

Then, the man said, an absurd rumor began going around: "Actually, a water spirit already seems to be in the city. And from what we've heard, it's here to make a contract with a summoner."

Occasionally, spirits did wander into populated areas. There were a couple different reasons why they might do that, but people usually just let them go around and do as they pleased, since they made good neighbors to humans.

However, the adventurers here in Haxthausen didn't see it that way, especially not since it was a water spirit. They'd been in an uproar over the spirit's desire to make a contract with a summoner. The spirit had freaked out and vanished.

"I…see." Mira tried to hide the tense look on her face.

When the man first mentioned the water spirit who'd come to form a contract, she'd assumed it was just one of those spirits who occasionally showed up in cities, and that it had nothing to do with her. But the very next moment, it dawned on her that the water spirit might very well be Anrutine. Considering that she'd come to form a contract, that was even likelier.

Finally awake, Anrutine had probably begun walking around the city, hoping to run into Mira. As she did so, she'd have stumbled across some of the adventurers that Mira had proselytized to earlier. That certainly seemed likely.

"By the way, I was hoping to ask you about something, Spirit Queen… Since you're bonded with the Spirit King, can you use your bond to detect nearby spirits, or use Undine to detect another water spirit that happens to be nearby? Or anything like that?" the man implored politely.

He seemed to believe that his long-awaited chance had finally come. Even if the adventurers used every tip and trick in their arsenal, finding a water spirit wouldn't be easy. So, realizing how difficult it was to find a water spirit if it didn't want to be found, the man was seeking Mira's help. Who better to pitch in than the Spirit Queen, who knew more about spirits than anyone else thanks to her bonds with them?

He was right on the money. *Hrmm... This one's sharp.*

The truth was, using the Spirit King's blessing, Mira *could* detect spirits in her surroundings. The man was also right to presume that she could easily detect other spirits' presences with the assistance of Undine.

Still, she hesitated to answer. She needed to take into account that the adventurers were looking for a water spirit they'd just happened to run into.

At any rate, it didn't seem like any spirits were nearby at the moment. Using the Spirit King's blessing, Mira wasn't picking up on the presence of any water spirits, although it was still likeliest that the water spirit in question was Anrutine.

Talk about bad luck. Anrutine must've entered the Spirit King Network to get here as soon as possible but ended up attracting the other summoners' attention by doing so.

That wasn't to say that Mira couldn't answer the man's question. She could simply lie that the Spirit King's blessing offered no such power. She was the only one with that blessing, so it wasn't as if anyone could contradict her.

However, the man had also asked whether Undine could detect other spirits. That was something that even someone who *wasn't* a summoner could ask a spirit and immediately learn about. So even if she answered that it wasn't possible, he'd eventually figure out that she'd been lying. If something like that got out, it'd besmirch the good name of the Spirit Queen, and after Mira had finally built enough of a reputation to propagate summoning's merits too. Allowing her name to be dragged through the mud would do a great disservice to the world of summoning.

That said, she didn't want to answer truthfully.

Then again, she could tell the man that the spirit was named Anrutine, and that she'd traveled from far away to make a contract with Mira—so hands off. If she did, the adventurers would probably back off. Probably.

No good deed goes unpunished, huh?

Mira looked down the street. She shuddered as she saw several fierce-looking female adventurers searching for the water spirit.

Summoners usually couldn't make contracts with two spirits with the same elemental affinity. But Mira could bend the rules with the help of the Spirit King's power. What would the adventurers think if she was just honest and told them that she could double up on the number of contracts she made with spirits?

If she said that she had contracts with two different water spirits, they might be so shocked by the Spirit Queen's capabilities that they'd hold her in even higher esteem.

After seeing the frenzied way they were searching, though, Mira felt that the chances of that were extremely low. They'd surely accuse her of inconsiderately hogging all the spirits. Or they'd say that it was unfair, especially since she'd inspired them to make contracts with spirits in the first place.

Mira could certainly imagine them saying things like that. Now that she thought about it, it was like allowing a man who already had a beautiful wife to have a cute girlfriend as well. There was no doubt about it; they'd hate her.

Realizing that, Mira racked her brain for a way to protect herself. She couldn't lie, but she also couldn't tell the truth. How could she possibly answer?

A few moments had passed since the man's question when Mira finally spoke. "Hrmm. You're right, I can detect spirits."

She'd decided to confirm it. Whatever happened, if she lied then, there was a very high chance the man would see through it later. She really had no choice other than to tell the truth. The important part was what came next.

“Wow, I thought so!” the man exclaimed. “Then you can help us locate where the water spirit in this city is hiding, right? Of course, we’d be willing to pay for the service!”

Having gotten the answer he’d been hoping for, the man couldn’t help showing his excitement. Behind that excitement, however, lay a deep fear of the female adventurers who’d so frantically asked him for help.

Unfortunately, Mira couldn’t assist more than that. “No, I’m afraid not,” she quietly asserted, looking down furtively.

“S-seriously…? Why not?!” the man persisted.

“For those summoners’ sakes…” Mira answered in the lowest voice she could manage.

She continued in this same manner to appear as convincing as possible, telling the man that—while it would be easy for her to tell them the water spirit’s location—that wouldn’t help them with making a contract. Rather, it would make bonding with the spirit even more difficult.

“No way. How so…?” Perhaps precisely because he figured it’d be a walk in the park for the Spirit Queen to help find it, the man unintentionally drew a sharp breath upon hearing Mira’s solemn words.

“A meeting like that is meant to be fateful. You first work hard to find a spirit, and then—because you found it yourself—you feel true joy at having done so. Eventually, those ties blossom into a powerful bond that connects spirit and summoner. If I told them where the spirit is, I’d become involved in the whole thing. It wouldn’t be considered a true bond,” Mira said, before finally adding, “At least, that’s my theory.”

“I see… So that’s why.”

It seemed as if that somehow made sense to the man. A pensive look lingered on his face as he let out a sigh, hanging his head like he’d gotten ahead of himself.

“Now, it’s not always wrong to look for shortcuts. And you were doing that for your friends’ sakes, right? That was noble in its own right. It’s just that, in this case, there’s a reason for doing it

the old-fashioned way," Mira responded, then hopped down from the roof. She looked toward the man and said, "Here's a little something to commemorate our meeting."

Taking a spirit crystal from her Item Box, she tossed it up to him.

"Wow, is this a...? Thanks so much!"

That was an expensive, rather hard-to-find item. As a result of Mira's publicity campaign that morning, they'd flown off store shelves. That meant they were now a valuable commodity quite likely to go up in price.

The man's group hadn't been able to get their hands on one. And considering how much the price had skyrocketed, they likely couldn't have afforded one for some time. Now the man's encounter with Mira had solved that problem.

Bursting with gratitude, the man waved goodbye to Mira as she walked away. Then he turned toward where his friends were waiting, spirit crystal in hand.

Chapter 8

THAT ACTUALLY WENT PRETTY WELL, didn't it...?

Thinking back on the encounter, Mira smiled wryly to herself. She'd laid her explanation on a little thick.

It hadn't been a *lie* that bonds were important to a summoner, or that she always located spirits by herself. But it wasn't as if a person couldn't form a strong bond with a spirit that someone else introduced to them. It wasn't some romance fated by the stars. It could be more akin to how plenty of people started happy families after being set up by a matchmaker, without having met their partner by fate.

It was only that aspect that Mira had to sell the man on. Finally, by giving him a spirit crystal to commemorate their meeting, she'd drawn him away from his search and distracted him from thinking too much about what she'd said.

Now, where could Anrutine be...?

Having overcome that obstacle, Mira began to return to the Baron Hotel to confirm the situation. She looked in the wagon and saw nothing but her ashen knight standing guard. Anrutine was nowhere to be seen.

Mira had ordered the ashen knight to safeguard Anrutine, but there was no sign that they'd done anything. They seemingly hadn't carried out her orders for some reason. Not only that, the letter she'd left on the heater had fallen in a spot obscured by the ashen knight's shadow. That led Mira to surmise that, at some point, it had fallen in such a way that the water spirit never noticed it.

Mira no longer had any doubt that the spirit the adventurers were looking for was Anrutine.

If only the water spirit had stayed put, Mira thought, simultaneously mulling over the fact that *she'd* been the one to abandon Anrutine and go exploring.

I should just have left the note in her hand, huh?

With that still on her mind, Mira summoned Undine and asked which direction Anrutine was in. The spirit gently pointed into the distance.

Once Mira just figured out which direction Anrutine was in, the rest would be simple. The Spirit King's blessing didn't provide a very wide range of detection capability, but if Mira faced in Anrutine's direction, the water spirit would surely come into range eventually.

Mira thanked Undine, then dismissed her and immediately began running in Anrutine's direction. Shortly thereafter, she managed to meet up with the water spirit without incident, and the two forged an evocation contract.

It turned out that earlier, while eluding the adventurers, Anrutine had hidden in an underground aqueduct. She reported that the strange aqueduct beneath Haxthausen was separate from the city's sewers. Moreover, it connected to a river running outside the city, so she'd escaped the adventurers simply by following that waterway.

That was how Mira spent her time waiting to meet Chief Detective Wolf again.

Eventually heading off to have dinner with Wolf and Julius again, Mira arrived at a restaurant that was apparently famous in Haxthausen.

"I'm sorry for suddenly having to run off before. There was something I absolutely had to do. Very important, I assure you." While Wolf began by apologizing, his eyes seemed to implore Mira to ask what it was that he'd had to do.

"Anyway, Mira, would you like to know anything else?" asked Julius, gently brushing aside the chief detective's unspoken plea. The assistant looked over at Mira as if urging her on. His eyes seemed to say that it was perfectly fine not to ask what the chief detective had been doing.

"Hrmm. I have a question. I overheard that, a long time ago, there was an orphanage full of war orphans in an unnamed village deep in a forest northeast of Grimdart. Did any of the orphanages you visited match that description?" Mira asked.

She had a higher opinion of Julius than of the chief detective and was ready to immediately start back where they'd left off that afternoon.

In any case, her prime objective wasn't capturing Fuzzy Dice but locating Artesia. While she suspected that Fuzzy Dice's true identity was Lastrada, she wouldn't have to worry about Fuzzy Dice or anyone else if she just found the orphanage.

The chief detective had mentioned visiting quite a few orphanages. If that was true, he might've met Artesia. Even if he hadn't, he appeared to be a master of his craft, so he had to know something.

Mira shifted her gaze to Wolf expectantly. Meanwhile, he—despite looking a tad let down—immediately began pondering. After about ten seconds, he answered, "War orphans, eh...? No, I don't remember an orphanage like that."

He seemingly hadn't come across her target during his investigation.

"Hrmm, you don't? I guess it really was just a rumor..." Mira looked crestfallen at the prospect of her search ending in vain. She knew of several settlements located deep in the forest northeast of Grimdart, but none of them mattered if they didn't contain the orphanage.

"I wouldn't go that far," the chief detective told the dejected Mira warmly. "I only investigated orphanages that were officially registered and on record. If the one you heard about was unregistered... Well, that wouldn't have been part of my investigation. So it may be tad early to assume that it doesn't exist."

Wolf's words rekindled Mira's hopes. "Oh ho...!"

According to the chief detective, it wasn't necessary for an orphanage to apply for registration or anything similar. However, if an orphanage was registered and something happened, the orphans' medical expenses would be taken care of. That was why *most* were registered.

"There most definitely *are* unregistered orphanages. In many cases, they also happen to be...inadequate."

There was only one advantage to an orphanage staying unregistered: If there was an emergency, and someone happened to be nearby to help, being unregistered cut down on the paperwork necessary. But it wasn't easy to always have someone like that on hand. That was even more true in small villages.

So, if one was thinking of the orphans' best interests, registration was a no-brainer. It required a little extra work, but there were virtually no drawbacks for the orphanage.

So why else would an orphanage remain unregistered? Apparently, the chief detective had come across that scenario several times in the past.

"Well, this all happened back when I was still an adventurer..." the chief detective began, frowning.

This was another yarn from his fabled adventuring days, yet this one seemed to serve more as a cautionary tale than as anything to brag about. Unregistered orphanages were apparently hotbeds for human trafficking, and the chief detective said he'd come across and broken up several trafficking syndicates based out of orphanages like that.

"I didn't do anything crazy. I just collected information and left the rest to law enforcement. Still, it made for a few good adventures. Now that I think about it, the techniques I picked up then paved the way for what I'm doing now."

Wrapping up his story, the chief detective stared into space as if lost in thought.

"Adventuring really is the key to growing, huh?" he muttered to himself.

"That's impressive. So that's where you got all your detective skills," Mira said.

"Perhaps this is my true calling," he responded jokingly to her praise. The smile that broke out on his face was radiant.

Apparently, he'd cut his teeth as an amateur detective while working as an adventurer. While there was a big difference in how much profit a detective could make, Wolf didn't seem wholly unsatisfied; he evidently valued his detective work more.

“Either way, that’s awful,” Mira said as she thought about the unregistered orphanages that were really fronts for human trafficking.

Thanks to the chief detective’s hard work, though, word of those operations had spread. Unregistered orphanages were now regarded as shady and likely to be involved in crime. If an orphanage wanted to look legitimate, it was best for them to register. At least, that was the direction that things were moving in now. In turn, the number of sketchy unregistered orphanages was dropping. The chief detective’s work had left a lasting legacy. It was actually quite a remarkable achievement.

“But, actually, isn’t starting by digging up evidence and stuff pretty much how the phantom thief operates?” Mira added.

The chief detective lawfully collected relevant evidence and submitted it to the authorities, just as a detective should. Fuzzy Dice, on the other hand, stole evidence, then exposed it to the public. Their methods were different, but the results were the same. In either case, evildoers were punished to the full extent of the law.

“You’re right. On that note, one individual can only do so much to combat organizations like that. If you want to do something about them, the right way to go about it is to rely on bigger institutions such as the church or state.”

All the misdeeds that Fuzzy Dice had exposed so far had to do with organized crime. Taking on such foes, the chief detective elaborated, would be trouble even for a guild that had assembled a bevy of A-rank adventurers. Behind-the-scenes syndicates usually had lots of connections, and someone brazenly opposing their illegal activities would inevitably make mistakes.

“To protect what’s most important, it’s sometimes necessary to bend one’s principles,” the chief detective said softly, looking down. It seemed as if he’d recalled something.

A hero was supposed to stand tall in the face of evil, but the more they stood out, the more vulnerable they became. That was especially true if information about the hero started making its way around. There were certainly even heroes who fought

injustice at the cost of their own friends and family, which was more or less what the detective was alluding to.

“Fighting injustice sure isn’t easy, huh?”

“Well, I think it only becomes a problem when dealing with people,” Wolf deadpanned, eating a heaping spoonful of potato salad. Then, his mouth still covered in potato-salad remnants, he grinned and emphasized how Fuzzy Dice was a perfect opponent.

“I’m going to run to the bathroom.” Mira got up and headed to the facilities. Perhaps due to the all-you-can-drink au lait beverages the chief detective was treating her to, nature had suddenly called.

On her way there, Mira peeked into a nearby private dining room. *Wow, are they really having a full dessert course during dinner...? Hrmm, whatever floats your boat.*

The person she’d glimpsed inside the dining room was a nondescript man eating crème brûlée with three empty plates beside him. All three plates seemed to have traces of cream on them, which suggested to Mira that the man could well have a sweet tooth rivalling the chief detective’s.

Mira mulled over what she’d order for dessert, especially considering the chief detective was paying. She opened the bathroom door and went inside. Behind her, the nondescript man stared after her surreptitiously.

Hrmm... Hotbeds for human trafficking, huh?

As Mira relieved herself, she pondered what the chief detective had said. He’d fought injustice from the shadows, which decreased the number of unregistered orphanages substantially. Even so, there were still some out there. For example, orphanages that could provide their own medical care, despite the difficulty of such a thing.

Mira thought about the prospect of an orphanage operating in a village deep in the forest northeast of Grimdart. If that orphanage was set up by the person she thought it was, chances were that it was unregistered.

After all, the person she suspected of founding it was none other than Artesia of Dissonance, a cleric and one of the Nine Wise Men.

Holy Arts users specialized in support abilities like healing and treating injuries. Considering that Artesia was the best at those arts, she wouldn't need to register an orphanage she ran. Even if it were registered, no one could surpass Artesia in terms of treating injuries. And while Holy Arts couldn't treat disease, that wasn't a problem, given her ability to make powerful medicine.

Of course, she'd have nothing to do with human trafficking. Someone who loved children as much as Artesia wouldn't even permit the suggestion of such a thing. Just finding herself in the vicinity of a place like that would likely infuriate her so much that she'd raze it to the ground.

So Artesia could likely get away with not registering. That said, considering the overall situation with orphanages, it would probably have been easier to just register anyway. So why hadn't she?

Unable to come up with a reason, Mira concluded that, in any event, Artesia must be running an orphanage. *There's a good chance.*

And given the whole situation, there was a real possibility that Artesia was at the orphanage that Mira had heard about. But Mira had only ever heard rumors about the village containing it. She couldn't say for sure whether it existed. Furthermore, assuming that it was even located where she thought, it would be in the middle of an exceptionally huge forest.

Even if Mira was able to search for the location from the sky, it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Having already come this far, it would be fastest for her to just ask Fuzzy Dice first. Going off and looking for the village herself would be her last resort.

And there was still information to gain from the chief detective. With renewed determination, Mira stood and pulled up her panties, then eagerly returned to her seat.

“So, Miss Mira, you want to capture Fuzzy Dice to find this orphanage deep in the middle of a forest, correct?” the chief detective guessed—correctly—the moment Mira returned to the table.

That must’ve been easy for him to figure out, given how Mira had been acting and what she’d been asking.

“Mm-hmm, that’s right,” she answered, nodding candidly.

The chief detective seemed pleased at having guessed correctly. “Thought so,” he said with a smile. “From my investigation thus far, it seems as if Fuzzy Dice is most definitely donating to orphanages. Not only that, I found several discrepancies while calculating how much he stole versus the donations received. Now, he could just be pocketing the remaining money. But if he isn’t, and he’s donating it all, then some money could very well be going to unregistered orphanages. In that case, it’s highly likely that the phantom thief is aware of most of them. If so, he may know the location of the orphanage that you’re searching for, Miss Mira.”

At that point, the chief detective added that—considering Fuzzy Dice’s commitment to honorable thievery—he very likely did have connections to those unregistered orphanages.

“Hrmm. If you say so, then it must be true.”

At least, you’d think so, given that Wolf was the leading authority on Fuzzy Dice. Up until then, Mira had pursued the thief based on a vague hunch. But hearing someone else agree with her greatly reassured her, and she finally felt as if she was getting closer to her goal.

Well, it’s not hard to see why Fuzzy Dice is so popular.

Even the chief detective had commended the thief’s commitment to stealing honorably. Thinking back on all the stories she’d heard about Fuzzy Dice—as well as the time she’d met him—Mira couldn’t help admiring him too. The phantom thief never acted for personal gain.

She could definitely see herself rooting for him under different circumstances. The more she heard about him, the more he struck her as a champion of justice. That was why, if there was

an orphanage full of war orphans, she believed he'd certainly be involved somehow. If she could just meet Fuzzy Dice, she'd be able to figure it out.

As Mira thought this, the chief detective suddenly spoke. What he said shook her. "In other words, Miss Mira, if you find out the orphanage's location, you won't have any reason to capture Fuzzy Dice, correct?" He shot her a razor-sharp look that suited a detective.

Under that gaze, Mira felt a tad guilty.

No wonder. Up until that point, the chief detective had shared lots of valuable information with her, assuming that they were both trying to capture Fuzzy Dice. Based on that assumption, he'd even treated her to whatever she wanted at multiple restaurants. Now she was almost saying that, depending on how things turned out, she might not even need to capture his quarry. It felt even worse that Wolf had guessed as much.

"You've taught me a lot. But, no, I suppose not," Mira answered frankly after a pause. Capturing Fuzzy Dice would just be a means of locating the place that she was looking for.

When she said as much, the chief detective's sharp look suddenly lightened. "Oh, no, I don't mind one bit. I'm just talking about all this because I enjoy it." It seemed he really didn't mind. As if coming to Mira's defense, he continued, "If I were in your position, and Fuzzy Dice offered me information in exchange for letting him go, I'd definitely say yes."

"Hrmm. Is that true? Well, it's nice to hear that from you."

"Yes, it is indeed true. Don't worry about that. More than anything, I'm just pleased you joined us so that Julius and I could enjoy all these dishes we normally couldn't order. You have our thanks, Miss Mira."

As Wolf finished saying that, a waiter plopped a chocolate parfait down in front of Mira. The chief detective had evidently ordered it while she was in the bathroom. As soon as the waiter left, Julius moved the parfait in front of the chief detective.

"I'm always a bit self-conscious about such things," the chief detective admitted, taking a spoonful of the gorgeous-looking

parfait and eating it. A truly contented smile spread across his face.

Wolf occasionally tossed out thoughts for discussion, such as how tough detectives were usually better received in the industry and how difficult it was for detectives to become well-liked.

Finally, he flashed a radiant smile, holding his parfait in one hand. “You have my deepest thanks,” he told Mira.

She could tell that he meant it.

Chapter 9

DEPENDING ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES, Mira had the option not to capture Fuzzy Dice. Since Wolf and Julius didn't have any issues with that, their conversation moved on to their plan for the date written on the calling card.

"Well, whether we decide to capture him or not, I wondered if—just this once—you could go along with our plan." The chief detective had finished his chocolate parfait, and his eyes glinted as if to say the time had finally come.

Considering how much he'd told Mira, how much food he'd treated her to, and the little bit of guilt she still felt, there was no turning him down.

"Sure thing. I'll help," she agreed, after downing a last bite of crème brûlée.

"Thank you!" The chief detective beamed, then turned his wheelchair and added, "Well, let's get a move on." Apparently, it would be easiest to explain by simply going to the spot where the plan would take place.

"Hrmm, sure thing," Mira replied, nodding.

She hastily followed the chief detective, who briskly sped ahead. Afterward, Julius—who'd gotten up a bit slowly—moved the empty parfait dish and spoon to where Mira had sat. Having hidden the evidence of Wolf's dessert, so that none would be the wiser as to who ate it, Julius paid and went to rejoin the chief detective.

After they left the restaurant, Mira, Wolf, and Julius went down the main street running diagonally through the center of northeastern Haxthausen. Since there were mansions lined up as far as the eye could see, Mira presumed that this area was where the wealthiest townsfolk lived.

The chief detective led them to a large white mansion that sat among several other estates. In front of the mansion, guards

stood on either side of a barred gate. As the chief detective approached, one guard moved to block his way.

"What're you doing here this late at night?" he asked gruffly.

"Just having a look around. Don't worry." The chief detective gave a small, exasperated shrug at the guard's surly attitude. "Look, this mansion belongs to a man who's both the president of the Dorres Company and the accused. He was named on Fuzzy Dice's calling card."

Fuzzy Dice always targeted evildoers who'd engaged in shady activities behind the scenes. Thus, the chief detective grinned slightly as he referred to the company president as "the accused." As he did, the guard turned and stared at him, his eyes bugging.

"Oh dear. I guess it's a bit early to call him *accused*. Well, it's just a matter of time." Utterly unapologetic, Wolf returned the guard's gaze with a look of complete indifference.

"Beat it. Nobody's got time for some useless detective," the guard barked.

As the two men glared fiercely at each other, Mira implored Julius to explain why they were suddenly at each other's throats. Julius gave a brief explanation as Wolf and the guard stared each other down.

Apparently, the chief detective had had some kind of dispute with the Dorres Company. Without going into the details, the company president and chief detective *really* didn't get along. Thus, guards sent Wolf packing if he even got near the mansion.

"But, I mean, does he have to argue with the guard…?"

"It's a bad habit of his. My apologies."

The chief detective seemingly had some childish bad habits left over from his days living in his comfort zone as an adventurer.

As she waited for the men's argument to finish, Mira thought back on everything she'd heard about the Dorres Company. They were rumored to have links to Chimera Clausen, and from what she'd heard from Solomon, they were guilty of other crimes as well. According to royal sources, the company's actions skirted the edges of the law. There was nothing anybody could do about that

because they couldn't find any evidence. But this time, Fuzzy Dice would dig up the proof that the president had kept hidden and expose it to the world—just like a true champion of justice would do.

What exactly was Fuzzy Dice's objective in that? And what kind of place was the mansion where the battle would occur? As Mira pondered these questions, the detective's argument with the guard ended.

"No one will count on a detective who's failed every single time. Come back when you've got a win under your belt."

"Hmph!"

The guard had evidently had the last word. According to Julius, the chief detective wasn't much good at arguing, despite being quick to do so.

"Look. He's coming over again."

The guard flicked his hand as if to tell them to scram. Wolf scowled in response, his brow furrowing in frustration. The guard must've touched a nerve, but there was no more fighting it. All the vanquished could do was leave, so Julius spun the chief detective in the opposite direction.

"Let's get out of here for now," Wolf said, deflated, and began wheeling himself forward.

Before they left, Mira turned her gaze toward the mansion she'd been so curious about, which lay just on the other side of the barred gate. Perhaps due to the calling card Fuzzy Dice had sent, she saw plenty of security personnel on the grounds.

"Ah. I might've guessed. Several of them are armed with formidable spirit weapons. And one is using a yin spirit weapon," Mira murmured to herself unintentionally.

Since the guards were clearly armed with powerful spirit weaponry, it wasn't a surprise that the Dorres Company had links to Chimera Clausen.

"Wow. You can tell that just by looking?" the chief detective asked. "Hmm... They have spirit weapons, huh?"

He stopped moving, squinting to look at the other side of the gate the guard stood beside. The only thing he saw was armed men, and he apparently couldn't determine whether they were armed with spirit weapons.

"That's not difficult for a mage of my level." A well-studied mage could visually identify both spirits and spirit weapons, so Mira perceived the power dwelling within the weapons easily. To her, it really was a piece of cake.

"I guess I should've expected as much of a mage they call the Spirit Queen." The chief detective nodded in admiration, then shifted his gaze toward the guard and smirked. "I see. So…one of those guards has a yin spirit weapon. That reminds me—they say the spirit weapons Chimera Clausen peddles are all of the yin variety!" He purposely raised his voice to make his point.

Could that really be a coincidence? It seemed likely that the guards' weapons had been made by the loathsome organization Chimera Clausen. The chief detective eyed the guard accusingly.

Maintaining his dour expression, the guard shrugged off the detective's gaze with a look that seemed to say that coincidences happened, and that without evidence, the visitors had nothing.

"By the way, do you happen to know *who* in there is using a yin spirit weapon?" the chief detective asked, pointing inside the gate. His tone implied that this was the moment of truth.

"Who the yin-spirit-weapon users are, you mean?"

Listing off some telltale signs, Mira pointed out who she thought it was. Each time she indicated a yin weapon user, the chief detective's smile widened, his lips curling into a victorious grin.

"I see. They all have quite a bit in common, don't they?" Wolf smiled fearlessly, as if he knew something Mira didn't. He took one more look at the dour-faced guard before signaling Julius and saying, "Let's be off to our next destination."

Julius gave a small nod and began pushing the wheelchair to leave.

The detective had seemingly said enough to silence the guard at the gate. Following the chief detective and his assistant away from the mansion, Mira glanced sideways; the seemingly frustrated guard was unable to offer any rebuttal.

Making their way to a spot where they could see the mansion from a distance, the three turned to face each other.

“The Dorres Company that Fuzzy Dice has targeted is about as shady as they come, as we might’ve expected of the phantom thief,” the chief detective murmured with satisfaction.

He looked toward the faint outline of the mansion’s gate. It seemed that all the guards that Mira had pointed out really did have something in common. Wolf having spotted that was apparently what had silenced the gatekeeper and reignited the detective’s confidence.

But what was it that those guards had in common? Mira asked the chief detective that very question.

He gleefully explained that both private soldiers and mercenaries had been guarding the mansion, and the ones wielding yin spirit weapons were all private soldiers.

Those weapons were from Chimera Clausen, beyond a shadow of a doubt, and it was hard to imagine the Dorres Company getting their hands on that many private soldiers armed with yin weapons without having ties to the group.

However, the detective went on, their presence wasn’t irrefutable proof of ties to Chimera Clausen. They could simply use the absurd excuse that weapons dealers linked to Chimera Clausen occasionally went around selling spirit weapons.

Punishment for such a thing would be carried out by, among others, the Cross-Border Judicial Force. They derived their authority from a church of the three great kingdoms, so they made even the royal family break out in a cold sweat.

Because they wielded so much authority, however, rock-solid evidence was a prerequisite to get them involved. As long as the evidence wasn’t completely clear, it didn’t matter how certain the accusers were, the judicial force wouldn’t take action.

“That doesn’t clear someone of suspicion. But so long as the evidence remains hidden, the judicial force can’t convict them of anything. After all, they don’t want to go around making enemies of those with money or power.” The chief detective heaved a sigh, lamenting that every case he’d encountered while chasing Fuzzy Dice had been like this.

Smiling bitterly, he added that that was precisely why everyone called Fuzzy Dice a hero. To most people, money and power were the roots of all evil.

“Well, since we couldn’t get inside, what’s the plan now?” Mira asked the chief detective, looking toward the Dorres Company president’s mansion.

From his behavior, the guard at the gate had clearly felt animosity toward the chief detective from the very beginning. But all in all, the goal of both Wolf and the guard was to capture Fuzzy Dice. Differences aside, it didn’t make sense that the guard wouldn’t cooperate at least perfunctorily.

Still, the reality was that they’d literally been turned away at the gate. Wolf had stated his intention to work alongside the guards to capture Fuzzy Dice, but he, Julius, and Mira hadn’t even been allowed onto the scene of the would-be crime. Mira was worried about what they’d do now.

She didn’t have to worry for long.

“Ah, not a problem,” Wolf replied. “I was just checking the heist’s starting point. I’ve focused on springing all my recent plans *after* Fuzzy Dice executes his heist.”

In short, the chief detective only put his plans into motion after Fuzzy Dice stole the evidence necessary to bring down the accused. Given that strategy, Mira presumed that Wolf wasn’t trying to keep the phantom thief away from his mark; he was solely focused on confronting Fuzzy Dice.

Wolf wasn’t about to stick out his neck for some villain. No, Fuzzy Dice had his full support in that regard.

The chief detective suddenly turned and shot Mira a challenging look. “Now, Miss Mira… Do *you* have any idea where Fuzzy Dice will go after he steals the evidence?”

It seemed to her that Wolf's entire plan hinged on exactly that. And in noting what all Fuzzy Dice's past heists had in common, the chief detective had given her a little hint.

"Where he'll go? Hrmm. What you're really asking is what he'll do with the evidence, right?" Mira asked, resolved to tackle the chief detective's challenge head-on.

She began using all the information she'd come across to find an answer. *Where* will *he unveil the evidence? He'll have to create some kind of scene where there's plenty of people, so that large institutions—like the government—have no choice but to take action.*

"A big public square…?" Mira guessed. It had to be a place full of people, so a plaza with abundant foot traffic and intersecting streets seemed reasonable.

"I see. That's your conclusion?" The chief detective gazed at her searchingly.

From the look in his eyes, Mira sensed that he felt victorious. Or rather, she could tell because he just had a terrible poker face. It was like an open book—even she could read it.

"No! Wait!" Gathering from Wolf's demeanor that she was wrong, Mira took back her answer and reconsidered.

Wanting to come up with the right answer, she carefully thought over all the information she had. She'd never racked her brain quite like this. That said, there wasn't technically a right or wrong answer yet, so this also just felt like a waste of time. Still, with her pride as a man on the line, Mira was determined not to back down from Wolf's challenge.

Where else could it be…?

Mira thought deeply. Then it came to her.

If Fuzzy Dice unveiled the evidence in a town square, how many people would see it? His MO was to sway public opinion so completely that even those operating behind the scenes couldn't avoid scrutiny. But if he disseminated his evidence of wrongdoing to the populace themselves, would that be enough to penetrate to the great dark forces that lurked behind the scenes and in the shadows?

That wasn't terribly likely, Mira concluded. Who really cared about public outcry from a single city? As she considered this, she suddenly remembered what they'd spoken of earlier; it was the answer she was looking for.

"The Cross-Border Judicial Force... The church!"

Given everything they'd spoken about, how had she not known sooner? Mira's expression lit up as if someone had turned on a lightbulb.

The chief detective furrowed his eyebrows, slightly disappointed, which Mira didn't miss. "That's your conclusion?" he asked once more.

"Yes!" she fired back.

"You are...correct."

The Church of the Trinity had locations all over the continent, as well as an extensive information network and broad public support. They were also equipped with the powerful Cross-Border Judicial Force. Once they knew someone had done wrong, the entire continent would hear about it.

"After stealing evidence, he heads to a church by rooftop. That's what each of his crimes has had in common."

As he spoke, the chief detective signaled Julius. The boy turned the wheelchair and began pushing it toward the city center. It seemed they'd visit the church next.

En route, the chief detective motioned toward the roofs of the nearby row houses; aloud, he predicted the route Fuzzy Dice would take. Apparently, the thief took the shortest route possible regardless of how high or narrow it was, gliding from rooftop to rooftop.

They continued following the route that way for about ten minutes before arriving in the center of town: the crossroads where the main streets intersected. It was crammed full of the positively swanky buildings one might expect at the center of a bustling city. There were inns, restaurants, shops offering weapons and magical tools, as well as many other establishments.

Just looking at them, one could tell that they were all large-scale flagship locations.

“The phantom thief always leaves the evidence he stole at a church. Perhaps for that reason, he only carries out heists on the night of the seasonal liturgy, which is held every three months.”

The church was in the corner of the area, and its splendor stood out even amid the tightly packed shops. It was called Haxthausen Cathedral, and it was one of the most prominent churches in all Grimdart.

“The liturgy will be held tomorrow night. It won’t just be in the cathedral either—this whole area will be teeming with people. Not only that, the archbishop is sure to preside over the festivities himself. Any evidence Fuzzy Dice exposes, as well as the will of the masses, will most definitely reach those in even the upper echelons of the church.”

The chief detective laughed about how much backlash the evidence gathered during Fuzzy Dice’s heists usually provoked. Details of the evidence would make their way from one church to another. In turn, the evildoers Fuzzy Dice exposed would find themselves backed into a corner, beyond any hope of salvation. Ultimately, they’d be taken away without even resisting.

“Well, you reap what you sow,” Mira muttered bitterly as she looked up at the great cathedral meant to embody the glory of the gods.

Those evildoers had spent a very long time evading the law and taking advantage of others, so it was their just deserts.

“The people, on the other hand, will stand and clap as justice once again vanquishes evil,” Wolf predicted. “They’ll have seen it happen in front of their very own eyes, after all.”

To the public, the church was like the living embodiment of righteousness. Seeing evil stamped out like that would make the believers feel good. Therefore, they’d support Fuzzy Dice for his aid in delivering justice.

That wasn’t the only reason Fuzzy Dice was popular, however. What compelled people most was that his criminal behavior—namely, stealing—forced the church at the center of their faith to

take action. That meant utilizing the protectors of law and order, those who brought down the sword of judgment in the name of the divine: the Cross-Border Judicial Force.

The phantom thief exposed evildoers' crimes so that the Cross-Border Judicial Force could bring their might to bear. It was a classic hero-antihero partnership.

The unlikely alliance between the two further distinguished Fuzzy Dice's deeds as an honorable thief, the chief detective added.

"I imagine an evildoer would find them quite a fearsome duo."

The thief went in and stole the evidence necessary to bring down the full might of the law. That was completely against the church's principles, but Fuzzy Dice had no affiliation with the church, which let him do it in their stead. And while he brought them evidence of his own accord, the church couldn't very well ignore it, so they moved to enforce the law.

"From the church's point of view, Fuzzy Dice is a criminal for his thefts. Yet they pretty much don't even attempt to catch him."

According to the chief detective, there actually *was* a task force pursuing Fuzzy Dice. The church, which administered the law, couldn't very well let a prolific thief who robbed all over the continent go unchallenged. That said, everything he stole was useful to the church, so the "task force" wasn't tasked with much.

Having finished explaining this, the chief detective looked toward one area of the church. "Wow—speak of the devil. There they are. Perhaps they're meeting about the big day."

Following Wolf's gaze, Mira saw five figures in matching clothes atop a platform set up beside the church. They wore black robes with red-and-white accents a bit too light to be considered proper priests' attire. That must've been the uniform of the Fuzzy Dice Task Force.

These five individuals always showed up to the church in whichever city Fuzzy Dice had sent a calling card, so the chief detective seemed to be acquainted with all of them.

“Make no mistake, they’re not discussing how to *capture* Fuzzy Dice,” Wolf added. “They’re discussing how best to collect all the evidence smoothly and how they’ll bust into the Dorres Company mansion.”

On one hand, Fuzzy Dice had no actual legal power. On the other hand, the church had that power, but certain criteria had to be met for them to flex their authority. By using each other, the thief and the church had brought down many villains. Thus, the job of the Fuzzy Dice Task Force was to *appear* to attempt to capture the phantom thief while arresting the real evildoers as members of the Cross-Border Judicial Force.

“I thought the church was rigid and uncompromising. They’re actually more easygoing than you’d think.”

Mira pictured them as an institution in which laws passed down from the gods were absolute, and which wouldn’t tolerate anyone breaking those laws under any circumstances. In reality, they were a bit more pragmatic than she’d thought.

It was that way in this world for a reason. “Well, the gods are most likely somewhat easygoing too,” Wolf replied. “The Oracles of the Trinity are said to receive messages from above occasionally. And apparently, the messages are most often about not becoming too rigidly fixated on the rules.”

“Again…I could’ve guessed as much.”

Mira frankly found the whole idea of receiving messages from a god very suspicious. That said, in a fantasy world full of angels, devils, spirits, and everything else, was it that farfetched for gods to exist?

And, while Mira wasn’t sure whether it really counted as proof, the progenitor spirit Martel said that Mira was a vessel for the coming advent of the gods. Moreover, Martel was on the level of a goddess, and Mira could talk with her as she would to a friend.

“*I guess the gods have substantial dealings with people, huh?*” Mira suddenly asked the Spirit King.

“*Guidance has been handed down so that they don’t need to interfere unnecessarily. However, they supposedly do occasionally send*

their followers messages if they're struggling with interpreting the gods' teachings. After all, if they didn't, those misconstruing the teachings would run wild and sow chaos," he replied as if it were obvious.

No doubt about it, this was high fantasy: Objects of worship spoke to their followers personally. That explained why so many people were faithful.

"I see," said Mira. *"It's reassuring to feel that the gods are always so close at hand, huh?"*

People here weren't worshiping statues of gods but the real things. Fantasy religions were sure different from the ones in the real world. Mira was impressed once again.

Perhaps because he hadn't spoken to Mira in a long time, the Spirit King launched into a lesson on the Divine Trinity, although Mira hadn't asked about them. He talked about each of their personalities, as well as mentioning things that bordered on personal information.

The Spirit King had evidently looked forward to sharing these facts with Mira. As she listened, she noted that his voice was taking on a slightly feverish tone. She snickered to herself at the thought that he might even give Chief Detective Wolf a run for his money when it came to telling stories.

"So now, they're peacefully watching over the world from the moon."

When the Spirit King casually let that incredible information slip, Mira had been thinking about how—despite being gods—the Trinity sure had a lot in common with humans. But those deities—who had the most followers in this entire world—lived on the *moon*?!

Immediately after the Spirit King finished speaking, Martel's slightly shocked voice was audible. "*Sym, was it really all right to share that with Mira?*"

"Er..." the Spirit King continued, having seemingly just realized something. "*Miss Mira, that's beyond top secret. Please don't __*"

He’d apparently slipped up. *“Hrmm… I didn’t hear a thing.”*

So it was a big secret that the gods—who really existed—lived on same moon hanging in the sky. Mira smirked, not so much at the absurd idea of the gods living up there as at the Spirit King’s carelessness.

Chapter 10

NOW WAS THE TIME to get moving on the plan to catch Fuzzy Dice, so Mira decided to put aside the massive secret she'd just learned for the time being and return to the situation at hand.

"So is this where you'll set your plan in motion, Chief Detective?" she asked, finding herself in the middle of another of his yarns about the church.

Even if he could predict Fuzzy Dice's rooftop route, there was no way he could be completely sure that it was the route Fuzzy Dice *would* take. That said, the thief's destination would be the church, so they could just wait for him there. Then, after staking the place out, they could apprehend Fuzzy Dice once he made his grand entrance.

At least, that was what Mira assumed the chief detective's plan would be. However, the words that followed had her scratching her head again.

"No, this is still just part of the path we'll take. We'll carry out our plan at our next stop." With that, he turned and shot Mira another challenging look.

"There's one more good spot for him to distribute evidence. Where would you say that is?"

"Oh ho... You've got another puzzle for me, huh?" Having decided that she'd take on whatever challenge he threw at her, she stood up to ponder this question.

She mulled it over. What kind of place would get lots of public attention and be ideal for handing over evidence? It would need locations all over the continent, like the church had. What location might that be?

It had to be beyond the influence of money and power—a place that served the people. Were there other places like that? Mira thought about it for a bit before, from the depths of her mind, the answer came to her, clear as day.

“It’s got to be the Adventurers’ Guild Union!” she declared with hopeful enthusiasm that contrasted with the chief detective’s stern look.

“Correct,” Wolf said, sounding somewhat let down, as Mira flashed a cheeky grin.

Mira was already very familiar with the Adventurers’ Guild Union. It had its own organizational structure and operated independently from any regime or nation. Much like the church, it had branches all over the continent. Furthermore, it was deeply connected to the general populace thanks to the services it provided. The more she thought about it, the more it seemed like a perfect secondary drop point.

In addition to those reasons, many people ended up hearing tales initially shared within the guild; tales of adventurers’ exploits were often retold for entertainment, becoming popular with the masses.

Most importantly, the guild offered its services in enforcing the law on behalf of the state when it came to things like banditry. If they received any evidence of wrongdoing, the guild’s martial artists would move collectively to strike.

After Fuzzy Dice pulled off a heist, an evildoer would have to contend with both the law and some of the continent’s most powerful martial artists. Not many people stood a chance against both.

“I believe that, once he releases the evidence into the hands of the archbishop in the cathedral, he’ll go along the rooftops over there and make his way to the guild,” the chief detective said, ignoring Mira’s smirk and pretending he didn’t mind her being right both times.

Still pointing at the buildings opposite them, he rolled forward again.

The roofs that the chief detective had mentioned were on the other side of the main street and were about twenty meters in width. From what Wolf had said, Fuzzy Dice could easily make that jump.

I mean, I could too!

It'd be no sweat if she used Air Step. Mira looked up at the rows of buildings, defiance burning in her eyes, as she followed the chief detective.

Haxthausen's guilds were located along the main street heading north, not very far from the cathedral. Facing each other across the street were the Mages' Guild to the west and the Warriors' Guild to the east.

"Which will he choose?" Mira asked, as if to herself, as she stepped clear of passersby. Would he appear in the mages' or warriors' building?

The chief detective explained that Fuzzy Dice *always* chose the Mages' Guild, apparently because the evidence he stole was sometimes magically sealed or imbued with anti-theft enchantments. Therefore, he left it with the mages, who could easily deal with both. He even made sure to leave it on the counter as politely and gently as possible.

"Then, while they're busy dispelling any enchantments, he vanishes. That's how his heists always end."

The chief detective had an idea of just how Fuzzy Dice managed that. He believed that the phantom thief used a technique to disguise himself the moment the evidence distracted the onlookers.

"Quite obnoxiously, he usually renders several of the enchantments left on the evidence unstable. So those working at the guild have to scramble to dispel them."

According to the chief detective, that was all part of Fuzzy Dice's plan. As guild employees struggled to dispel all the enchantments, the surrounding area would flood with mana.

"I heard from a friend who's a mage that, under those circumstances, mages can't use Mana Perception or otherwise sense magic use. And because that mana seeps into everything, it's soon impossible to detect Fuzzy Dice's mana. No one could guess that a man who'd been a wildly flashy phantom thief moments earlier suddenly turned into a nondescript demonologist."

With the guild in an uproar, Fuzzy Dice would use a technique to change his appearance, blend in with the rest of the adventurers, and then slip right out the front door. Having analyzed everything, that was how the chief detective believed Fuzzy Dice was suddenly vanishing.

"I see," said Mira, feeling that he was probably right.

She knew there was a Demonic Arts technique for changing one's appearance. She also knew just how effective it was. It was called [Demonic Arts Otherworld: Phantasmal Form] and was very simple and straightforward to use. That said, its *effect* wasn't so simple. It was determined by the difference in magic power between the person using the technique and the one seeing it.

In short, if an onlooker had more magic power than the user, the technique wouldn't work. And if both people had about the same amount of magic power, it was a coin flip. So, to ensure that the technique would work, a person needed to use it around those with less magic power than they had. In short, the technique wasn't always useful—but when it did work, it was something else.

Hrmm. If the chief detective's right, Fuzzy Dice must be incredibly powerful.

After all, the Adventurers' Guild Union had its fair share of advanced masters. If none of them had seen through Fuzzy Dice's technique, he must have been more powerful than all of them. That would prove that he was truly next level. In that case, it would be impossible for other adventurers to identify him when he used Phantasmal Form.

Mira was confident that *she* could see through the technique, but she couldn't say for certain. It was also possible that he could cast Phantasmal Form on everyone in the room. If everyone was affected, she'd have trouble identifying Fuzzy Dice, even if she noticed that something wasn't right.

So what could she do about it? Mira—who didn't often need to rack her brain—put it into overdrive and came up with an idea.

"Well, could we do something to keep him from mingling with the crowd?"

If they simply didn't let anyone inside the guild after Fuzzy Dice executed his heist, his technique would be useless. He'd be just like a moth flying into a flame.

"I tried that once before," the chief detective said with a bitter grin, shaking his head.

He'd explained the situation to the Adventurers' Guild a day in advance and gotten their permission to go ahead with that very same plan. On the day of the heist, they hadn't allowed anyone inside the guild besides the chief detective and the staff responsible for dispelling enchantments, then waited for Fuzzy Dice to make his appearance.

"It completely backfired. He simply threw the evidence through the window instead of leaving it on the counter."

Fuzzy Dice had escaped without them even getting a look at him.

The phantom thief always made sure his crimes never injured anyone. He took that rule so seriously that the chief detective had begun to think that he followed an honorable thief's code. He'd predicted that that code would extend to how Fuzzy Dice treated evidence, but he'd apparently been mistaken.

"The only rules he seems to hold to are not to harm anyone and to send a calling card."

When it came to anything else, he adapted to situations fluidly and wasn't beholden to any prescribed "honorable" methods. The chief detective had learned as much trying various means of capturing him.

First, knowing Fuzzy Dice would make his way to and from the church and guild by rooftop, Wolf had planted several traps on the roofs. When he did, Fuzzy Dice simply escaped via the street. Another time, he'd waited in a church to ambush Fuzzy Dice with a containment barrier. When he did, Fuzzy Dice simply handed his fans the evidence on the very edge of the containment zone.

In short, the thief didn't follow any rules when it came to delivering evidence. Knowing as much, the church and guild couldn't do anything but wait for that evidence to show up. And it always did.

“But my plan this time is different. This new operation is based around his usual MO. I’ve been preparing for this for a long time, and now everything’s ready!” the chief detective said, his face full of glee.

But his cheerfulness faded right away. With all his plans about to come to fruition, he’d injured his legs.

“I was thinking of throwing in the towel. But that’s when I met you, and my hope was rekindled,” the chief detective said as he looked at Mira.

Simultaneously, he pulled what appeared to be a gaudy gun from a bag attached to one side of his wheelchair. Upon closer inspection, the object looked like a long mechanical box with an ammo clip and trigger attached. It certainly had *looked* like a gun at first glance, but it also appeared quite unwieldy and didn’t even seem to have a barrel.

So what was the object? Mira thought about it but couldn’t come up with an answer. The only thing she knew was that it was likely a new magical tool. She’d seen her fair share of magic gadgets while shopping around town.

“Oh ho… Now, that’s something I’ve never seen before. What is it, some kind of magical tool?” she said, asking the chief detective to confirm her guess.

“Correct. It’s not the most recent model, but it’s the genuine article from the Sentinel Institute. It’s an extraordinary piece of equipment used to track down criminals.”

The chief detective struck a few poses with the magical tool, his face lighting up like some little boy dreaming of becoming a police detective one day. Perhaps owing to his grizzled features, he really would’ve looked like a hard-boiled police detective if he’d kept quiet.

“Ah, something from the Sentinel Institute, you say? They sell these too?”

Mira remembered hearing about the institute before—probably while chatting with Solomon. In Alcait, as well as the other player-founded kingdoms, a force known as the Sentinel Knights existed. Those knights worked for the Sentinel

Department and held a similar role to the police. Their responsibilities differed from those of military members, who primarily functioned in times of war. Essentially, Sentinel Knights were fantasy-world cops. They apprehended criminals and looked for missing children, making sure the streets were safe and the townsfolk were happy and healthy.

The Sentinel Institute was in charge of organizing, monitoring, and furnishing each respective country's Sentinel Department. Additionally, as was obvious from the fact that they functioned mainly in player-created kingdoms, they were under the Hinomoto Committee's jurisdiction.

The Sentinel Institute worked primarily on developing nonlethal weapons to prevent crime and stop criminals, such as the weapon the chief detective held.

"It wasn't easy getting my hands on this beauty," Wolf added. "Sometimes, it really does pay to be well-connected."

It wasn't often that genuine Hinomoto Committee equipment, even older models, found their way onto the market. Considering the difficulty of acquiring such a thing, Mira guessed that Wolf had impressive connections indeed.

"There is one issue, however. Only someone with a light spirit's blessing can wield this thing," the chief detective said with a sigh. He then quickly explained how the device he held worked.

First off, without a light spirit's blessing, it wouldn't function. That was apparently true of many magical tools from the Sentinel Institute. Wind, water, and light spirits tended to have calm, gentle personalities, as did those they bestowed their blessings upon. This restriction, the detective noted, made it very unlikely that the tool would be used to perpetrate intentional wrongdoings.

"When the Sentinel Institute makes something this powerful, they have to think about the possibility of it falling into the wrong hands. I applaud their forethought." He looked over the device he held and nodded to himself as if impressed.

Since not many people could use the tool, he continued, it wasn't much good in an emergency.

A considerable level of skill was needed to use this tool; on top of that, a person couldn't just get a spirit's blessing whenever they wanted. However kind or benevolent they were, they needed to encounter a spirit first. Thus, Sentinel Knights with a water, wind, or light spirit's blessing generally got preferential treatment.

"In fact, I have light and wind blessings myself. After I retired, the Sentinel Department offered me a position, but I turned them down because I wanted to be a detective," Wolf said, his voice somewhat boastful.

"Oh, you don't say?" Mira replied nonchalantly.

The chief detective looked a bit let down by her reaction, or lack thereof.

Mira didn't know the details—they weren't of much interest to her—but apparently, the Sentinel Department only reached out to those who were the elite of the elite. In short, the chief detective had been fishing for praise, and Mira's unimpressed response took the wind out of his sails.

"Now, about how to use this..." The chief detective coughed and regained his composure as he began to explain how the magical tool functioned.

The tool was designed to draw on the Ethereal Arts used for investigating. There were basically two different models that could be used, depending on the situation: one tracked magical power, and the other tracked vital force. Since Wolf was going after a demonologist like Fuzzy Dice, he was using the one that tracked magic. That would be easier to detect since, as a mage, Fuzzy Dice would have high mana reserves.

Using the magical tool was simple. All the user had to do was point it at a target and pull the trigger. There was one thing to be careful of, however, which was not to use it around someone with high magic power, or someone emitting a large amount of mana.

"The problem is it only tracks targets within a three-hundred-meter radius."

Even if they managed to find Fuzzy Dice, he could simply slip back outside the tool's detection range. And even if the chief detective locked onto the thief with the device, he couldn't hand it

over to Julius to track him down, since Julius lacked a light spirit's blessing.

"I believe that a laborer mage would have an easier time making their way around, thanks to all the help they could summon. So, Miss Mira, if *you* used this, you likely wouldn't have any trouble chasing down Fuzzy Dice."

Summoners were so uncommon that no one was quite sure how powerful they were anymore. And now Mira, the masterful summoner known as the Spirit Queen, had appeared. The chief detective's eyes glittered eagerly as he wondered what she was capable of.

"Hrmm. Chasing him down, eh...?" Mira seemed lost in thought before adding, "If that's all you need me to do, I don't think it'll be a problem."

She used Air Step to zip upward, nimbly springing onto the roof of the Mages' Guild.

"That's incredible..." Wolf had expected her to use an evocation, but she'd suddenly used an Immortal Arts technique. It was no wonder he was stunned.

Wolf wasn't the only one caught off guard; Julius was taken aback as well. "Wow. Now, that was a surprise..."

He'd never expected Mira to do something like that either, and having followed her movements a little too closely, he'd gotten a full-on look at her panties. He was hit hard with a conflicting mix of awe and guilt; it was a real emotional rollercoaster.

They heard voices coming from nearby. Since they were in a crowded area, Mira's actions had caused a bit of a stir. All eyes were focused squarely on Mira, and Julius' fears were about to be realized.

"What do you think? This would be a better way to chase him down, right? My evocations are pretty powerful... I think they'd be too easy to spot!" Mira brimmed with confidence.

After running around in midair using Air Step, Mira gently alighted. When she did, her skirt floated fully up around her. She didn't just flash the onlookers; she gave them a full show.



“That must be an Immortal Arts technique, correct? Good heavens, that’s marvelous,” Wolf said. “I’m surprised that you’re able to use an endogenous skill as well.”

“Right?!”

The chief detective was even more impressed than she’d expected, and Mira herself didn’t seem to share Julius’s concern as she rushed back to the raucous applause of those who’d seen the show.

The chief detective certainly thought that Mira’s ability to run through the air meant that she’d have no trouble with mobility. She probably wouldn’t even have any problem chasing after Fuzzy Dice. That’s why Wolf—who should’ve been the most cautious—let himself get carried away at the exciting prospect of Mira outmaneuvering the phantom thief.

“With that kind of mobility, you should be able to stay right on his tail. We might at last locate his base of operations! It seems the tide has finally turned,” said the chief detective, thrilled to finally glimpse victory.

He immediately began teaching Mira how to use the magical tool, aptly named the Lock-On M Type-2.

Although Mira and Wolf were both getting excited, Julius felt the need to remind them of something very important first.

“Can I just say one thing?” he interjected.

The mobility afforded by the Immortal Arts was second to none. So although those weren’t Mira’s main art, she’d be able to pursue Fuzzy Dice without any trouble, just by using the technique she’d demonstrated. And as she’d noted, it would be harder to spot a petite girl like her whizzing through the air than to spot one of her evocations.

That was precisely why Julius felt the need to warn her. “The way you moved just then was incredible. Even the phantom thief surely couldn’t outmaneuver you. But you mustn’t do that again without wearing something more underneath.” Julius’s pointed, unbending gaze left no question as to what he meant.

“Ah…yes,” the chief detective said, as if finally recalling what had happened. “Yes, indeed. That’s true, Miss Mira. You should take more care when you jump into the air like that. An old friend of mine used to say that area is precious. Girls, especially, should always make an effort to keep it hidden.”

Perhaps out of consideration for Mira, Julius and the chief detective were being quite serious. Mira tilted her head as if she had no idea what they were talking about. Then, after considering what Julius had said, she picked up on what they meant.

“O-oooh. Got it! Dressed like this, you could probably see everything, huh?” Mira looked down at her bottom half, grabbed her short skirt, and gave it a swish. She realized the garment wouldn’t be much use for keeping her underwear hidden while using Air Step.

Well…it doesn’t really bug me, but I guess it’s not really socially acceptable.

It finally dawned on her just how exposed and unprotected she’d left her panties. It was kind of strange that she’d only come to realize such a thing because of two men, but she agreed that she had to do something about it.

While Mira personally couldn’t care less who saw her panties, she never intended on going around showing them to everyone, nor did she have any need to put on any more shows.

“Um…I’ll deal with it later,” said Mira, who had an idea on just how to fix the problem. She smiled at Julius, adding, “Thanks for the heads-up.”

“Not at all. I’m just glad you got my drift,” he replied with a smile.

There was, however, more to his smile than met the eye. Mira’s cute expression was burned into his brain, as was the erotic glimpse of her panties. An indescribable sensation began to rage inside him. Mira had once again awakened feelings in another adolescent boy.

Having settled the incident with the panties for the time being, they resumed talking about Fuzzy Dice. Over the course of

the discussion, Mira learned more or less how to use the Lock-On M Type-2.

To test it, Mira tagged Julius, then used the device to locate him after he hid in a back alley. Judging by the tool's accuracy, it seemed to her that the Sentinel Institute's products were no joke.

"Hrmm. I see," she murmured. "Guess we're ready to go then."

"All right, then. Miss Mira, there's something I'd like to ask of you…"

Since they'd finished testing the device, the chief detective began describing how he planned to use it.

When Fuzzy Dice reached his destination, the Mages' Guild, he had three possible ways to enter the building: He could either go in through the front door, the back employee entrance, or via the second-floor balcony.

The first stage of Wolf's plan was to stake out the guild and lock on to Fuzzy Dice with the magical tool when he made his grand entrance. The tricky part would be doing this without alerting the phantom thief. If he figured out that they'd tagged him with a magical tool designed exclusively for tracking, the whole plan would fall apart. No one who knew they were being tailed would return to their hideout.

"At any rate, I don't believe we need to worry about him entering through the back door," Wolf continued. "There's a lock on it that can only be opened using a key restricted to staff members. It'd likely be difficult for even Fuzzy Dice to open, so I think we can ignore it. Miss Mira, I'd like you to keep aiming at the balcony entrance from the café on the other side of the street."

They looked at the Mages' Guild in front of them. There was a balcony on its second floor, but since it was set back a bit from the main street, it wasn't easy to aim at from the Warriors' Guild directly across the street. Still, Mira would have a clear sight line from the third-floor balcony of a café nearby, and it certainly looked as if she'd also have a perfect shot from there.

"Gotcha. I shouldn't have too much trouble lining up a shot," Mira agreed. "But should I just aim for the balcony door? From

over there, I should have a good view of the front entrance too." Two of the three guild entrances were on the main street, and just as Mira said, she could aim for either from the café.

But the chief detective responded that she didn't need to worry about it. He was apparently certain that Fuzzy Dice would make his way in through the balcony. "In all his heists, he's only ever gone in via the second floor when entering from the front… because I always blocked the other entrances. So as long as we don't do anything to spook him, he'll definitely come in through the front."

Fuzzy Dice was known to adapt fluidly to situations, but so long as nothing out of the ordinary happened, he'd follow his usual MO. Thus, the plan was not to set up traps along most of his route and just to let him enter the Mages' Guild the way he usually would: through the balcony on the second floor.

"However, I'm planning a little something to buy you enough time to lock onto him," the chief detective added.

Letting out a sinister laugh, he explained that he'd leave an inconspicuous trap on the balcony to make it easier for Mira to target the thief. He warned her that, given how the tool worked, it would be unable to lock onto the thief or properly measure his mana if anyone else was near him.

"They solved that issue on the latest model, for the record. If I could only have gotten my hands on it, we'd have had a little more leeway with our plan. Unfortunately, that was out of the question—I got shot down."

Older models had found their way onto the market, but the newest ones hadn't. Even if he could've found a new one, he'd have had to buy it illegally, the chief detective half joked. That would just have caused more headaches down the line. Beaming, he covetously described the newest model.

First, it had three times the lock-on range of the older model, and its detection range had been bumped up to a staggering five kilometers. It was also more accurate and could even lock on to targets in a crowd. Finally, it came with a remote device that could

share information. It had certainly improved a lot, compared to the model just before it.

"If only I'd accepted the Sentinel Department's offer and helped them out, they'd have let me at least borrow one for sure."

Wolf must've felt pretty conflicted after spending so much money on the older model, since the newer one was so much better. The Sentinel Department had offered him a position in the past, so one could only imagine what connections he'd have made if he'd chosen to become a detective *after* working for them.

Likely pondering just that, Wolf peered into the sky with a distant look in his eyes. As if in a dream, he absently muttered to himself about what could've been.

Returning to reality, he began reviewing the basics of the plan and everyone's positions. Mira would lie in wait with the Lock-On M Type-2 while Fuzzy Dice executed the heist. Wolf, meanwhile, would wait inside the Mages' Guild, keeping an eye on the overall situation. Finally, Julius would keep track of Fuzzy Dice's heist and the phantom thief's movements. If he did anything unexpected, Julius would contact everyone else immediately.

To contact each other, they'd use boxes that Mira had seen once before—a few days ago, while she was clearing the Ancient Underground City. She'd come across a group of adventurers working as a larger team. To clear the dungeon as several smaller parties, each party was given a box for communications.

However, there was one key difference between their boxes and these ones: The adventurers' boxes had been very basic magical tools that just sent simple signals displayed as floating red, blue, and yellow dots. The communicators the detective was providing were an advanced version that actually sent text. It could relay messages of up to fifty characters, which were typed using a panel. That panel made the boxes a bit larger than the adventurers', but considering the convenience of sending text, that was worth it.

Mira wondered why the party in the Ancient Underground City had used an older model that only flashed lights rather than this much more useful version. She subtly asked the chief

detective about the newer model's price. Even if it was a bit more costly, one could just do so much more with a communicator that sent text—or so Mira naively thought.

The chief detective knew why the adventurers had used the older one, though. The communicators Mira had previously seen could be purchased for fifty thousand ducats. While that wasn't cheap, the adventurers she'd seen could certainly have afforded it. However, the model the detective had was a different story. And he had *three* of them, which came to thirty million ducats.

This model—the latest—was also very popular among adventurers, given its ability to send text, and wasn't easy to get hold of due to problems with distribution or something. Wolf had needed to rely on his connections to get the ones he had.

To even get his hands on one of these, he'd need substantial connections.

All the communicators were technically the same type of tool, but there were certainly major differences between them. One needed to add three zeroes to the price tag if they simply wanted to send text instead of dots. Moreover, the tools were now used a lot more frequently than when *AEO* was still a game. That was one reason why Mira was looking forward to using the communicator set, which had cost Wolf a whopping thirty million ducats.

Still, for an adventurer, throwing around that kind of money was par for the course. Mira pondered a sudden vision of a future in which, after she was done with everything else, she could go off and try a bit of carefree adventuring.

Chapter 11

"SO THAT'S THE GENERAL PLAN," Wolf concluded.

He'd explained that Julius would move to the scene of the predicted crime to keep updated on Fuzzy Dice's real-time movements. Making sure everyone's locations were marked, the chief detective told Mira that the rest was up to her.

"Hrmm. Can I really go about this however I want?" she asked. Considering how precise his preparations had been, she wasn't sure that would be all right.

If everything went according to plan, then all the credit would go to the chief detective. But it would mostly go to Mira if she captured Fuzzy Dice or discovered his hideout on her own.

"Yes. Go right ahead. There really isn't much I can do this time, after all," Wolf said, looking down at his lower body. With injured legs, he chuckled, he couldn't even dream of chasing the phantom thief.

He shrugged slightly, the stern expression that he'd had up until then gone. Then he burst out laughing that—despite his current situation—he did hope that all the time he'd spent coming up with the plan hadn't been for nothing. He wanted to learn just how well it had worked out as soon as possible.

"Besides, to be completely honest with you, I haven't paid any thought to what to do *after* we begin tracking him," he admitted.

Wolf had evidently injured himself right around the time he was coming up with that part of the plan. Since he couldn't go after Fuzzy Dice at all, he'd left that element unfinished. That said, he was set on finding out whether he could lock on to the phantom thief without Fuzzy Dice noticing.

Since he'd at least wanted to see if he could do that, he'd set about trying to find a mage who would help. It was right then, he laughed, that he'd managed to enlist the fabled Spirit Queen.

"I see. Well, I don't blame you," Mira replied, smiling wryly.

She sympathized with the chief detective. While playing *AEO*, she'd rarely been able to contain herself when it came to implementing new strategies or techniques alongside others. Danblf had often logged in to do just that, even in the middle of the night. It contributed to a significant lack of sleep that got so bad that his friends even suggested that scientists should study him.

"I have high expectations of someone with a nickname like yours. And you've got the speed and maneuverability to match the phantom thief. If I'd known earlier that you'd join us, I'd have planned out how to chase him down."

The chief detective couldn't have known that Mira would decide to help, so he wouldn't have spent a whole day coming up with a plan that revolved around her. In light of that, the chief detective thought it best to just leave the undecided details to her.

"Well, I'll give it my best shot," Mira replied. Smiling to herself, she looked up at the second-floor balcony. This was going to be fun.

The time for planning was over, so they made their way to the café across the street to try to get permission to use the third-floor balcony. Since it had a great unobstructed view of the Mages' Guild, it was the very best place to lie in wait and hopefully get a clear shot at Fuzzy Dice.

"—and that's why we need access to the balcony. So would you let us use it?" the chief detective asked the the proprietor, having looped him in on the full plan.

"Gee, I'd really like to, but I'm afraid I can't," the proprietor replied with a sour look.

Apparently, people really did consider Fuzzy Dice a hero. For that reason, some were reluctant to help the chief detective in his quest to capture the thief, and there wasn't anything the detectives or Mira could do about that. Those in the service industry also had PR to worry about.

Then three women tried their hardest to convince the surly proprietor.

“Come on. It’s no big deal. It’s not like we’ll make a spectacle of ourselves.”

“Yeah. No one will even know we’re here.”

“We’re just fans who want front-row seats to see Fuzzy Dice.”

The chief detective had found the beautiful, charismatic adventurers in front of the café earlier. He’d seemingly spoken with them after splitting up with Mira, and they’d agreed to help with his plan.

That way, the chief detective explained, they could improve their odds of success by using the fact that Mira was a young girl. It wouldn’t be Mira waiting alone on the balcony but rather a group of women dressed up like Fuzzy Dice fans. Every time Fuzzy Dice pulled off a heist, the area in front of the local Mages’ Guild became packed with fans. And considering how Mira looked, Wolf asserted, she’d blend right in.

They’d tried a similar plan in the past, he noted—an utterly absurd version in which both he and Julius had dressed up like women. Needless to say, it hadn’t been a success. Wolf had been recognized immediately, and the whole thing had basically fallen apart in the ensuing hubbub, although Julius—rather surprisingly—had managed to slip in undetected.

“For sure, *you* can use it,” the proprietor said.

The women’s efforts to persuade him had paid off; they’d been allowed access to the balcony.

Mira considered telling Wolf that she could just have used Wasranvel’s optical camouflage but decided to keep that to herself. Next time he came up with a plan like this, he’d undoubtedly be using Julius. With that in mind, she quietly looked at Julius and crossed her fingers.

Once they’d secured the balcony without incident, they discussed everything necessary that pertained to the operation. All they had left to do was to wait for the big day. Tomorrow’s date had been written on Fuzzy Dice’s calling card, and the climactic battle would start at eight o’clock sharp.

If Fuzzy Dice managed to steal evidence from the Dorres Company president's mansion and get it to the church and Mages' Guild, victory would be his.

Suddenly, Mira thought of something. "One thing's been bugging me: What if people in the church or Mages' Guild have links to Fuzzy Dice's targets? They could just hide whatever evidence he stole, right?"

It didn't matter that believers gathered to worship the gods in churches or that the guild was a union that strove to help people. So long as those institutions were full of people, there'd be at least a couple bad apples. If one had secret connections to the target, they could simply conceal whatever evidence Fuzzy Dice had stolen.

"I considered that exact same thing," the chief detective said, smiling as if he'd gotten a second wind. "But..." He went on a tangent about another hypothesis.

Although Mira noted that the explanation just refused to die, she was still curious, and began listening to the chief detective as he elaborated. By doing so, she discovered something thoroughly unbelievable.

According to the chief detective's investigation, in every city where Fuzzy Dice had carried out a heist, there had been a huge disturbance that saw all the church and guild members engaged in shady activity rounded up and arrested shortly before the phantom thief sent his calling card. Moreover, they were all arrested due to anonymous tips and anonymously submitted evidence.

"Good heavens, do you think it could be a coincidence? It happened in Haxthausen as well just about two weeks ago. Two shady members of the church and three suspicious individuals from the Mages' Guild got arrested," Wolf said. He shrugged slightly with a dry laugh. "It's sure convenient that all those informants chose to speak up just then."

The information always came from anonymous informants. Picking up on the chief detective's insinuation without even

needing to think about it, Mira grinned crookedly. “To think he engages in those kinds of clandestine maneuvers as well…”

Fuzzy Dice only went after big fish who had not only *lots* of connections but connections that went far and deep. They were opponents against whom normal methods wouldn’t quite work. Yet Fuzzy Dice managed to take them all down in just a single night.

According to the chief detective, one of the main reasons he could do so was that Fuzzy Dice’s big, flashy heists were only the very last step in his plans. Even before the obvious start—sending a calling card—the phantom thief was hard at work.

“We can’t be sure he had anything to do with it, but in every city Fuzzy Dice has appeared in, the number of crimes has dropped drastically. Quite a mystery, isn’t it?” the chief detective added sardonically.

He’d apparently given up on pursuing any of Fuzzy Dice’s other activities. The chief detective’s focus was squarely on the flashy heists where Fuzzy Dice made his grand entrances, rather than the work he did behind the scenes.

“Well, if the cities end up more peaceful, I suppose we ought to be thankful,” Mira said.

He wanted their showdown to be aboveboard and out in the open. Mira sort of understood how he felt, so she didn’t ask anything else. She simply agreed that peace was nice.

Thanks to the anonymously submitted tips and evidence, the bad apples embedded in the church and guilds were behind bars. Those organizations were now free of malign influences, so Fuzzy Dice no longer had to worry about anyone tampering with his hard-won stolen evidence. He was free to go to either institution as soon as he’d pulled off a heist.

“All right, then,” Wolf said. “We’ll meet tomorrow night in front of the guild.”

“Mm-hmm. Sounds good.”

Once Wolf had said goodbye, Julius bowed slightly and began wheeling him away.

“This plan is sort of lacking, huh…?” Mira murmured.

The chief detective’s plan only went as far as marking Fuzzy Dice with the Lock-On M Type-2. His most important objective was trying out the fancy new magical tool that he’d gotten his hands on.

He’d left how to actually pursue Fuzzy Dice to Mira’s discretion, but they’d never used the magical tool before, and it was hard to come up with more plans without knowing how it worked. Thus, Wolf needed to know how handy it’d been once she used it.

The fact that the important thing was to get data on the tool’s functionality was another reason for Mira not to feel too stressed. The chief detective hadn’t brought up anything about her pursuit’s potential outcome. She didn’t need to panic about whether she’d catch the phantom thief.

Perhaps Wolf had only set his priorities so that Mira wouldn’t feel any unnecessary pressure. His expression during their conversation suddenly reminded Mira of the face of a researcher back in her tower.

After pondering the chief detective’s true goal for a moment, Mira decided that she didn’t really care. She’d spend the night coming up with a plan that suited her.

After parting with Wolf and Julius, Mira decided to address the issue they’d pointed out to her and went in search of a store that fit her needs.

That was when she saw them. A large group of Fuzzy Dice fans had gathered. The women were seemingly discussing the location of the best vantage point. Fuzzy Dice would show up at the church and Mages’ Guild, so they were anxious to have the best view.

The voices Mira overheard were fighting for spots in corners beside the main street, as if the fans were attempting not to inconvenience pedestrians. When it came to the spots they wanted to watch from, they seemed surprisingly restrained.

They’re awfully polite for a bunch of rabid fans, huh…?

As Mira continued, she heard some talk about heading to the Warriors' Guild balcony or into the church, but the fans surely wouldn't get permission to do so just to glimpse Fuzzy Dice. Mulling this over, Mira quietly passed the women.

As Mira walked down the street, hunting for a store that worked, she spotted a perfect-looking one among the rows of shops.

"Wow. This place looks great."

It was in a large, fairly conspicuous building and appeared to sell various kinds of apparel. At first glance, they clearly offered a huge selection, from casual wear, to formalwear, to underwear, and even gambesons for adventurers.

Julius and the chief detective had warned Mira that by making any extreme movements in a skirt, she'd end up flashing her panties to the entire world.

"Might as well look."

It didn't really bother Mira if anyone saw her underwear, but fine. She viewed consideration of others as a gentleman's duty, so she opened the door to the shop.

The store's name was Marl & Stritz. Despite being located a bit away from the city center, it was fairly large. The large selection and utterly packed shelves made the entire place look cramped, but that state meant shopping there almost felt like treasure hunting. All the merchandise was sorted into the appropriate sections, so while the store was messy, it was organized chaos.

"Of all the shops I've been to, this one's definitely got the best selection," Mira murmured to herself in admiration as she looked around the bustling store. Truthfully, she hadn't been to many clothing shops, so whether it really had the best selection was anyone's guess. Regardless, Marl & Stritz was packed with enough products to make Mira imagine that this was so.

"Come to think of it, I really don't have many clothes. Might as well get some stuff here!"

The two-level store was divided into men's and women's apparel. Mira was near the first-floor entrance, a section full of

stylish men's apparel that was for sale. Quickly forgetting her panty conundrum, she looked at several cool men's robes that caught her eye.

"Wow. This is nice. This one with the red stripe looks awesome."

When it came to clothes, Mira tended to put a premium on aesthetics. She found three robes that spoke to her and stood with them in hand in front of a full-length mirror, then held them up in front of herself. The robes' edgy look appealed to her, but she heaved a sigh. The reason was simple: They were *men's* robes, so even the smallest size was too big for her petite frame.

"Hrmm…and now that I think about it…"

Regardless of whether they appealed to her aesthetically, they didn't really suit her, considering how cute she now looked. Mira put back the robes dejectedly, reminiscing on her days as the cool, majestic-looking Danblf.

"Can't I get a Vanity Case *anywhere*…?" she muttered.

Figuring she might as well ask the Spirit King, Mira inquired about whether a technique, item, or spell could revert her appearance.

He just answered apathetically that he'd never heard of such a thing. Apparently, even the fabled Spirit King couldn't wrap his mind around something that miraculous.

"Guess I'll just have to make the most of being cute," Mira muttered, unsure whether that was reassuring or not.

It didn't seem like she'd go back to being Danblf anytime soon. With that reality in mind, Mira sighed and made her way back onto the street. Then she whipped her head around, looking back at the clothing store.

"I totally forgot why I went in there!"

Having gotten tired of checking out the men's robes, she suddenly remembered why she went into the store in the first place—not to check out robes but to solve her panty problem. The tasks were polar opposites. With that in mind, Mira stepped inside

Marl & Stritz again. This time, she went straight to the second-floor ladies department without letting herself get distracted.

"How do I put this? The vibe here is...totally different."

Whether just due to its ambience, or for some more concrete reason, the whole second floor had a comparatively refined, extravagant air. At a glance, it also seemed to be entirely full of women.

That was when Mira realized the main reason the floor felt luxurious. In a corner of the floor—exactly one-quarter of it—clothes were laid out sparingly, with plenty of room between garments. Shopping in that section was a far cry from the treasure-hunting fun of the rest of the store.

"People sure are crazy about trends," Mira said, smiling knowingly at that corner's needless extravagance.

That section was devoted entirely to magical-girl-style clothing. They'd even put up a big sign that read THE ONE-STOP SHOP FOR MAGICAL KNIGHTS APPAREL. Magical Knights was a clothing brand specializing in magical-girl-style clothes. Remembering that, Mira was inexplicably drawn to the display and soon found herself walking toward it.

The Magical Knights corner seemed popular and was full of women, all dressed as one would expect. Their outfits certainly looked like cosplay, but since this was a fantasy world, the women pulled them off well.

Mira made her way farther into the corner, peering at the clientele, then looked up and saw a case marked THE ORIGINAL. According to the written explanation nearby, the case contained the famous robes that had put Magical Knights on the map and started the fashion craze sweeping the world.

"I should've known."

Mira had previously seen the very clothes sitting behind the glass on the sturdy shelves. They were carbon copies of the robes in one of her favorite magical-girl anime. And while the ones she was looking at were replicas, they were all overpriced, selling for an arm and a leg.

Mira guessed that the founder of Magical Knights, who'd started this craze, must've been a former player. At the same time, she thought it'd be nice to sit down with that person, along with Solomon, over a few drinks.

I totally get why they chose the second costumes.

The anime in question featured three magical girls as the main protagonists. As they grew up, their costumes changed, and Mira had always considered their second costumes the best. Mira briefly reminisced about the time she'd gone to see the anime's movie with Solomon.

Their ultimate final-battle-mode costumes were pretty cool too. Those weren't for sale, though.

Still, given that Magical Knights' founder was apparently a fan, it wasn't hard to imagine the brand offering those as well. Despite ruminating on this, Mira wasn't about to forget what brought her into the store again, and she began looking for a solution to her panty predicament.

The store's interior was large, and—Magical Knights garments aside—the selection of clothes felt almost endless. It seemed like Marl & Stritz was attempting to see just how many clothes it could cram into one place. In places, the aisles were so narrow that there wasn't even room for two people to walk through them side by side. If anyone stopped to check out a product, other shoppers had to rub against them just to squeeze by.

In other words, just by passing other customers, Mira would fulfill her dream of touching women.

"Sorry. Just got to get by."

"Ah. Pardon me."

There was an unspoken rule that female shoppers passed by each other very closely to avoid throwing the shelves into further disarray. Having figured that out from looking around the store for a while, Mira decided that rules were rules. She pressed against several stunning ladies, feeling the silky smoothness of their skin from her head to her toes as a giant grin floated across her face.

Doing so, Mira eventually made her way to the corner of the store selling bottoms for women.

“Well, now what?”

She *had* to find something to wear underneath her skirt. Confronting the issue at hand, Mira looked at the shelves in dismay.

That was when it hit her. Ever since assuming her current form, she’d never made a point of finding clothes for herself to wear, but now she needed to pick out actual women’s clothes. This was uncharted territory.

“How about *these*…? They look like they’ll work.”

After agonizing a fair bit, Mira picked up a pair of navy-blue pants. If she wore them under her skirt, she wouldn’t even need to worry about anyone seeing her panties. Even if her skirt got ripped off, the pants would act like impenetrable castle walls. No one would so much as catch a glimpse!

Convinced that the pants would definitely serve their purpose, Mira quickly pulled them on and went to look at herself in the nearby mirror.

“This is… Yeah. I get it. That’s what he meant, huh?”

Her outfit looked adorable. The miniskirt she had on and the way her legs popped out under it really emphasized her charms. Seeing the way she was dressed, though, Mira recalled something a friend of hers had said.

He was an oddball who’d transferred to her school during her glory days of playing VR games. When winter came, that friend —on the verge of tears—said that girls wearing sweatpants under their skirts was a major sin. He was dead serious too. He’d argued that, at the very least, they could wear black tights instead.

At the time, Mira thought he was being an idiot. But now, standing there and looking at herself in the mirror, she understood.

“Hrmm, yeah… No, this won’t work.”

There was just something so spectacular about bare thighs emerging from a skirt. The sight was truly priceless. Seeing her

perfect female form wearing pants beneath a miniskirt, Mira realized just how unflattering that was.

She pulled the pants off in a hurry and looked in the mirror for a quick glimpse of her thighs poking out below her skirt.

I couldn't forgive myself for tarnishing such cuteness.

Whatever anyone said, it was only natural that she had a soft spot for the ideal form she'd created. Deciding that she needed to preserve her cuteness, Mira pondered how to hide her panties without sacrificing her attractiveness.

The only difference in her approach would be how she'd pick that layer out. A miniskirt was only truly a miniskirt if a girl's bare legs were visible beneath it. With that firmly male perspective in mind, she put the pants back on the shelf and traipsed around the store, looking for a cover-up that'd suit her.

Chapter 12

IT HAD NEVER BEEN her intention to become the young lady she was now. But, having accepted her circumstances, Mira would be the cutest young lady she could be. She wouldn't make any compromises.

"When it comes to hiding your underwear, there's more than one technique…"

Given the store's massive selection, there were plenty of ways to solve Mira's problem. She just needed something that wouldn't keep her from showing off the delightful shape of her legs.

Her task was to conceal her panties without ruining her miniskirt's intrinsic charm, so she'd have to consider shorts, tights, leggings, and boy shorts. Taking a brief look at the options, Mira puzzled over which suited her best.

"Well, I guess I should start trying them on."

It seemed to her that she'd get her answer more quickly by actually doing that than just by thinking about it. With that in mind, Mira started by grabbing the closest solution and heading toward a mirror. She was unaware of the establishment's fitting room.

She tried on a pair of shorts first. They weren't visible beneath her skirt, so her cuteness remained unimpeded.

Mira grabbed her skirt and flipped it up. As expected, the shorts—which she could have worn out as they were—hid her panties completely. As long as she had a pair of shorts on, they would cover her even if her skirt came off, like pants did. She'd be free to move around without needing to worry about anyone seeing beneath them.

"I bet nothing would get past these either."

Still standing in front of the mirror, Mira tested how well the shorts hid her panties by running in place, jumping up and down,

and tossing her skirt up. The shorts passed every test with flying colors and were easy to move in to boot.

“A solid first choice.”

In her original form, she wouldn’t have been too pleased to hear about a girl wearing shorts under a miniskirt. That would have dashed any hopes of a fortuitous panty peek. But this was about her own body, and at the moment, she was the one trying to dash others’ hopes of peeking.

It was dawning on Mira just how effective the miniskirt-shorts combo was; it let her move freely while maintaining the miniskirt’s cute look. She was finally getting the sense that she truly understood women’s feelings. Yet, as she tossed her skirt up once more, she couldn’t help feeling a bit disappointed.

Next, Mira tried on leggings. She put them on and began testing them in front of the mirror as she’d done before. She’d picked out the super-short type known as “bike shorts,” which went down to the hem of her skirt.

“Hrmm. These aren’t bad either.” They were lighter and snugger, but she could move as freely as in the shorts. They’d go on her list of options as well.

Lifting her skirt in the mirror, Mira noted that the black bike shorts hid her panties fantastically well. Moreover, they fit tightly enough that there wasn’t even a slight bulge in her miniskirt, as there had been with the regular shorts. But although bike shorts were even more effective at concealing her underwear, there was one additional problem with them.

“Yeah… He actually didn’t seem to mind these.”

She remembered something her weird friend had once said about how great bike shorts were. According to him, they didn’t hide a girl’s legs or butt but actually accentuated them. Best of all, one could faintly see panty lines through them.

“Yeah, I sort of get that now.”

Checking the bike shorts in the mirror, Mira realized that her friend had a point. He’d mentioned that, while the shorts didn’t look very sexy at first glance, something made them extremely

erotic: Even if they covered a girl's underwear beneath a miniskirt, they were still very snug and hugged all her curves. So, while they did conceal one's panties, they created the potential for a different kind of peek.

Realizing the truth of this firsthand, Mira went about the selection process with renewed scrutiny. Next, she decided to try on the most classic garment of the bunch: boy shorts. These were known to conceal one's underwear while, at the same time, *looking* like underwear.

They were considered—rightly—the pinnacle of panty protection and could be worn in most situations in which one's skirt might fly up.

"These look almost like a stylish diaper," Mira muttered to herself as she slipped into the boy shorts in front of the mirror. "Hrmm. Perfect."

The boy shorts' design was similar to slightly larger panties. They weren't visible beneath her skirt, and they didn't impede movement. Mira stomped around, hopping up and down to get an idea of how they felt. After giving them that quick, basic test, she grabbed her skirt hem to begin the definitive trial and slowly lifted her skirt.

"Hunh... He might've been right about these."

Looking at the black boy shorts in the mirror, Mira couldn't help feeling that the sight was so appealing that it resembled fine art. The boy shorts were stylishly decorated with lace. They were actually *meant* to be seen, and their visibility accentuated their appeal. No wonder they were often called "show panties."

As Mira admired them, she again recalled something that her friend had said. He'd mentioned how, despite hiding a girl's underwear, boy shorts still looked enough like them to thoroughly turn him on.

"They really aren't much different, are they...?" Mira muttered.

She continued to stare in the mirror, deep in thought. Looking at her reflection, she appeared to be simply wearing panties under a skirt. But these were *show* panties; it shouldn't be

a problem if anyone saw them. The whole purpose of boy shorts was to hide one's real underwear.

That said, they looked so perfect at first glance that one might mistake them for an actual pair of sexy panties—the garment that the boy shorts were intended to hide.

If someone stole a peek at boy shorts, was that really much different? Would it really matter to them whether the boy shorts were a separate layer?

Looking in the mirror, Mira tilted her head slightly as if puzzled. She was convinced that the boy shorts did a fine job accentuating her natural cuteness. Yet she continued her search, picking up a pair of black tights.

The tights were made of highly elastic material. They covered pretty much *everything* from the tips of one's toes to one's waist. The thick type in particular was known as the undisputed champion of panty protection thanks to its ability to conceal not only panties but legs as well.

"Hrmm… These are… Yes, indeed."

Having quickly pulled on the black tights, Mira stared at herself in the mirror. Her expression was dead serious, and her gaze spoke to a powerful sense of utterly unyielding determination. She began checking every inch of her body, scanning from her head to her neck, her chest to her waist, and then down to her legs.

Mira did this repeatedly, then patted herself on the back. "Well, I look good in just about everything, don't I?"

The beautiful sight of bare legs emerging from her miniskirt was gone; still, the tights actually accentuated her legs. They helped convey an altogether different sexiness. Best of all, the way they complemented her legs brought the foxy silhouette to a previously unfathomable level of beauty.

"I really am cute." Confident of that, Mira began moving around in the black tights. "Hrmm. They're pretty easy to move in, huh?"

Because the tights were made of such terrifically stretchy material, they'd hold up however wildly she moved. Finishing her preliminary check, Mira grabbed her skirt to give the tights the long-awaited final test. Lifting her skirt quickly, she saw that everything underneath was black.

"They're like boy shorts but sort of different."

The only difference between boy shorts and tights would be whether they showed her bare legs. At least, that was what Mira thought at first. Looking at the faint outline of her panties through the tights, she brooded. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but some discrepancy between the two was floating in the back of her mind.

After she racked her brain for a moment, her friend's eternally hopeful words came to mind: *"Boy shorts kind of give off a sporty vibe, right? But black tights give off an intellectual vibe. I think girls look pretty darn sexy in black tights too."*

"I see... If I threw on a pair of glasses, I'd look like a chic intellectual, wouldn't I?"

Girls in boy shorts looked sporty and outgoing, while girls in black tights looked quieter and more reserved. She wasn't quite sure where or how she'd gotten that impression. Still, seeing herself in black tights now—after having seen herself in boy shorts a moment before—she knew it was true.

"Well, maybe next time."

Having gained insight into how men saw boy shorts and black tights differently—and liking both looks—Mira crossed black tights off her list. Her rationale was both very simple and very important.

"Tights don't really make sense in this weather."

It was summer, and Mira was already slightly warm from moving around a little bit. On top of that, she was wearing thick tights, which were great at retaining heat. That, combined with the fact that it was summer, meant that her legs were getting clammy.

The shop had thinner tights, but given their sheer fabric, they wouldn't fully conceal underwear. She could put her new

Dinoire Trading cooling conditioner under her clothes, but it wouldn't really work with tights. And nothing was more uncomfortable than one's lower half feeling completely soupy in the middle of summer. Having decided as much, Mira ripped the tights off and her panties along with them.

As she did, her friend's words rushed back to her again: *"You know, once a girl's tights or boy shorts get sweaty..."*

Shaking off the unbelievably perverted conversation that'd popped into her head, Mira returned her panties to the proper position and quietly put the tights back on the shelf she'd gotten them from.

Come to think of it, they have a lot of winter clothes, don't they?

Suddenly looking around the store, Mira noticed shelves and displays full of every type of clothing, regardless of season. There were definitely more summer clothes, but lots of winter clothing was piled on the shelves too. The shelf where she'd gotten the black tights was positively *packed* with such clothes, but she'd probably boil in any of those garments.

With that in mind, she began checking the shelves that had mostly summer clothes. On one, she came across a pair of black stockings.

"Hrmm. There's probably no reason to try these on."

The thin, sheer-looking stockings didn't seem like they'd conceal her underwear. That judgment made, Mira suddenly and unintentionally remembered something else her friend had said.

"Let me tell you about pantyhose..."

She dismissed the thought and left the shelf immediately.

Having tried on most of her options, Mira took one more lap around the store to see whether there were other ideas she hadn't considered. After going in a full circle, she once again found herself in the Magical Knights corner.

While it was still in the same store, that corner's vibe really was completely different. It fit the magical-girl style almost too perfectly. Thinking back on the maids in the imperial castle, Mira began to leave.

At that exact moment, she spotted an innerwear section along the wall right beside the magical-girl corner. Not only that, those shelves nearest the Magical Knights corner proudly displayed magical-girl-style innerwear.

"I can't believe they have a whole section for this stuff."

The magical-girl style generally entailed risqué, low-cut miniskirts. In a world without upskirt-prevention magic, innerwear would be a necessity.

So many varieties were displayed, they seemed to encourage hesitant Magical Knights enthusiasts to try them on. The section contained countless varieties of shorts and tights like Mira had just tried on, as well as a bunch of other undergarments like half slips.

Even from a distance, she could see that the section's huge selection included stuff with lace, stuff with frills, culotte-esque things, and garments that would suit either a cute or sultry aesthetic.

This section's girlier than any I've come across so far. Mira wished she'd noticed it when she first came upstairs.

Rather than rushing to that area immediately, Mira looked at the three girls hanging out in front of the innerwear display. This section had the vibe of a women's undergarment department. The three girls standing there were probably between fourteen and seventeen and wore full magical-girl garb. Holding several garments from the section, they avidly shared their thoughts on each.

Unsurprisingly, the three wore *very* short magical-girl skirts—and unlike Mira, they were bona fide girls, so they seemed genuinely concerned about how best to conceal that area.

"These are cuter! Look—they're a much nicer color, just in case anyone sees them."

"You think so? I think these look better. Aren't they any good?"

"They're all right. They'd be really cute if they had a cutout here."

The three continued discussing their thoughts, trying on different pieces. They showed each other how the various garments looked and shared their opinions on each.

Perhaps because only women were shopping nearby, the three were momentarily unconcerned with modesty. They stood in front of a store mirror, lifting and tossing their skirts in much the way Mira had.

I'm still not really sure what I'm doing. It might be helpful if some women with more experience pointed me in the right direction. Hrmm... I'll watch them a bit for reference. Yeah, just let me watch for reference. Purely for reference.

The way the girls tossed their skirts reminded Mira of a matador's cape. Lured by their high-pitched voices... No, simply wanting to *understand* women better, she approached the group, all the while telling herself that she had no ulterior motives.

Mira drew up to the edge of the innerwear section, pretending to be just another customer randomly picking out clothes, and covertly began to watch and listen to the three.

Since Mira was a girl, the group wasn't a bit suspicious of her. They continued trying on different articles even as Mira neared, and they didn't stop exposing what they wore under their skirts to each other. They were completely absorbed in trying on different garments.

Mira listened in as their girlish discussion continued. She really had planned to eavesdrop for insight into how girls made their selections—her justification wouldn't have been a bald-faced lie.

The girls were still freely lifting their skirts to ensure the innerwear was effective, Mira saw in her peripheral vision. "Yes, I see. That works," she murmured to herself, as if she were just taking notes.

Doing so, she learned about the things women kept in mind while picking out innerwear, as well as about the three girls themselves. Every once in a while, she overheard them refer to monsters, dungeons, or guilds. It certainly seemed as if they were adventurers in the same party.

They're really...?

The group looked a lot different up close than they had at a distance. From a better point of view, the scene Mira took in was crystal clear.

Adventuring was a tough job, and the distinction between male and female adventurers sometimes became irrelevant. It made sense that girls in that world wouldn't have quite the same sensibilities when it came to shyness and self-consciousness. Observing as much, Mira felt that that must've held especially true when adventurers of the same sex gathered.

There was a fitting room in a small corner of the store, but the girls had still decided to try on everything and show each other right there. They must've concluded that no men would come over and that they were only trying on innerwear, then let their guard down in this very public display.

Are they really...?!

Innerwear were basically undergarments that other people were allowed to see. Yet they were inherently different from actual underwear, which were what men *really* wanted to see. A glimpse of innerwear could produce a second of happiness, but only a second. In Mira's opinion, they were basically counterfeit panties. It didn't matter how often she looked at the girls in their innerwear; she felt no true joy.

While she found the sight of their bare thighs incredible, she'd only made her way over to where they were chatting so she could immerse herself in their fun. There was something special about being in a place where girls were enjoying themselves.

Mira certainly was starting to feel exhilarated, and the reason had nothing to do with innerwear, underwear, or even the nearby shoppers' lovely thighs. More than anything, their behavior—namely, the way they were pulling up their skirts—appealed to Mira's sensibilities.

Yes, I see. I'll take note of this.

That particular area would normally be hidden, its owner keeping the sacred ground firmly under lock and key. Now,

incredibly, they were unveiling it with their own hands. That sight was rare indeed.

Mira decided she'd continue to watch. These three had a lot more experience being girls, after all. At least, that was the excuse that kept coming to her as she focused intently on the group, beginning to daydream about how perfect it'd be if one of the girls began acting a tiny bit embarrassed.

Just then—perhaps because Mira had let her gaze linger too long—a girl looked over. They'd finally noticed Mira watching them furtively.

Damn it! They saw me!

This was bad. If Mira suddenly looked away, though, it would only seem more suspicious. In that moment, Mira thought with all her might about what she could do and what excuse she could try using.

Feeling as if she'd been caught red-handed, Mira sought an excuse that would hold water as her head began to spin. However, she was about to find out that her current appearance as a beautiful girl was more advantageous than she'd guessed.

"Oh, sorry. Are we in the way?" the girl who'd seen Mira asked apologetically. She was seemingly the oldest and had blue hair. Apparently, she thought the three of them were standing in a spot that prevented Mira from reaching a shelf.

Although they'd caught Mira red-handed, they didn't seem to suspect that her intentions were anything but wholesome.

For real...?!

At that point, Mira recalled how her current form came off. Not only was she more charming as a female, she was also a young girl, so her demeanor was innocent and naive as well. So much so that there wasn't a soul who'd guess that, inside, she was actually a dirty old man.

That was why she thought that, so long as she wasn't quite as obvious as Flicker, her cover wouldn't be blown.

"No, you're not. It's just...a friend of mine said I should wear something over my panties, and it's my first time buying

something like that. I'm not really sure how to go about it. I thought maybe I'd listen to what you had to say to get an idea," Mira replied, passing off the excuse she'd just thought up as the truth. She shook her head as, inside, she triumphantly rejoiced.

She'd decided to go with that explanation out of a slight concern that if she made a run for it, she'd end up looking even more shady. The girls hadn't noticed that Mira was the famed Spirit Queen, but if it started going around that Mira was a Peeping Tom, it would be a *serious* problem for her. Worst of all would be if Mariana caught wind of it. With that in mind, Mira had tried out her excuse.

"You mean you're not wearing any now?!"

"Seriously?!"

"Do you, like, *want* people to see your panties or something?"

All three girls had apparently bought Mira's excuse. Mira supposed that answering them straightforwardly had done the trick. Perhaps that was why they'd all had such strong reactions. But they now seemed to take her for some debauched exhibitionist.

Apparently, magical-girl-fashion enthusiasts considered innerwear a no-brainer. Most magical-girl skirts were exceptionally short, so that must've been obvious to most women. Mira was apparently an exception.

While the three girls looked shocked, they also peered at Mira with curiosity and even a bit of pity.

The oldest girl thought for a moment, then asked curiously, "Hmm...have you got much experience dressing like this?"

Since picking innerwear was integral to magical-girl fashion, the fact that Mira hadn't yet done so had to mean she was new to the hobby. At least, that was what the girl thought.

"You called it. I've only been dressing like this for a few months," Mira replied with a wry smile, thinking back on her first day of wearing magical-girl clothes.

The truth was that she just hadn't cared about concealing her panties, but that was another story. Now that she thought about

it, it had actually been quite a while since Lily and the others forced her into this outfit. Smiling to herself, she recalled how—before she even knew it—she'd been converted and found herself dressing the way she did as if it were natural.

"I see. A real newbie! Guess we've got no choice, huh? Since you're here, we'll show you the ropes."

The girls claimed that magical-girl fashion was a pretty deep rabbit hole. They laughed about how, despite having over three years' experience dressing in the style, they still had a lot to learn. They planned to help each other learn more about it together.

"Well, I'll take you up on that," Mira replied.

What had started as a cover story had actually become true: She really didn't know what to wear. She wasn't sure what the girls would teach her, but for the time being, Mira accepted their kind offer.

"It's crazy how incredible you look even though you're so new to this... I really had no idea you were figuring these clothes out. You might have what it takes to be a model representing our style on the runway."

The bespoke outfit designed specifically to complement Mira's figure and accentuate her natural features seemed to be a massive hit with the three magical-girl-clothing fans. It had even caused them to suspect Mira was a veteran enthusiast.

Hoping they'd relent on the idea of making her a representative of the trend, Mira avowed her earnest support of fellow enthusiasts. "U-uh, no...no way. Plenty of people out there would do a better job than me."

"You'd definitely have a shot, though."

As they chatted, Mira followed the three into the Magical Knights corner.

Chapter 13

ONCE MIRA AND THE GIRLS had swapped introductions, they made their way into the fitting room. Before picking innerwear, it was essential to check that it would match Mira's outfit exactly. At least, that was what the three girls said as they nonchalantly led Mira into the fitting room.

This wasn't the small private fitting room one might expect in a clothing store. It was more like a large dressing room.

"I've been curious about your outfit since I first saw you," one of the girls told Mira. "I don't recall ever seeing one like it."

"Yeah, I don't see any logo," another added. "What brand is it?"

"It's super well-made."

The three avid enthusiasts were so incredibly passionate about magical-girl fashion that, as soon as they went into the fitting room, they opened Mira's collar and flipped up her skirt, examining her outfit however they wanted. All three stared intently at the garments.

The oldest of the girls was named Mirei; she was garbed in a military-style magical-girl outfit. Next was Marietta, who was very inquisitive and dressed in an outfit reminiscent of an animal. Finally, there was Nene, who wore a Japanese-style outfit. At first glance, she seemed like the most reserved of the group, yet she was the one who boldly flipped up Mira's skirt.

The cute yet loud trio swarmed around her. Mira didn't particularly mind the situation, so she played along and answered their question. "Uh, well, my friends actually made this for me."

"Wow! It's handmade!"

"They must've put a lot of work into it!"

"I'm jealous."

Mira should've expected as much of garments created by royal maidservants. The quality of her clothes didn't just match

that of store-bought goods, it far *exceeded* them.

Realizing that at first glance, the girls closely inspected every inch of Mira's body—or the clothes on her body, rather. As they did, they even removed her jacket, so that she stood there in only a slip. The girls were in such a fervor doing as they pleased that they were about to take *that* off.

Of course, assuming they were normal girls, they'd probably have backed off once Mira said, "Okay, that's enough." But Mira didn't say a word. She made no attempt to fight, struggle, or even move. She just let whatever happened happen.

The situation would've looked pretty wild to anyone looking in from outside. They'd probably think that there was no reason to turn someone's clothes inside out just to inspect them. Or they might've said that, if the girls were going to go that far, Mira might as well have just let them check the clothes after taking them off.

Still, Mira didn't utter a single complaint as the girls practically yanked off her outfit. *I have no idea what they're checking or why, but women's fashion sure is a lot more of a pain than I anticipated*, she thought irrelevantly.

She stood perfectly still, the three girls still inspecting her collar and skirt. She figured that doing that while still fully clothed must be normal for girls figuring out what clothes would complement others. At least, her experiences thus far suggested as much.

After all, the maidservants had done the same thing with her clothing… No, it'd been *worse* with them. They'd stripped her down to almost nothing to take her measurements and check every other minute detail. If anything, these three girls—who were focused entirely on her outfit—were a thousand times easier to deal with than the maids' scrutinizing gazes had been. Since Mira had begrudgingly gotten used to the maids' treatment, she'd reached the point where she could openly tolerate and almost embrace her current circumstances.

"Wow—looks like combat cotton. It's high-quality too. Incredible! This is fine craftsmanship. I've never seen anything so beautiful."

Not only was Mira's outfit visibly custom-made, but it incorporated a number of specialized elements too.

First, it was military grade and made with combat cotton. That material was particularly popular with adventurers. The specially treated cotton was exceedingly tough, highly impact resistant, and breathable. It was often employed in mages' robes and in the padding worn beneath warriors' armor. It was so widely used that owning protective garments made from combat cotton signaled that one was a full-fledged adventurer.

High-level officials used high-quality military-grade combat cotton, a luxury material ten times pricier than normal combat cotton. That very fabric lavishly lined Mira's jacket.

"This kind of thing would make a first-class defensive item! Whoever made it for you must've really loved you," Mirei noted, having observed that the outfit was designed to protect its wearer.

Although the workmanship indicated to Mirei just how much love the maidservants had poured into the outfit, she didn't detect just how manic and rabid that love was.

That said, the clothes *were* well-made. To anyone who regularly engaged in battle, the jacket would seem like a reliable piece of defensive equipment. And since it was a magical-girl-style design, magical-girl-fashion enthusiasts would consider it a holy grail. At least, that much was clear of Mirei, who had jealousy written all over her face.

I heard that making this outfit was pricey, but I had no idea it was this special.

Although the maids had sewn it, Solomon and Luminaria had mostly paid for it. Despite having caught wind of its cost, Mira hadn't had any idea that the outfit was made with combat cotton. She was impressed.

Using even more technical terms, Mirei excitedly elaborated. According to her, Mira's ensemble was an enthusiast's dream outfit in several respects. It was made using technomancy, lined with combat cotton, and crafted with techniques that protected its wearer. She listed aspects Mira had never even heard of.

Who'd have guessed that it's this special...?

Mira knew just how passionate the maids were. She'd guessed that sewing was only their side hobby, but maybe it was one they were a little too hardcore about. Maybe the outfit's two financiers had put the maids up to making garments this elaborate, thinking it would be funny. That would have allowed the maids to craft something incredible even though sewing was just a hobby of theirs.

At any rate, Mirei said enthusiastically, Mira's outfit was incredibly well-made and so high-performance that it would hold up against the highest-quality Magical Knights combat clothing. It would go for no less than ten million ducats.

Mirei's eyes drank in Mira's outfit; she looked spellbound. Marietta and Nene also gazed at the clothes in reverent adoration, as if wondering whether they'd ever acquire garb like hers.

Mira finally understood just how high-performance and absurdly expensive her clothes were. She was shocked to learn just how much time and money the maids had poured into making it. They'd evidently worked so hard at their hobby that they were now at a professional level.

As anyone might expect, Mirei and her friends began hounding Mira with questions about the makers of the outfit. They asked how these friends of hers had become skilled enough to make clothes like these.

Mira simply answered that a very large group of friends had made it and that the rest was a secret. It wouldn't do to have the girls snooping around.

The girls took the hint. It looked like they were eager to know more, but they seemed to fight back the urge to grill Mira. Although Mira had learned a lot about her clothing, they returned to the subject of what innerwear she should wear with her outfit.

As they did, Mirei suddenly noticed Mira's left arm. "Ah, a User's Bangle! That means you're a high-ranking adventurer, right?"

"Wow, incredible!"

"You're so cool."

The three were getting frenzied again. They should've noticed her User's Bangle when they took off her jacket, but they'd likely been too absorbed in checking out her outfit to do so. Having noticed her User's Bangle now, they finally realized Mira's status. They looked at her with eyes that glittered with admiration and respect.

What man wouldn't have been ecstatic in that position? Mira was no different.

"Who, me? I'm only A-rank," she boasted, smiling proudly. Then she hammily flashed her adventurer's license.

"You really are!"

"I've never met anyone A-rank."

"And you're a summoner to boot…"

A-rank adventurers were the cream of the crop, and Mirei and her friends paid no mind to Mira's blatantly transparent behavior. Checking her adventurer's license, they got even more worked up. Mira herself got more and more carried away, beginning her pitch on how the age of summoners was nigh.

Then Marietta abruptly asked something that'd been on her mind. "I've been thinking about this. If you're a high-ranking adventurer—even more so if you're A-rank—you get into some pretty intense battles, don't you? So…you'd *need* innerwear, right? How have you gone this long without it?" she asked, returning to the topic at hand.

Why would an A-rank summoner who'd probably seen plenty of fearsome battles only shop for innerwear now? Mirei and Nene must've wondered the same thing, as they both suddenly went silent. All three awaited Mira's response.

Mira wouldn't necessarily have needed innerwear if she was just having fun as a magical-girl-fashion hobbyist, so it hadn't seemed too crazy to the girls that she didn't have any yet. But innerwear was a requirement for an A-rank adventurer who routinely engaged in epic battles with fearsome monsters, especially considering how short Mira's skirt was—there wasn't any doubt that others would see her panties. In short, it would just be common sense for her to have innerwear on.

Yet Mira had said that she hadn't yet worn any. That was something fellow girls absolutely couldn't understand.

"No... What I meant was...I just never really gave it much thought..."

Answering this poorly would probably make them think she was some weird exhibitionist. But although she'd worried about that for a moment, she again answered their question honestly. Up until that day, she'd ignored the question of whether anyone could see her underwear—and probably would from that day on as well.

"I see. Guess there *are* girls like that around, aren't there?"

"So, you're that type of girl, huh?"

"That's so boyish."

As the three spoke, their inquisitive looks suddenly vanished, and they smiled with exasperation.

Apparently, some female adventurers didn't split hairs over their outfit. They saw no practical reason to change their clothes away from their party, since that would only invite a monster to attack them. Still, these three girls *did* happen to worry about these trifles.

"Well, I don't think I've met a girly girl like you who was that type, Mira."

In the girls' experience, such female adventurers usually dressed in clothes that emphasized practicality. They'd never met a girl dressed as cutely as Mira who favored function, they added.

"I've heard people say that A-rank adventurers are odd. Guess it's true!"

"Yeah. There's something different about you."

Marietta and Nene had both spoken while staring at Mira. Marietta had a very keen expression, and Nene's eyes were full of deep respect. Apparently, the other members of Mira's cohort whom they'd met were mostly somewhat eccentric.

Thinking briefly back on the A-rank adventurers she'd met in the past, Mira smiled bitterly to herself.

“Yeah, you may have a point there…”

She couldn’t help but agree. First, there was the former player Cyril. Then there was the samurai she’d met on the way to the Celestial Ruins, Heinrich. There was also Aaron, the warrior she’d met at the Isuzu headquarters. Then there were Jack Grave and Eleonora, who’d ridden on the same airship as Mira after the battle with Chimera Clausen.

Recently, she’d met another one, named Tryde, in the Ancient Underground City. Well, Tryde wasn’t that peculiar. Still, thinking back on some gory details, Mira thought that the percentage of “unique” A-rank adventurers was rather high. She began to feel conflicted as she considered whether that went for *her* too.

Regardless, Mira was relieved that the three girls were reacting less negatively than she’d expected. She’d been prepared for them to say that such a thing was utterly unthinkable for a woman. Instead, she once again felt the resolve and compassion of the other women walking alongside her on the adventurer’s path.

Not only that, but the girls’ attitude had changed completely in the blink of an eye.

“It must be rare to stumble upon a brash A-rank adventurer dressed in magical-girl clothing who’s shopping for innerwear, huh? That means we have a hefty responsibility on our shoulders. We’ll have to do our best to help you!”

“Yeah! This is an urgent, top-priority mission!”

“Victory at any cost!”

In their eyes, Mira had suddenly transformed from a newbie magical-girl-clothing fan to a seasoned A-rank adventurer they all looked up to—not only that, but also one magnificently garbed in the very magical-girl fashion that they loved so much. The fact that she was also a fan of that style further amplified the three girls’ envy of Mira.

It was the icing on the cake that she’d asked for help picking out innerwear. The fire that had now been lit in the girls burned hotter than any Mira had ever experienced.

Since innerwear's purpose was basically to cover one's underwear, the wearer didn't need to be embarrassed if anyone glimpsed them. But for A-rank adventurers like Mira, things were a bit different. How much and how vigorously an adventurer moved in battle generally corresponded with their rank. That was why A-rank adventurers almost never wore skirts.

Mira wasn't just a high-ranking summoner, she was *A-rank*, and she would definitely need to move around quite a bit. Thus, Mirei explained, she needed to pick innerwear with the assumption that everyone would be able to see it. Furthermore, she needed innerwear that could deal with any situation and complement her outfit—or, at the very least, not detract from its cuteness.

Not bothering to ask Mira how she felt about any of this, the three girls agreed on those criteria and formed a plan. In their relentless pursuit of the perfect innerwear, they began carefully examining every inch of Mira's body again.

"Something like this would be cute, right?"

"Just based on the color, it's hard not to consider these."

"How about something a bit lingerie-like?"

The three girls lined up innerwear of varied styles and colors on the fitting-room table, giving their thoughts and opinions on each. Finally, they resolutely grabbed a selection, had Mira try it on, and examined the garment from every angle. They chattered about how the garment did a good job of looking good in and of itself while also guarding against anyone catching a low-angled glimpse, in case Mira's skirt flew up and revealed the innerwear as she moved around.

Mirei and her friends weren't about to make any compromises on this task. After the ten or twenty minutes that'd just passed, Mira found that—perhaps because the girls were fellow female adventurers, or because they'd bonded over being magical-girl-fashion fanatics—she'd become fond enough of them that she had no qualms about standing in front of them in her undergarments.

Having befriended the girls, she was in a good mood. However, it only lasted a moment. Looking up toward the heavens imploringly, Mira now lamented the situation in which she found herself.

Why did it all have to come to this…?

During her very first attempt at picking out innerwear, she'd asked these three girls with more experience for help, and in turn —before she'd even had a chance to process what was happening —she'd buddied up with the three, who now wanted her to try on all kinds of innerwear like some human mannequin.

"Let's try putting her in something a little more mature next."

"Good idea. I think they still have a few of last month's new style. I'll grab a pair."

"They didn't look good on us, but they might on you, Mira."

Not only was their enthusiasm not diminishing, they were getting even more fired up.

Mira undeniably felt a bit like fleeing, but the girls all looked extraordinarily serious, and she decided not to object. She could've told them that they didn't need to get so intent or that she didn't mind wearing anything so long as it didn't look too weird.

Unfortunately, that ship had sailed. What started out as trying on different types of innerwear had, at this point, turned into more of a fashion show. Before Mira knew it, staff members and other customers had begun peeking into the fitting room to glimpse the event.

They usually exclaimed something like, "Wow, those look great!" It wasn't just lip service; they genuinely meant it.

Overhearing those heartfelt compliments, other customers flocked to see what was going on. Looking into the fitting room, they discovered that the target of the flattery was none other than a stunning young girl.

As one might expect, the spectacle attracted quite a bit of attention. Mira might as well have been a model, since the innerwear she donned looked even more stunning than usual.

Before she knew it, people were choosing what to buy based on what they'd seen her trying on.

How had this happened? Well, the shoppers probably just wanted to wear whatever they saw on someone they idolized. Mira *had* effectively become a model representing the magical-girl-fashion community.

When will this end...? Endlessly putting on clothes, only to take them off so she could put on something else, Mira puzzled over why things had taken this turn. She knew that she couldn't keep doing whatever the girls told her to.

Mira belted out an incantation to summon First Pupil: "Your reconnaissance skills can help me out of any trap, meow. You can help me scratch that itch that I can't reach, no matter meow hard I try. I have no doubt that you, Cat Sith, will be the perfect partner for me, right here, right meow!"

She summoned the evocation beside her, as if to demonstrate summoning's usefulness. The words of the incantation had more to do with Cat Sith himself than anything related to summoning, but it worked well nonetheless.

Mira was pretty sure that the Magical Knights catalog and events usually featured a mascot like Cat Sith. In fact, fuzzy mascots were almost synonymous with the magical-girl genre, which was why they were used so heavily in advertising.

It might've been fair to say that Mira was sort of exploiting that so that First Pupil, who could easily pass for a fuzzy mascot, would immediately get just as popular as Mira. In short, she was able to use Cat Sith to divert about half the audience's attention and—though to a lesser extent—promote summoning. Everybody loved mascots, so Cat Sith would no doubt improve people's overall image of summoners.

Pleased at the opportunity to show young people summoning's merits, Mira smiled and slipped on another pair of innerwear that was handed to her.

In the end, she spent about two hours modeling. While she'd started out just trying on innerwear, she eventually ended up

donning all kinds of Magical Knights outfits—and even other outfits from throughout the store.

Word had spread of the pop-up fashion show, to the point that droves of people had made their way to the store. Most of those who came to watch were women; there were only a few men. In this world, magical-girl clothing was apparently less cosplay and more high fashion.

“I feel like I’ve gotten seriously sidetracked…” Mira muttered to herself.

She glared at the three girls, who were still smiling brightly as they sat in the employees-only break room that Mira had been given special permission to use. She’d only wanted to pick out innerwear, but the whole thing had somehow turned into a huge spectacle. Given all that’d happened, the time had flown by.

“All’s well that ends well, right?” Mirei said, avoiding Mira’s gaze.

“You’re just so adorable, Mira. There’s really no helping it, is there?” Marietta also avoided Mira’s gaze.

“You got two hundred thousand ducats for two hours of work. That comes out to one hundred thousand an hour.” Peering intently at a paper bag near Mira, Nene added that Mira had looked incredibly beautiful and that her dressing up in all those outfits had been really helpful. Her smile as she told Mira all that was one of genuine delight.

Nene’s serene smile utterly trounced Mira, who softened her gaze. “Jeez… When you put it like that, I guess I’m glad I put in all that work.”

She picked up the paper bag. Inside were packed leggings, skorts, tights, and all kinds of other innerwear. The garments had been carefully selected by the three girls or the store staff. Best of all, they were on the house, courtesy of Marl & Stritz.

As Nene said, the bag also contained about two hundred thousand ducats. Mira’s presence had, by all accounts, resulted in profits that had smashed the records for any Magical Knights-affiliated retailer. The store had given her the tip to celebrate breaking that record, as well as to entice her back.

Well, I guess it'll have to do.

At any rate, she'd gotten what she came for free of charge. Not only that, it was all stuff specifically picked out and recommended to her by experts. The garments would definitely match her current appearance. Trying to look on the bright side, Mira didn't bother worrying about the details; although her shopping trip had turned into a complete spectacle, she'd accomplished what she'd set out to do.

Thus, she bid farewell to the three girls before making her way back down the main street. Her skirt fluttered from side to side as she walked, and a bit of black lace peeked out. That was one of the new articles that she'd received—a pair of bike shorts adorned with beautiful lace.

Mira had chosen that particular pair of bike shorts for her first foray into wearing innerwear to hide an undergarment. They didn't change how her outfit looked, were fantastic at concealing her panties, and weren't hampering her movements. And they really were quite stylish. If anyone saw them peek out beneath her skirt, it wouldn't be a problem.

Most importantly, the other three girls had all worn bike shorts when they first tried innerwear, and so they'd all encouraged Mira to do so as well. She and the girls hadn't known each other long, but that didn't stop the three from becoming big fans of hers.

Reflecting on that, Mira looked down at a promotional flyer. Mirei and her friends had given it to her, hoping that they could meet up again sometime. On it was written "Fashion exhibition sponsored by Magical Knights." Apparently, a big event was being held for magical-girl-clothing enthusiasts. The three girls would definitely go, so they'd given her the promo flyer for the event so they could have a little reunion there. In short, they expected Mira to attend.

But, despite not feeling great about letting the girls down, she had no intention of going.

I mean, I'm not really a fan, Mira thought suddenly, feeling guilty. *I haven't known them long either. Still, I ended up getting along*

with them better than I would've expected, huh?

Sometimes it didn't take long to meet, forge ties, and become fond of others.

She wondered how the three girls would greet her if she showed up at the exhibition—and how they'd look once they realized she'd ghosted them. Tucking the flyer away carefully, she strolled off, her skirt continuing to sway gently.

For the record, the castle maids *had* worked on innerwear for Mira, but they had yet to complete any. They'd been confounded by the same thing as Mira: There were too many different types. The maids had all worked on creating her outfit together, yet their opinions were divided when it came to what innerwear would be best. It got to the point that there were even those advocating scrapping underwear altogether in favor of a one-piece swimsuit.

Deliberations were still ongoing, so it might be quite a while before Mira got her hands on any innerwear sewn by the maids.

Chapter 14

IT WAS ALREADY PAST NINE when Mira left the clothing store—just about the time when the lights in the store windows along the shopping street began to go out.

"Hrmm. Tomorrow's the big day, so maybe I'd better head back for tonight."

Tomorrow was the date written on Fuzzy Dice's calling card. Thinking she ought to get back to her room and sleep, Mira again wended her way to the Baron Hotel.

Then she noticed something up on the rooftop in front of her. There, barely visible in the darkness of night, stood several figures. They looked suspicious at first, but afterward, Mira realized what they were up to.

Ah. They're still searching, huh?

Several adventurers were indeed traipsing across the rooftops. Turning her gaze back toward the street, Mira saw several others busy searching as well. They were the same adventurers who'd been hunting for the water spirit earlier.

Hunh. Yeah, they're probably still looking...

If she'd had no connection with them or their search, she'd simply have wished them the best and been on her way. That wasn't quite the case, however. The water spirit in question was Anrutine, with whom Mira had just made a contract. And Anrutine had avoided capture by the adventurers by slipping into an underground waterway and leaving the city.

Only Mira knew that, of course. At least, that seemed to be the case, since the adventurers were continuing their meticulous search for the water spirit. But since Anrutine was no longer there, they'd obviously never find her, however hard they searched. They were completely wasting their time.

Mira was partially to blame for this happening, so she couldn't just leave without doing anything. She went up onto a

rooftop and, looking around, saw an adventurer whose face she remembered.

“Looks like you’re still on the hunt,” she called out, dashing across the roof.

The man turned his head and flashed a smile. “Wow! If it isn’t the Spirit Queen! Thanks for your help earlier. You really made Rina’s—our summoner’s—day!”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it,” Mira said, attempting to hide her guilt.

She didn’t just feel guilty because the man was there looking for a water spirit she’d already contracted. It was also because, earlier—in a bid to avoid the searchers’ ire—she’d given him a spirit crystal to distract him from the process without telling him that their search was utterly in vain.

“So…is there anything I can do for you? I’ll tell you whatever you want, as long as I’ve got the info.” The man seemed to assume that Mira had jumped onto the roof and approached him because she had some questions.

This time, however, that wasn’t the case.

“Well, about that…” Mira explained that, just a short while earlier, she’d detected that the water spirit that everyone was looking for was no longer in the city. Not wanting them to keep searching in vain, she’d decided to deliver that news.

“What…? It’s not in the city anymore? We must’ve scared it when we first bumped into it, just like you said, huh…?”

The real reason, of course, was that Anrutine had completed her contract with Mira and gleefully departed. But since the man never alluded to that, it was safe to assume that he didn’t realize Mira had anything to do with the water spirit’s disappearance. Instead, he believed it was the fault of the overzealous adventurers who’d bumped into Anrutine and tried to secure a contract with her.

“Well, whatever the cause, the spirit is no longer here,” Mira replied. “Would you mind filling everyone else in?”

She wasn't crossing paths with those scary women from earlier again if she could help it—another fact she obviously avoided disclosing to the man.

"Sure thing. I'll tell them exactly what you said!" he agreed readily.

"All right. Then I'll leave you to it." Mira hopped down from the roof.

"Thanks again!" the man's voice called out from behind her before she hurried off.

She found her way back to the Baron Hotel at a little after ten o'clock.

Since she had Julius's business card, she had secured a spot there for her wagon, but where *she* would be staying was another matter. After getting another look at the hotel, she felt that it might be a fun place to stay. They really went all out to sell the experience of living like royalty.

"For now, I'll take a room for two nights," she told the receptionist.

And so Mira booked a room and checked in. Once she had, a staff member dressed like a butler showed her to her room. The room certainly looked like it belonged to an aristocrat. Everything inside, from the furniture down to the decorations, seemed luxurious.

Despite the room's very aristocratic air, the gold and precious metals that adorned it were imitations. Still, after a quick look, Mira noted that the bed and sofa were fairly high-quality.

"Well, I guess I'll take a quick bath."

After she'd settled in and looked at the Baron Hotel guide on the table, Mira made her way to the grand public bathhouse.

True to its goal of allowing its guests to live like aristocrats for a day, the Baron Hotel had butlers and maids available around the clock, and even private maids to attend to one's every need. It was the kind of service of which most men dreamed.

But Mira didn't take advantage of that service, and the servants didn't guide the guests around the hotel for free. So, after

making her way downstairs by herself, Mira soon found herself somewhat lost. The hotel prioritized ambience, so there weren't many signs showing how to get around.

Mira ended up roaming the halls as she searched for the bathhouse. As she did, she passed quite a few other guests and realized most had hired servants; the men had by and large hired maids, while the women had hired butlers.

As she continued to wander, Mira suddenly saw a familiar face. The chief detective himself was indeed staying at this very same hotel. Now a maid was pushing him around, rather than Julius, so he was seemingly making use of the hotel's services as well. From his attire, Mira guessed that he'd just come from the bath. The chief detective—married, with a child—was clad in a bathrobe and had a gleeful expression as he chatted with the maid.

Well, he sure seems to be enjoying himself. Mira wondered whether the hotel had a service where the servants bathed the guests as well.

That crude thought still in her head, she slipped away from the chief detective—she'd only seen him from some distance away—and began walking in the direction he'd come from. If he was just coming back from a bath, then she figured the bathhouse had to be in that direction.

She was correct. Soon, Mira arrived at the grand bathhouse. Strolling through the women's entrance to the baths, she found herself in a changing area beneath a brightly shining chandelier.

It doesn't seem like any butlers are around.

Even if guests paid the servants to wait on them hand and foot, servants evidently didn't go as far as accompanying guests into the baths.

Glancing quickly around the changing room, Mira realized she was alone. Shrugging, she began to disrobe, then suddenly thought of something: If the chief detective had been here on his own, wouldn't he have had trouble getting into the bath?

He couldn't have done that. I guess Julius must just still be in the bath.

Julius must've gotten the maid to help after the chief detective got out, then continued to soak and relax. Drawing that conclusion, Mira opened the door to the bath.

"This place is even more gorgeous than I imagined..."

The room sparkled silver and gold and was covered in marble from floor to ceiling. The walls, floors, and even tubs were made of marble, while the faucets, showers, and chandelier glittered silver and gold.

Not only that, quite a few seductive-looking female sculptures stood around the room. The bathhouse certainly *looked* luxurious, but Mira smiled as she thought to herself that no true aristocrat would ever own such a space.

It should be noted that the Baron Hotel's aristocratic flair was meant to appeal to the general public. In short, the hotel wasn't supposed to accurately capture the kind of place where an actual nobleman would live. Rather, it was meant to be a place that ordinary people *imagined* a nobleman could live in.

There was no such thing as too much of a good thing, Mira reflected, kicking back and enjoying the bathhouse's opulence to the fullest. After getting out of the bath, she slipped into a simple dress—a shift that Mariana had put in her bag specifically to wear after a bath. Then, despite getting a bit lost, she managed to return to her room.

There, Mira rang a bell to summon an employee and order some dessert. It was fairly late, but the Baron Hotel had round-the-clock service.

After enjoying a sophisticated dessert platter, Mira spent the rest of her time lounging in her room. She looked through the *Encyclopedia of Skills* and a research book, practiced using Synchronized Senses with First Pupil, looked into how she'd level up her ashen knights, and basically just did a host of things that she enjoyed.

The clock struck midnight, and Mira found that she couldn't stave off sleep much longer. She slowly crawled into bed and immediately drifted off.

Her morning at the hotel was thoroughly pleasant. She woke up a little after seven o'clock and slipped out of bed. After polishing off a bottle of coffee milk to wake up, she was ready to take on the morning.

The day of Fuzzy Dice's big heist had arrived, and Mira had agreed to meet up with the chief detective at seven o'clock that evening—still more than ten hours away.

There were a few more things she wanted to do in advance. Before going to sleep, she'd been working out a plan, and she intended to go into Haxthausen as soon as she could.

"This is something else…" Mira said in surprise, peering at the city that stood in front of her.

Up until the day before, Haxthausen's shops had been holding sales commemorating Fuzzy Dice's arrival, while his fans strutted through the streets. The phantom thief's presence had electrified the city to such an extent that it really seemed like a festival was going on.

Today, things had reached an even more fevered pitch. Looking around and taking in the situation, Mira got the sense that the whole city was holding a dress rehearsal. She made her way down the main street in utter shock at just how much it had changed.

Not only were all the shops having huge sales to welcome Fuzzy Dice, quite a few food stalls and so on were now positioned in front of those shops. The most shocking thing was just how many fans there were. Haxthausen was filled with Fuzzy Dice devotees as far as the eye could see. The entire city seemed to be bidding him welcome.

"Jeez. The phantom thief sure is well loved." As she continued taking in the scene, Mira quickly began wondering whether everyone was getting a little *too* worked up.

This time, Fuzzy Dice's target was an influential company from Haxthausen, so some shops must've had connections to that company. Some stores were also bound to be hurt once they could no longer do business with them. But from what Mira could tell, all the shops seemed to welcome Fuzzy Dice's arrival nonetheless.

Mira wondered if the Dorres Company perhaps was less influential than she'd thought. Then, in the crowd of people passing back and forth down the street, she suddenly saw a face she recognized.

"How's guard duty going?" she asked.

Mira had run into none other than the guard captain she'd spoken with previously, along with the soldiers he commanded. When people crowded together, there was naturally a higher risk of an unfortunate incident occurring, so the captain and his soldiers were making the rounds to keep an eye on things.

The captain looked around and recognized Mira. "Well, if it isn't the Spirit Queen. How are you feeling?" His stern expression quickly softened and gave way to a cheerful smile.

His fellow soldiers also broke into smiles, as if her mere presence somehow calmed their nerves.

"I'm actually feeling great," Mira replied. "Could I ask you something?" She proceeded to inquire about what she'd been wondering regarding the Dorres Company.

"Ah, yeah, well..." the captain said with a slight, bitter smile, then answered her query.

The explanation related to Fuzzy Dice's newfound popularity. The large scale of the city's celebration apparently stemmed from what'd been happening over the past several years. Originally, several small groups of fans had met up—nothing like the citywide party going on now.

So what had changed? The captain elaborated: A while back, the phantom thief had targeted *another* influential company in Haxthausen. To celebrate, a rival company had launched a huge sale to welcome him.

Of course, the targeted company wouldn't take such a thing lying down. They rallied their affiliates and took several countermeasures in protest. Still, Fuzzy Dice's operation went off without a hitch. The targeted company collapsed and went out of business.

They weren't alone. Their affiliates were also thoroughly investigated, which uncovered quite a few irregularities, and they soon vanished as well. The company that'd had the huge sale came out the undisputed victor.

After that, other stores naturally started having similar big sales. Now the entire town was buzzing as if mid-festival.

"Hopefully that explains it. That doesn't mean that there aren't lots of shops that are simply excited for Fuzzy Dice to show up. But, as you can tell from all the people walking around, this whole event is a great chance to boost sales. And people tend to suspect that any stores that don't have huge sales might be hiding something…" the captain concluded, looking troubled.

"I see… That certainly sounds like it could be a problem."

Mira smiled incredulously to herself at the origins of the city's festive mood—and at the fact that, once again, it was all due to the phantom thief. Thanking the captain for everything he'd told her, she took her leave.

She headed down the street for a closer look at Fuzzy Dice's possible escapes routes and the areas surrounding them, in order to prepare fully for the big night.

Now, where do I start?

One thing was troubling Mira: Aside from what she'd seen of Fuzzy Dice that one time before, she wasn't sure what the phantom thief was capable of. She was suddenly concerned, given that he'd made such quick work of several A-rank adventurers. If he seriously tried to escape, just how well could he do so?

Mira wanted to prepare some insurance. Watching the bustling main street from a short distance away, she recalled the map she'd seen of Haxthausen. *The guilds should be right up here.* How would she pursue Fuzzy Dice without losing sight of him?

Working out a plan that'd guarantee her victory against Fuzzy Dice, Mira made her way around the city, focusing on the areas near the Mage's Guild.

"I'm guessing his escape route will be somewhere around here."

She checked back alleys and small shopping streets, went through residential areas, and eventually made her way to the wealthy district where the city's nobles and upper crust lived. The area was full of impressive mansions, and the people who walked through it exuded grace and sophistication. They'd seemingly all heard of the Spirit Queen; she was getting a fair amount of attention.

Mira paid none of this any heed and simply continued working toward her objective. Having finished surveying the area, she found herself standing in front of the Dorres Company president's mansion, which happened to be in that district. Though it was far away, she saw several armed security guards through the gate, which stood slightly ajar.

Not only that, but among them, she spotted someone with a surprisingly large sword slung across their back. The blade looked as if it'd cut a large monster cleanly in two.

Since that was different equipment from what the security guards carried, Mira guessed the figure was an adventurer or mercenary hired specifically for that day. Rather than guarding the mansion, the man appeared to be on his way to capture some hulking beast.

"Hrmm... Now that I think about it, I wonder..."

Making eye contact with the gatekeeper, Mira quickly looked away. Taking a quick look around, she suddenly remembered something. She unfurled the map in her hand and pointed to where she stood; then she moved her finger straight to the place she'd remembered.

"Yeah, I thought so. It should be right beneath here."

Mira was just northeast of the square where she'd made her contract with Anrutine the day before. When they'd done so, the water spirit had noted that—although the subterranean waterway was mostly full of moss—one odd part had no moss at all. Mira was precisely where that mossless spot would be.

Anrutine had wondered whether that spot's lack of moss was due to humans and if a secret passageway was perhaps nearby. If so, it was most likely somewhere in this area. The fact that the

neighborhood was full of the upper crust seemed particularly suspicious. Was the underground waterway being used for some sinister purpose?

Mira glared at the even more suspicious president's mansion. As she did, the gatekeeper glared right back. He'd had his gaze on her for quite a while. Was he just keeping a close eye on her, or was he developing a crush?

What she could say for certain was that he'd most likely seen her with the chief detective. Still, he didn't seem very hostile. Maybe he only hated Wolf.

Just how much had they gone at it?

Chapter 15

MIRA SPENT A COUPLE OF HOURS making her way around Haxthausen, preparing for her confrontation with Fuzzy Dice.

Soon finding herself hungry, she stopped by a restaurant offering a discount and ordered their lunch special. The main course was a giant cut of quality steak with a light, puffy Danish and a cup of chowder. A salad with all the fixings and a heavenly slice of cake rounded out the meal.

"Thank you, Mr. Fuzzy Dice!"

It was the kind of meal that one would only expect at a high-end restaurant—everything tasted utterly sublime. And it was a steal at only a thousand ducats, which was also due to the Fuzzy Dice effect. Noting that the restaurant was probably losing money on the lunch special, Mira finished her glorious meal by ordering another slice of cake to go.

Sated, Mira resumed her preparations, finishing them all in short order. By four o'clock, she was ready. There were still four more hours until the fated hour of the heist, and three until she had to meet the chief detective.

Would the plan she'd finally put together actually work? Thinking it was better to be safe than sorry, Mira decided to give it a dry run. "Well…perhaps I'll take a shot at it."

Mira was planning to position lookouts throughout the city: the Valkyrie Sisters, the Korpokkur sisters, First Pupil and Woofson, Wasranvel, Undine, Gnomide, and Sylphide. As she was unable to speak to three of those spirits, Mira relied on the Spirit King to interpret for her.

"We won't let him escape," she heard Martel and the Spirit King say.

She'd chosen not to use Salamander because of its appearance. The evocation could easily be mistaken for a dragon, so Mira would hold off on summoning it. And she didn't plan to

summon Anrutine because…well…it might be an *issue* if those water-spirit-hungry female adventurers caught wind of her.

She'd sent Wise Popot to fly around the city in Fuzzy Dice's stead, and things had gone surprisingly successfully.

"Hunh. This worked better than I'd expected."

Wise Popot flew low to keep hidden, but although she flew inconspicuously and soundlessly, Mira's lookouts had no trouble spotting the evocation. Receiving reports of Wise Popot's position from all over Haxthausen, Mira quickly established just where she was flying.

That meant that even if Fuzzy Dice outmaneuvered Mira, and even if he eluded the tracking tool, Mira could still track his exact location by keeping him in the evocations' sight lines.

Especially important to this plan were First Pupil, who excelled in determining enemy locations, and Elezina, one of the younger Valkyrie Sisters, famed for her archery as well as her hawklike vision.

"You won't catch me," Wise Popot stubbornly declared as she attempted to escape.

It was a face-off between the owl—who could freely wield illusion magic—on one side and the sharp-sighted First Pupil and hawkeyed Elezina on the other. The battle was fierce; Wise Popot's illusion magic caused quite a stir below.

Mira maintained an air of complete ignorance in regards to all this, however. She dispelled Wise Popot before the scene grew too chaotic, ending the exercise with a blithe expression. As she did, she considered whether First Pupil and Elezina alone would be enough for her purposes. In the end, she decided not to worry about it.

Having finished positioning and testing her lookouts, Mira noted that it was just about seven o'clock. It would soon be time to meet the chief detective.

Her test had determined that she could keep an eye on just about the whole city. But things would become much more difficult if Fuzzy Dice escaped outside Haxthausen. The

surrounding areas were mainly flat, grassy plains. She feared that, if she tried to trail him there, he'd immediately realize that she was following him.

After considering it for a moment, Mira paired up First Pupil and Wise Popot. "In the worst-case scenario, I'll have to rely on you," she said.

Since both evocations looked like animals, they were likelier to go undetected. First Pupil was particularly good at moving in the darkness. Meanwhile, in addition to her illusion magic, Wise Popot's silent wings allowed her to all but melt into the night sky. Those two were ideal candidates for pursuing someone across grassy fields.

"Meow, leave it to us!"

"I'll do my best!"

In response to their sweet, determined voices, Mira addressed the group. "All right, everyone, I'll be counting on you!" she reiterated.

Alfina immediately affirmed her commitment to the operation, and the rest agreed quickly.

Hearing her friends' determined tones, Mira smiled to herself and headed off to the spot where she'd meet the chief detective. After connecting, they made their way to a conference room in the Mages' Guild.

"All right, let's go over our plan quickly," the chief detective said, opening a map of Haxthausen on the table.

He began briefly reviewing their plan for the night. The entire city was roughly three square kilometers, and the president's mansion was a little over a kilometer from the Mages' Guild. The cathedral lay on that route, only about three hundred meters from the mansion.

Julius would stand by in front of the mansion, waiting for Fuzzy Dice to make his move. As soon as Fuzzy Dice completed his heist and began making his way to the cathedral, Julius would contact Mira and the chief detective, then hasten to the Mages' Guild.

Once she got that message, Mira—who would be disguised as a Fuzzy Dice fan so that she could easily blend in—was to lie in wait at the building across the street from the guild.

When Fuzzy Diced showed up on the guild balcony, Mira would use the Lock-On M Type-2 to begin tracking the phantom thief. That was the key to the operation's success.

The chief detective would wait in the Mages' Guild and, the moment Fuzzy Dice arrived, give a signal to seal off the guild. That, however, would be nothing more than an act. Fuzzy Dice would easily slip out and escape, Wolf confirmed.

At that point, Mira would again step up to the plate. Having locked on to Fuzzy Dice with the magical tool, she'd go after him. That was the operation in a nutshell.

"All right," the chief detective concluded. "It looks like you don't have any questions."

Once they finished reviewing the plan, they gave their magical tools a quick check. Everything seemed to be working fine. The communication set functioned smoothly, and they had no trouble sending each other messages via text. The Lock-On M Type-2 that Mira would use was working fine as well.

"All right, then I'll be off," Julius said after they'd prepared. He set off toward the mansion to take up his position.

Mira and the chief detective savored the delectable cake that Mira had brought before leaving the conference room. As they made their way downstairs, something odd happened.

"Oh, that's right. I should give you this before I forget," the chief detective said, handing Mira a dubious-looking mask. It looked like the kind of thing a Fuzzy Dice fan would wear to psych themselves up before one of his big heists. Since the plan was for Mira to blend in with those fans, it would apparently be best if she wore a mask as well.

"Hrmm. Sure thing." The half mask would mostly cover her eyes; it looked like something one would see at the Carnival of Venice. Mira took it and immediately put it on. "How does it look? Do I come off as a Fuzzy Dice fan?"

The chief took a quick look at her and smiled. “If anything, you look more queenlike.”

“What kind of queen would wear a thing like *this*…?”

A queen putting on a mask? Yeah, maybe a queen of the night. A bit dispirited, Mira quickly glanced at the mirror in the corner to check how she looked.

“I look like some kind of hussy.” Seeing her cutesy yet devious-looking reflection staring back at her, Mira couldn’t help but smirk.

As they left the Mages’ Guild, she glanced across the street. “There are more of them now,” she murmured to herself.

“Yes, this always happens. Even more will arrive,” the chief detective replied, transfixed by the scene.

They were certain that Fuzzy Dice would show up at the mansion to which he’d sent the calling card, as well as the cathedral and Mages’ Guild. His fans all knew that too, of course, so most were waiting outside those three places.

Additionally, two rivals of the phantom thief were present: the chief detective and Julius. And while the chief detective wasn’t *super* popular, Julius *was*.

“Are they…mobbing Julius?”

“Yes. This always happens too.”

Looking ahead of them, Mira saw the detective’s assistant—who should’ve been long gone—utterly surrounded by fans. Not only that, but they seemed to be cheering for him as well.

The women seemed drawn to the dashing young man who fought so valiantly in the face of adversity, both because of his rivalry with the phantom thief and his handsomeness. Fuzzy Dice’s fans flocked to the chief detective as well once they saw him; they seemed to be the type of women who were into grizzled, mature guys.

Mira felt like a third wheel. *If I were still Danblf…they’d be all over me.*

Back then, she hadn't just been grizzled and stately but strong as well. Mira reminisced on the good old days as the women forced her away from the chief detective as if she weren't even there.

Finding herself isolated as Fuzzy Dice's fans obsessed over Wolf and Julius, Mira went ahead and departed, making her way to the building opposite the Mages' Guild. To get a clear shot at Fuzzy Dice, they'd made sure to secure permission to use the balcony of that very café.

There, Mira found that the three female adventurers who'd agreed to help them with their operation had already gathered.

"Ah, you're here."

They'd made their introductions the day before. There was a swordswoman, Nina, who was clad in armor and wore a sword at her belt. Then there was Mina, a robe-clad mage, and finally a necromancer named Nana.

"Huh? Where's the chief detective?" Nina asked as soon as Mira joined them.

"Over there." Mira shifted her gaze slowly toward the giant crowd in the middle of the street.

"Goodness. Well, yeah, the chief detective has fans."

Nina seemed to get it; it was apparently fairly common knowledge that Wolf was popular as well. She chuckled that he'd just have to wait for the ruckus to die down.

"By the way, I overheard something when we first met yesterday… Um…my lady…I mean, ma'am…are you… Look, you're the Spirit Queen, right?" the robe-clad Mina asked, seemingly egged on by her two friends.

From the way she spoke, she seemed to be clumsily attempting to figure out how to address and speak to Mira. No surprise there. Although Mira looked like a young girl, she was the fabled Spirit Queen, which meant that she was an A-rank. The girls were all C-rank. From their perspective, the Spirit Queen existed on a whole different plane. Thus, it wasn't hard to imagine why they'd have trouble speaking to her.

“Ah… Hrmm. Yes, they do call me that,” Mira proudly affirmed, as if she were used to answering that question.

The second they heard her response, the three girls’ faces brightened.

“Yeah, we thought so! You helped out one of our party members, Zack. Not just that, you were even generous enough to give him something so valuable for us. Thank you so much!” Nina suddenly exclaimed, bowing her head.

Once she’d done so, the other two thanked Mira in quick succession.

Mira tilted her head to the side slightly, trying to figure out what they were talking about. After thinking back a moment, she finally remembered: Nina had mentioned Mira giving someone something, so they had to be talking about the guy she’d given the spirit crystal to the day before.

“Ah, so you girls are pals of the guy who was up on the roof?” Mira guessed.

It appeared that she was right on the money. “Yes, that’s right!” they all replied, nodding. They proceeded to thank her once more and told her how happy she’d made them.

The girls were apparently all sisters and also had a much younger sister who wasn’t there.

Six months prior, that younger sister had turned ten and gone to take an aptitude test for magic proficiency. She’d said for a long time that she wanted to become a cleric to help her awesome big sisters with their adventuring.

However, the aptitude test’s results indicated that she was only suited to summoning. Yet the barrier to entry when becoming a summoner was so high that most people who were only suited to that role gave up before ever becoming adventurers. Since it was the most difficult class, that was a fairly well-known phenomenon.

As one might expect, the girls’ younger sister had despaired at this news and was thoroughly crestfallen. But, Nina excitedly

recounted, that was when the Spirit Queen suddenly rode in on a white horse.

The Spirit Queen was an A-rank adventurer whose exploits were famous even in far-off lands. That had offered their sister a ray of hope. Indeed, the girl had seemed quite fired up, since—even as a summoner—she could become a famous adventurer and would undoubtedly be able to help out her sisters.

“She’s been doing physical training ever since then, and she’s begun studying summoning. But she’s realized how hard it is and just how few study resources there are…so she’s in low spirits again,” Nina said, smiling bitterly. In the next moment, her expression brightened, and she looked straight at Mira. “But then we bumped into the Spirit Queen herself.”

The ray of hope their little sister had thought she’d seen had turned out to be just beyond her reach. Yet, though she was disheartened once again, rumors began spreading that the very person who’d once inspired her had arrived in Haxthausen. Not only that, after arriving, the Spirit Queen had talked at length about the usefulness of water spirits and explained in great detail how to make a contract with one.

For the beginner summoner’s sake, her three sisters had hurried to get hold of one of the all-important spirit crystals. By then it was too late: Spirit crystals had flown off the shelves and were already in short supply.

Despairing at yet another setback, they’d heard that a water spirit had come to the city. Again for their sister’s sake, they began scouring Haxthausen. At that point, Zack had chanced upon the Spirit Queen herself. Not only that, she’d even given him a spirit crystal. The girls’ sister was happier than they’d ever seen her.

That wasn’t all. Having accepted the chief detective’s urgent request, the girls had found themselves in the company of the very Spirit Queen that they’d heard so much about.

“We were kind of hoping that you might, like…push her in the right direction.” Having spoken at length, Nina exchanged looks quickly with Mina and Nana. Then she stood up straight and turned to Mira. “I’m sorry to ask you to help in this situation, but…

do you think you could teach our younger sister about summoning? Even just a little bit would be great."

Once she finished requesting that, all three women bowed in unison.

It seemed as if they'd decided the night before to request this of Mira, no doubt for their sister's sake. To low-ranking adventurers, an A-rank famous enough to be known by a pseudonym was like royalty. If any other adventurers saw them ask such a famed adventurer to essentially become something like a private tutor, they'd assuredly have laughed at how silly a proposition it was. They might even have confronted the sisters and insisted that they not bother an A-rank adventurer with such a trifle.

Requesting such a thing was a bit of a faux pas, and the three seemed aware of that. Still, for their sister's sake, they felt compelled to do so.

"Hrmm. Yeah, sure."

Nina and her sisters had probably only decided to ask Mira for help after agonizing over whether to do so for some time, but Mira had agreed instantaneously. That certainly had something to do with just how much the three wanted to help their sister, but Mira more or less just agreed to anything that had to do with summoning.

Since their younger sister had been struggling with the art, Mira would show her the ropes. To her, the whole situation felt more like an opportunity for her to teach someone than like someone getting an opportunity to learn from her.

Another thing motivated her: the struggle of finding anyone besides herself to spread the art of summoning. While she had yet to meet the girls' sister, the very fact that there was a fellow summoning devotee out there sent Mira's spirits sky-high.

While the three sisters were initially shocked by Mira's sudden response, they quickly and politely said, "Th-thank you...!"

Mira simply nodded back as if the thanks were unnecessary. *Even if it's off to a bit of a slow start, it's nice to see summoning starting to get its day in the sun!*

She had once despaired over summoning's future, but her exploits as the Spirit Queen and proselytizing were promoting the art to the world once again. Her existence gave others hope, and Mira herself gave them hope too. She was certain her work was beginning to bear fruit.

She beamed as she reflected on how she'd particularly made an impact this time.

Chapter 16

SINCE MIRA HAD PROMISED to help the young summoner, she and the sisters discussed plans to do so. At that point, the chief detective, who'd finally been released by the Fuzzy Dice fans, joined them at last.

"Good heavens, my apologies. They got hold of me."

While he'd expressed his regret at being late, he actually looked quite pleased—as if rather delighted that a group of young women had been obsessing over him.

"You're pretty popular for a bad guy, huh?"

Fuzzy Dice was an honorable thief and a defender of justice, so most people saw the chief detective who wanted to capture him as a villain. Yet Julius and the chief detective both seemed popular with some of the very people supporting Fuzzy Dice.

While that may have come off as odd, the chief detective had an idea as to why it was the case. "I seem to serve as a foil to the phantom thief." While he might be somewhat popular, he laughed, he was still just a supporting character.

Many well-known adventurers had come to take on Fuzzy Dice and been defeated. The thief's fans loved him even more afterward, awestruck by his considerable abilities, heroic bearing, and unwavering sense of justice. In other words, most Fuzzy Dice fans didn't just want to see him punish evildoers—they wanted to see him take on and defeat particularly strong opponents.

Naturally, his fans were anxiously waiting for him to face another tough enemy. At the moment, however, Fuzzy Dice was considered so strong and so widely popular that no famous adventurers were stepping forward to take him on. Regardless, one man remained committed to his defeat: Chief Detective Wolf.

Despite being on a bit of a losing streak, the chief detective had been an A-rank adventurer, so it went without saying that he had considerable prowess. Fuzzy Dice's fans seemed intrigued by the episodes in which he thwarted all the chief detective's various

ingenious plans. The detective's charming young assistant, Julius, was also well received by the female fans.

That said, both were sort of seen as comic relief. Yet none of this seemed to bother the chief detective.

"At any rate, Julius is far more popular than me," he joked, adding with a cocky smile, "So long as we win in the end, they can think whatever they want."

Just then, they saw Julius—who'd been swarmed in the same way as Wolf—being released by the Fuzzy Dice fangirls. It was impossible not to spot his big grin as he left the throngs of fans.

From behind him, cheers of "You can do it!" rang through the air. Those cheers were somehow different from the ones the chief detective received; the women wishing Julius success were perceptibly more genuine.

Mira grimaced as the light in the smiling chief detective's eyes seemed to vanish. He and Mira—who formerly had only a sweet tooth in common—suddenly saw perfectly eye to eye.

And so Mira, the chief detective, and the three sisters had a quick meeting.

The group huddled around a table in a corner of the café where they'd secured balcony access, going over the operation one last time. Everything they had to do there was rather simple. Mira and the sisters would line up on the balcony disguised as Fuzzy Dice fans, and once the phantom thief appeared, Mira would shoot him with the Lock-On M Type-2 and begin tracking him.

It was crucial that Fuzzy Dice not discover them aiming at him with the tool, so they absolutely had to be convincing fans. It was very important that they acted the way his fans usually did.

Once Fuzzy Dice showed up, Wolf stressed, they absolutely needed to lose their minds with excitement. Although she was dressed like a fan, Mira would stick out like a sore thumb if she just sat there quietly and carefully aiming at the phantom thief.

While the chief detective thought that the balcony would be the best place to get a clear shot—especially since it was high above the throngs of fans—the four would certainly be noticeable

standing up there. Thus, he'd decided that Fuzzy Dice would undoubtedly catch on unless they worked themselves into a fervor like the rest of his fans.

"I'm not so sure about this..." Mira said, smiling half-heartedly.

She had thought she'd only have to aim the magical tool and pull the trigger. Now she had to fake being enthusiastic? She didn't even like Fuzzy Dice, and she couldn't imagine yelling, cheering, and going nuts for a man.

Just then, Nina's face lit up. "Leave that to us!" she said with a genuinely convincing smile.

Mina and Nana added that it wouldn't be a problem.

The trio's parents were professional actors who even ran several large productions. Their daughters had decided not to pursue the theater, but they were still confident in their acting abilities. The three sisters took out a few white cloaks, declaring that Mira could simply aim at Fuzzy Dice from under one of the garments while the girls screamed and cheered.

That took a little pressure off her, yet Mira couldn't help wondering whether it would work. But even as she contemplated the proposal, Wolf accepted it immediately: "Hmm, great idea. Let's do that."

It seemed to Mira that the girls had anticipated him saying as much.

It certainly didn't appear to be just some coincidence that Nina and her sisters, who were so confident in their acting skills, had been included in the operation. From the chief detective's reaction, he seemed to know something about the girls and their parents. Although it wasn't always very clear, the chief detective certainly knew what he was doing.

With the plan settled, Wolf suggested they spend the time before the big operation taking a stroll to help settle their stomachs. The five were currently enjoying the café's famed Bavarian cream; naturally, the chief detective was treating them to the dessert.

“They weren’t lying when they said this stuff was to die for,” said Wolf.

From his satisfaction, one might have guessed that he’d wanted to try the Bavarian cream all along. Nina and her sisters also loved sweets and couldn’t help smiling either.

“I could eat about ten of these!” Mira said.

She was in a fantastic mood as well. Having quickly polished off her first serving, she glanced over at the chief detective, who glanced right back. Taking the hint, he looked at Mira and the sisters.

“We’ve still got some time left. How about we all get one more?”

Of course, in saying that, the chief detective was implying that they definitely *should* all get second helpings. The four girls might have found it rude if he’d ordered seconds for himself without doing so for them too. But if he ordered another round for everyone, he could freely enjoy eating one more.

But while the sisters’ faces said they were dying for another serving, their mouths said, “Thank you, but we’re fine.”

Perhaps because it would be on the chief detective’s tab, they’d have felt bad about ordering more. Such a modest gesture was admirable, but this time, it wasn’t what Wolf was hoping for. Then the chief detective was thrown a lifeline.

“Hrmm. I guess I’ll get a chocolate Bavarian cream next!” Mira cut in, telling Wolf her order without prevaricating.

Mira had picked up on what he was trying to do and come to the rescue. Her words were like pebbles that fell and triggered an avalanche in the sisters’ hearts.

The chief detective didn’t fail to notice the change in their expressions. “Are you three sure you don’t want another? No need to worry about ordering more. I may not look it, but I used to be A-rank,” he said, somewhat pompously, to persuade the three.

After a moment, they all caved.

“Um, I’ll have the strawberry Bavarian cream.”

“I’ll take chocolate.”

“I’ll have custard flavor, please.”

At that point, Mira interjected, “It just hit me. Wouldn’t it be better to go to the spot Fuzzy Dice sent the calling card to, rather than waiting here or in the cathedral? Isn’t that where the real battle will be? I feel like his fans would want to watch the whole thing, from when he shows up to when he executes the heist.”

Fuzzy Dice would only pause at the guild and cathedral to drop off evidence before fleeing. According to everything she’d heard, he wouldn’t stay long and wouldn’t even do much there. His target location—the president’s mansion—would be where most of the action went down.

First, he’d arrive at the time he’d written on the calling card. He’d gracefully make his way through whatever fighting force his target had assembled, elegantly steal both evidence and coin, then quickly make his escape. The entire heist would take around ten minutes, and Mira couldn’t help thinking it would be more worth watching.

Considering Mira’s query, the chief detective replied, “I initially thought the same as you.”

He then proudly enumerated all the information he’d gathered to answer that very question. According to the Fuzzy Dice fans that he’d spoken with, whether someone watched from the scene of the crime, the church, or the guild depended on what they wanted to experience.

The crime scene was the spot where those who’d never seen Fuzzy Dice could go to fully enjoy the quintessential experience. Following his grand entrance, they could see him deftly knock out the guards and get an adequate taste of the phantom thief’s prowess. Finally, they’d see him discover carefully hidden evidence and piles of ill-gotten spoils, which he’d artfully steal before fleeing.

The cathedral experience was more for the fans who’d already seen Fuzzy Dice a couple times. Onlookers at the crime scene would only see the phantom thief from a considerable distance, but that wasn’t the case at the cathedral. It was no

ordinary building, so Fuzzy Dice couldn't get into it from the rooftop; he'd descend to the ground and go right through the front doors.

"He didn't start deciding to go in that way until his third appearance. I wonder what on earth changed his mind about not coming in from the roof."

Perhaps someone had yelled at him, the chief detective joked, then murmured that he could relate. It appeared that Wolf had done something that landed him in trouble at a cathedral in the past.

At any rate, that was why so many fans flocked to the cathedral—it was where Fuzzy Dice would descend to the ground, so they'd get a closer look at the phantom thief.

The last place people waited for Fuzzy Dice was the Mages' Guild, and that was primarily where veteran fans gathered. They did so to see the grand finale; they wanted to witness his heist's spectacular final act, in which he would miraculously disappear without a trace.

Wolf added that the fans outside the Mages' Guild looked forward to seeing exactly how Fuzzy Dice would outmaneuver the chief detective and lay waste to the ever-elaborate plans that he came up with.

What really excited them was that Fuzzy Dice was so good at adapting on the fly that it didn't matter whether Wolf had prepared for him or not. The chief detective smiled bitterly in grudging admiration of his nemesis.

"Be that as it may, we've covered all our bases. This time, it won't be quite so easy for him," Wolf said with a cocky smile, a truly radiant look of defiance glittering in his eyes.

Chapter 17

“TEN, NINE, EIGHT, SEVEN…!”

Just as the chief detective finished what he was saying, a voice counting down had suddenly cut through the air, coming from the street. It sounded as if they were counting down to the new year, and Mira wasn’t quite sure what was going on.

The chief detective, however, immediately knew what the countdown was. “Huh…? Ah—it must be that time already.”

He checked the time. It was just a few seconds before eight o’clock. The voice in the street was indeed counting down the seconds to the time on Fuzzy Dice’s calling card.

Finally, the word “zero” rang out. The din that followed made it really sound like there was a festival outside.

“Sounds like they’re getting pretty fired up.”

Although they were inside a café, the fans’ cheers reached them easily. Nina stood and poked her head a bit out the window to get a look at the situation. A wry grin broke across her face.

According to what the chief detective had said, these fans were supposedly veterans. Perhaps that was why they were all cheering in unison. It might’ve seemed like they were just going wild, but the cheers followed a coordinated call-and-response pattern.

“I guess we’ll have to go all out, huh?”

“They’re pretty hyped up, huh? Even more than I anticipated.”

Nina and her sisters’ job was to go wild while posing as fans, so they’d have to match the rabid enthusiasm sweeping through the fans on the street below.

Mina and Nana both looked out the window too. When they saw the fans’ zealousness with their own eyes, their faces tensed as they considered whether they were up to the task ahead.

Even as the three debated that, and just after they’d begun to observe the fans’ cheering, a bell-like sound rang out. It was the

communication tool the chief detective was carrying.

Meanwhile, in front of the mansion, in a large garden centered around a tall stone statue, Fuzzy Dice had arrived. He'd appeared right on time and was engaged in fierce battle with a band of mercenaries called Les Fantômes.

"Well, I'll be. That was quite a sneak attack. Color me surprised." Fuzzy Dice, his face concealed by a distinctive mask, smirked slightly as he easily dodged a blow from a man who'd snuck up in the shadows.

"You'd need eyes in the back of your head to see through an attack like that...!" Les Fantômes' leader objected.

His face twisted in rage as he glared at Fuzzy Dice. He should've been able to score a direct hit but hadn't even grazed the thief.

Les Fantômes were primarily scouts and, in a bid to utilize that class's skills fully, they fought from the shadows. They employed various traps and were well-versed in a remarkable variety of poisons. They applied that deadly combination of knowledge and stealth techniques through strategies like slowly weakening an enemy before finishing them off. That pretty much guaranteed their victory over fiends.

"You aren't half bad yourself. You're the only one I couldn't knock out." Fuzzy Dice carefully spread his arms and deftly leapt atop the statue.

The garden they stood in was already full of the sleeping gas Fuzzy Dice had dispersed, but the mercenaries' leader had resisted that gas and even launched a surprise attack on the thief.

"I get that a lot. You must've used a slow-acting anesthetic."

Les Fantômes were renowned for their skill in handling poisonous substances. Since they were all poison masters, their ability to neutralize poisons was nothing to scoff at. They could look at a symptom and tell whether it was caused by a natural or magic poison, then instantly identify a way to counteract it.

They could do that precisely because they knew so much about poison, and that was one reason they'd been hired for this.

The only concern was that if Fuzzy Dice knocked them all out at once, they wouldn't be able to do anything.

"What do you mean?" Fuzzy Dice asked bluntly.

Les Fantômes' other members had already passed out and now all lay on the ground. Only their leader was left standing, since he'd neutralized the poison before it took effect. Of course, that was clearly only possible because Fuzzy Dice had reduced the poison's potency.

"But why'd you let me…?" the leader asked with a wary look in his eyes, wondering why Fuzzy Dice had left him conscious. Even if he wanted to apply some sort of antidote to his friends, there wasn't much he could do with Fuzzy Dice staring right at him.

"Well, I wanted your help cleaning up after, that's all," Fuzzy Dice answered amiably. His voice wasn't even slightly malicious. The only thing one could detect in it was that he honestly wanted some help.

"I beg your pardon?" the leader responded, not quite understanding what the phantom thief meant.

"You'll figure it out once you wake up."

With that pithy reply, Fuzzy Dice slowly opened his right hand. As he did, the leader of Les Fantômes dropped to his knees, falling face-first on the ground before beginning to snore.

It was truly a perfect victory.

"Impossible. You already defeated them…?"

Having realized that something unusual was going on outside, the Knights of the Serpentine Chalice mercenary company rushed out to the garden. There, they stared in shock at the scene before them.

This group was mostly made up of knights and swordsmen, equipped with skills quite different from those of fiend hunters. The Knights of the Serpentine Chalice were Les Fantômes' polar opposite—and, for that reason, they readily acknowledged Les Fantômes' prowess.

Yet only one minute had passed since eight o'clock, and Les Fantômes had been wiped out. The knights were getting visibly

anxious.

“Since you’re all still standing, I’m guessing you must be those snake-and-cup guys, yeah?” Fuzzy Dice called from atop the stone statue. Despite standing within the anesthetic gas still hanging over the garden, the knights didn’t fall asleep. Instead, they turned cautiously toward Fuzzy Dice.

“Well, we had an idea of what sleeping gas you might be using, so we made sure to come prepared.”

In complete contrast with Les Fantômes, the Knights of the Serpentine Chalice were all healing and medicine experts. Preparing different remedies beforehand to protect against poisons was precisely what they excelled at.

Like Les Fantômes, they could also identify a poison by observing a victim’s symptoms. They’d then make a special dose of medicine that temporarily boosted the patient’s immunity. It would awaken someone who’d been knocked out and immunize them against that poison for exactly twenty-four hours.

The knights’ plan had been to take the poison they suspected Fuzzy Dice of using beforehand. They envisioned simply using the poison on themselves that afternoon, treating themselves, and subsequently making themselves immune to poison created using the corresponding Demonic Art. The most crucial step would be determining exactly which Demonic Art Fuzzy Dice was using.

While this seemed like a perfect approach, there were quite a few drawbacks. After all, it was no small feat to prepare the poison needed to dose and then immunize them all.

The battle would come down to Fuzzy Dice knocking them all out or the knights withstanding all his techniques.

“Well, how about we try this?” Fuzzy Dice opened his left hand.

The knights instantly tilted forward, then all simultaneously fell flat onto the ground. The phantom thief had dispersed another anesthetic gas to which they *weren’t* immune.

At the very next moment, several round objects suddenly came flying toward Fuzzy Dice from the mansion. He quickly leapt

back, but the objects weren't actually aimed at him. They hit the ground and broke into pieces, and green smoke poured out.

The knights soon rose, one after the other, from within the clouds. That smoke was evidently another antidote the knights had developed. It seemed that whoever was in charge of administering the antidotes was holed up in the mansion.

"Now it's time for round two," the knights' captain declared.

He was old enough to retire, yet as soon as he was back on his feet, he quickly closed the distance between himself and Fuzzy Dice and let his sword fly. His attack was so fierce and wildly fast that the other adventurers' eyes couldn't even follow it. However, he halted abruptly as he reached Fuzzy Dice.

"Ngh...! What the...?!"

Looking at his sword, the captain discovered that it was wrapped in countless spider-silk strands. He couldn't even push his blade forward or pull it back.

He was apparently familiar with the technique, however. He immediately unleashed several fighting skills to get rid of the strands. Paying no heed to how many layers of silk his sword was wrapped in, he simply cut right through them.

"Wow, you *are* strong."

Fuzzy Dice managed to evade the captain's relentless attacks by artfully manipulating the silk threads—occasionally to give himself a foothold, and occasionally to slow his opponent down by weaving the strands around his legs.

Meanwhile, the knights had completely encircled the area.

"All right. It's over now." Despite having passed out several times, the captain was continuously administered antidotes and thus kept getting back on his feet. Without ever letting his guard down, he gradually closed the distance between himself and Fuzzy Dice.

Fuzzy Dice, meanwhile, had again resumed his position atop the statue and was looking at the knights who'd surrounded him.

"Very true. Everything looks perfect." Flashing a smile, Fuzzy Dice raised his hand high overhead.

Perturbed by his mystifying words and action, the knights kept a steady eye on the phantom thief's hand.

Then there was a flash of light; it shone for an instant and then disappeared. While it didn't seem like much, it had a devastating effect. The knights surrounding Fuzzy Dice fell straight to sleep.

An antidote immediately came flying in. This time, however, nobody got back up.

Fuzzy Dice hadn't used sleeping gas this time. He'd used a form of light-based hypnosis. The knights needed a restorative, not an antidote.

"There are still a few more individuals and one more group, huh?" Fuzzy Dice muttered to himself before making a mad dash toward the mansion. As he approached the entrance, he heard two screams, which were quickly stifled.

Meanwhile, two men holed up in the mansion's storeroom—both fiend hunters from the Unsavory Gourmand Brigade—were chatting.

"It's gotten pretty quiet outside. Which of them are we not hearing anymore?"

"If our guys won, we'd probably hear them cheering. They must've lost."

The Unsavory Gourmand Brigade's members were professionals who specialized in capturing undead fiends, which were especially pesky. Those enemies used curses and hexes and could induce a huge arsenal of status effects.

On top of that, the Unsavory Gourmand Brigade's special training allowed them to wrap themselves in holy energy to exorcise hexes and curses. Brigade members also trained their minds to withstand corruption by such attacks. Additionally, they hardened their bodies by consuming small amounts of poison often enough that they had considerable resistance to it. In short, they truly pushed the limits of what was humanly possible.

They could also cast support magic and sought to flawlessly achieve objectives through the skillful use of combination

strategies. Now they stood as the mansion's last line of defense, directly in front of the room in which the president had locked himself.

"He's here..."

Out of nowhere, the large room they were waiting inside to ambush Fuzzy Dice suddenly began to fill with white mist. It must've been the sleeping mist they'd heard about. Unperturbed, they took battle stances, looking ready for just about anything.

Once the entire space was full of the mist, the Unsavory Gourmand Brigade's members all dropped straight to the floor. Yet none were sleeping; in fact, they were all immune to the sedative. This was all part of their plan. Due to the mist, though, they couldn't see anything other than their comrades' hazy outlines.

"Execute Plan Four. Be careful." The brigade leader relayed that order to his team without uttering a sound via a magical device.

Having prepared a plan beforehand to prevent friendly fire while operating in an area of low visibility, the group marked themselves and began paying close attention to their surroundings.

Then they saw a single shadow.

"Target confirmed, two o'clock, facing east. Aiming at target... Direct hit!"

The black shadow standing in the white mist wasn't marked as a brigade member. Rather, it now bore the mark a brigade member had just fired.

"You were careless, Fuzzy Dice! None of us are sleeping!" the captain exclaimed. He jumped to his feet and slashed at the shadow.

But was it really Fuzzy Dice? It seemed to fly as it darted away from the attack, slipping back to hide in the billowing white clouds.

"Your reflexes are impressive. But what now?"

The captain slowly made his way toward where the shadow had disappeared. Just then, he felt a sudden gust. Before he even

had a chance to react, a churning vortex of black mist assailed him.

“So you really *can* use more than one type of sedative.”

From the drug’s faint scent, the captain immediately determined its composition. An unconcerned look passed over his face. He was sure that none of the sedatives Fuzzy Dice used would have any impact. That was how effective the Unsavory Gourmand Brigade’s anti-status-ailment capabilities were.

“So what now? We can resist whatever you have to throw at us.”

The white and black mists melted together, shrouding everything nearby in a gray cloud. Still, the captain hadn’t lost sight of where the black shadow went. As he got closer to the shadow, it jumped from wall to wall as if trying to put distance between them.

Believing the shadow’s attempts to escape utterly futile, the Unsavory Gourmand Brigade continued advancing on it, then unleashed several attacks. The shadow leapt from the walls to the ceiling, always dodging their attacks at the last second, as the brigade slowly closed in around it. At last, they drove it into the very corner of the room.

“It’s all over!”

“Victory is ours!”

They launched several more attacks at the shadow in quick succession, and the force of their blows shook the room. The air filled with the sound of destruction. They were facing off against the famed phantom thief, so they held nothing back.

“What the…?” The captain trailed off as he moved forward to peer at their supposed target.

The rest of the brigade rushed forward to get a look at what he’d seen and found a doll wrapped in spider silk. The figure they’d chased into the corner, which they’d thought was Fuzzy Dice, was nothing more than a doll.

In that case, the *real* Fuzzy Dice was somewhere else. The captain made a mad dash to the door leading into the back room.

Glimpsing the scene before him, he looked up toward the ceiling.

“He got us… Mission failed.”

The brigade members who were supposed to guard the back door were sleeping soundly, stark naked and wrapped in spider silk. Meanwhile, on the other side of the door, the president of the Dorres Company was similarly wrapped up.

While the brigade chased the black shadow, Fuzzy Dice had successfully completed his heist.

“Damn it, when did he…?” the captain murmured.

He suddenly realized when Fuzzy Dice had made his move. The phantom thief must’ve taken advantage of the moment of chaos that’d broken out right after he’d whipped up that black-mist vortex that had swallowed them up; he’d knocked out the door guards and slipped inside. In the midst of that swirling vortex, the brigade members hadn’t felt the small draft that would’ve slipped out when the thief opened the door.

On top of that, as soon as the gray mist began to clear, the captain realized that the entire room was covered in spider silk. On it, he could see the marks where their attacks had landed. Fuzzy Dice had probably covered the room in that silk so that, if one of their attacks missed, it wouldn’t put a hole in the wall and let all the mist leak out.

“Well, that’s certainly one way to win,” the captain said, smiling.

Chapter 18

TWENTY MINUTES HAD PASSED since Julius sent his first update. Now they finally got his second.

It seems like Fuzzy Dice pulled his heist off just as expected. They put up a good fight, though. We've got a pretty surprising new record.

Up until that evening, Fuzzy Dice had only ever taken fifteen minutes at most to complete a heist, but this crew had held out for another five. There was nothing normal about pulling off such a heist in only twenty minutes when faced with high-level hunters, but Fuzzy Dice's records were apparently becoming quite skewed.

"Even if those foes weren't easy, we could've expected victory from Fuzzy Dice."

The phantom thief always avoided attacking anyone head-on, instead incapacitating opponents without harming a hair on their heads. If he'd done the same this time, that was no small feat, since he'd been against foes as vexing as a group of fiend hunters.

Thinking aloud, Mira had inadvertently said as much, but she was interrupted by another update from Julius.

"It appears that no one was injured this time either. And, uh... hm...what's this...?" As Wolf began to confirm the lack of casualties, another update came in, then another, and another.

Looking through the messages, the chief detective knit his brow, then informed the group that things were going a tad differently on this heist. According to Julius, Fuzzy Dice had found several unidentified children behind a seemingly broken door under the mansion.

"Children? If they're unidentified, then they must not belong to anyone in the mansion, right?" Mira asked.

"That would be the case," Wolf grimaced. Then he quietly murmured to himself, "Was that what he was after...?"

“What he was after? Chief Detective, do you know something about all this?” asked Mira. The chief detective’s implication that the children might be connected to some other incident piqued her interest.

“Oh—curious?” he asked, beaming. His smile declared just how eager he was to talk about the matter. According to him, Fuzzy Dice only showed up in places with connections to shadowy organizations that trafficked children. “Of course, I could be jumping to conclusions,” Wolf added before checking his watch. “Oh dear. Let’s hurry and get into our positions.”

The chief detective deftly wheeled himself toward the Mages’ Guild. Meanwhile, Mira and the sisters spoke briefly to the proprietor before proceeding to the third floor. There, they strapped on their masks—pretty much the official uniform of Fuzzy Dice’s fans—and stepped onto the balcony to get a look at the situation.

“Wow. It’s packed to the gills down there, huh?”

Fans crammed the streets below them. It certainly looked like a carnival.

“I mean, I’d heard stories, but I don’t think I ever expected this. We should have a pretty easy time blending in,” Nina said with a bit of an anxious laugh, staring at the crazed fans.

The sisters just needed to pretend to be Fuzzy Dice devotees so that Mira could get a clear shot at the thief without standing out. But emulating those fans would be a bit harder than it sounded, and he was still pretty far away. Just how much would all the women present lose it when he actually showed up in person?

Nina seemed to have some doubts as to whether their acting would hold up. From the way Mina and Nana scrutinized the fans, it was possible they were thinking something along those lines as well.

Uh-oh. Maybe I should lay out another backup plan. She’d thought of one while listening to the chief detective. Drawing back slightly, she opened her Item Box.

“This should probably work, right…?” Mira asked her faraway friend.

"Yes, that'll be perfect," the voice replied.

She was talking to Martel. From her Item Box, Mira had pulled a special piece of fruit from the loads of fruit that the progenitor spirit had given her. The translucent, pale-purple fruit was a unique foodstuff—the gold standard in granting powerful buffs once eaten. Mira decided to consume the fruit just in case she ended up needing to duke it out with Fuzzy Dice.

Martel's special fruit was so delicious that Mira had no trouble devouring it, despite being fairly full from eating so much Bavarian cream.

This really is something special!

According to Martel, the fruit Mira had just scarfed down wouldn't just dramatically increase her stats but also her magic resistance. Against Fuzzy Dice, who tended to inflict all kinds of status effects, that resistance effect would likely prove especially useful. That said, that fruit wouldn't raise Mira's stats quite as much as some other kinds would. But a person needed to be careful not to eat more than one piece of buff-granting fruit at a time, or it would cause digestive issues.

Her preparations complete, Mira held the Lock-On M Type-2 as she waited near Nina and her sisters. The girls hadn't just gotten used to cheering but had seemingly jumped fully into the spirit of Fuzzy Dice mania. They'd whipped themselves into a frenzy that not even the real fans could outdo.

If they are *acting, then they deserve awards.*

Mira stared at the three, deeply impressed by how they'd nailed the part. But she simultaneously had a sinking feeling that if she just hid beside them without going wild herself, she'd definitely stand out. Unfortunately, Mira knew nothing about acting, and if she half-heartedly copied them, she felt it'd look even worse than not cheering at all.

Mira decided to position herself stealthily between Mina and Nina, keeping low to remain as inconspicuous as possible, just like they'd originally planned. That could've made her seem like a pervert taking advantage of the large crowds to freely cop a feel,

but thanks to her current form, she simply looked like a shy young girl.

What she was on the inside, however, was another matter entirely. *Aaah, yes. They smell gooood.*

As Mira squeezed between them, Nina opened her cloak, using it to cover her. Mira was so small, it concealed her enough to keep her from standing out.

Mm-hmm. Now I can get a good view.

Sandwiched between two mature women, Mira was in high spirits, especially because they were in such close quarters. Still, she hadn't forgotten what she was there to do.

Her target was expected to make his way into the Mages' Guild from the balcony, and she needed to wait calmly for him to appear so she could line up a shot. She pretty much looked like a sniper.

Right after she'd gotten into position, the crowd roared. The street had been plenty loud before, but the cheers now were positively deafening. The phantom thief Fuzzy Dice had finally arrived, and the sound that went up from the crowd was unbelievable. Cheers and screams mixed and echoed through the night sky. It almost sounded like the fans were competing to see who could shout the loudest.

Mira instantly heard shouts from right beside her.

"Ah! He's here! Fuzzy Diiiiice!"

"Steal *me* while you're at it!"

"Fuzzy ◯×△◇◯△△×□!"

It was Nina and her sisters. Quickly noting how the other fans had exploded into cheers, they'd immediately done likewise.

There had been shouts simply noting his arrival, spicy and suggestive exclamations, and cries nobody could quite make out. The sisters had perfectly matched these in a way that seemed identical to the other fans around them.

The cheers crashed across the street like a great wave. Fuzzy Dice seemed to ride that wave as he dashed across the rooftops.

Seeing him do so, the fans' wild fervor peaked. And, while Mira and the sisters' spot was rather conspicuous at first glance, they were still blending in thanks to the sisters' acting.

"He looks exactly like he does on his card," Mira murmured, poking her head out from Nina's cloak to look at Fuzzy Dice.

Of course, she meant the portrait on Fuzzy Dice's unique *Legends of Asteria* card. Since that portrait completely matched how he now looked in the flesh, there didn't seem to be much chance that this was someone else.

Mira immediately peered down the Lock-On M Type-2's scope, getting the thief into her sights.

It doesn't seem like I'll get a look at his face.

If she could see that, she could simply have used Inspect. If that displayed the thief's name, she'd have been fine with letting him go right then and there. If he was a former player, he might even have been willing to discuss things with her, on account of them both coming from the same world. Finally, on the very off chance that he was Lastrada, things would've been even easier.

Fuzzy Dice's mask, however, was strapped so tightly around his face that there was seemingly no chance of it slipping. Keeping a cautious eye on his surroundings, the thief prepared to enter the guild.

Mira held her breath, waiting for him to stop moving. The Lock-On M Type-2 couldn't fire multiple shots and required ten seconds to recharge, so she needed to get this done with one shot.

She and Wolf had determined that the clearest shot would be right before Fuzzy Dice opened the balcony door, and the chief detective had apparently set up a trick to buy her time. According to him, that trick would force Fuzzy Dice to bend down.

It's just about time...

Fuzzy Dice descended from the rooftop to the balcony, waving to acknowledge his cheering fans. At last, he stood in front of the balcony door. He'd made it this far; all he had to do was open the door and go into the guild.

So what now? Mira had Fuzzy Dice locked in her sights when, just as the chief detective had said, the thief bent over in front of the door.

Now!

Mira wasn't sure what the chief had done, but she couldn't let this chance slip by—this was the shot she'd been waiting for. She firmly pulled the Lock-On M Type-2's trigger. It fired silently, without any light or sound. Amazingly, it registered Fuzzy Dice's mana.

"Sweet! Perfect shot!"

Glancing at the magical tool's display, Mira saw the tracking cursor pointing to Fuzzy Dice's position. Their plan had been a total success.

With all she had to do, Mira had been rather anxious. Heaving a sigh of relief, she let Nina and the others know that their plan had worked. The sisters had apparently been nervous too; they hadn't acted in a long time.

"Whew. Thank the gods..." they said, each letting a sigh of relief slip.

Having quietly executed their plan, they saw Fuzzy Dice stand up with a cat in his arms. Apparently, that cat was the chief detective's "trap." The balcony door opened outward, so Fuzzy Dice had needed to pick up the cat to open the door.

But what would they have done if the cat had wandered off before Fuzzy Dice showed up? Now that Mira knew the chief detective's whole plan, she couldn't help smiling in exasperation at how dubious it had been. Regardless, she chuckled to herself that all was well that ended well, watching Fuzzy Dice walk into the guild.

Chapter 19

HAVING FINISHED THE JOB they'd been hired to complete, Nina and her sisters—looking very much relieved—plopped down in the corner of the balcony.

Mira didn't have anything to do until Fuzzy Dice's next move, so she began chatting with the trio, keeping an eye on the Lock-On M Type-2's display. Registering Fuzzy Dice's mana with the magical tool was as far as the chief detective's plan went, so Mira was free to pursue the thief however she wished.

For the moment, the marker was fixed in the Mages' Guild. Once it began to move, that would mean that Fuzzy Dice had finished his business in the guild and was escaping.

In Mira's mind, the operation up until that point had just been her setting the stage. For Mira, the real operation was about to begin. She needed to chase down her target, capture him, and question him. Then she could realize her ultimate goal: finding the orphanage.

Fuzzy Dice's ability to dash across rooftops was superhuman, and Mira planned to give chase using his position on the Lock-On M Type-2. Furthermore, she wanted to do so without him catching on, so she couldn't ride something like Pegasus.

"What?! Are you going to chase him on foot?!"

The sisters were flabbergasted to hear Mira's plans. Looking skeptically toward her legs—which were thin, soft, and very much a young girl's—they asked whether doing that could be pretty difficult.

It didn't matter that Mira was an A-rank adventurer hailed as the Spirit Queen; without using her fabled evocations, there wasn't much chance that she could pursue Fuzzy Dice. Mira was sure that was what Nina and her sisters were thinking. Yet in addition to her summoning abilities, Mira had also developed several Immortal Arts techniques over the years.

“I guess I haven’t mentioned it yet, but I’m actually somewhat skilled in using Immortal Arts,” Mira boasted, jauntily activating True Sight. The moment she did, her aura became clearer and more pronounced, and her eye color changed.

“Isn’t that one of the hidden Immortal Arts…?”

“Her eyes look just like our teacher’s friend’s…”

“Adventurers with nicknames really are on another level, huh?”

Nina and her sisters took a collective breath, their eyes burning with admiration. They realized Mira just might be able to keep up with Fuzzy Dice.

“But…you’ll need to jump and leap around quite a bit, won’t you? Um, can you do that?” Nina asked, her gaze falling toward Mira’s skirt.

Just like the chief detective the other day, she was undoubtedly worried that Mira might end up putting her underwear on full display.

“Oh, I already took care of that. I got a second layer to cover my panties,” Mira said, brimming with confidence.

There was no need to worry about her outfit—she’d bought innerwear just for this occasion. For some reason, however, Nina and her sisters kept glancing back and forth between Mira’s self-satisfied grin and her skirt. Then they gave each other puzzled looks.

“What do you guys think?”

“Um, I think there might be some mistake.”

“Yeah, I think so too…”

Perplexingly, the three moved away from Mira and began whispering to each other. They wore troubled expressions, as if there was something they didn’t quite know how to say, and they shot glances at Mira occasionally.

Mira tilted her head, befuddled by the sisters’ actions. Had she said something that could’ve bothered them this much?

She was still sitting there, a blank look of confusion on her face, when the sisters whirled around as if they'd finally reached an agreement. They glanced once more from her face to her skirt as Nina spoke on the trio's behalf.

"Um…from what we can tell, those are just *normal* panties. Do they really sell innerwear like that?" Nina demanded, looking honestly perplexed. It was clear from Mina's and Nana's eyes that they were dubious too.

Mira had sat cross-legged without really considering that she was wearing a skirt. Since Nina and her sisters had been sitting opposite her, they could apparently see her panties. But a lot of people dropped their guard about that kind of stuff around members of the same sex, and since Nina and her sisters were fellow girls, she hadn't really worried about it.

But in the middle of all this, Mira had implied that she'd taken measures so that it wouldn't be a problem if anyone saw under her skirt. The moment she did, Nina and her sisters were suddenly taken aback. From the brief glimpses they'd gotten, they hadn't seen anything other than actual panties.

And their eyes hadn't deceived them.

"What're you talking about? Look, they're right…" Mira said.

She lifted her skirt, about to tell the girls how she'd bought innerwear specifically for this occasion, when—glimpsing only the panties she usually wore—she froze.

What had happened? She thought about it for a moment. The answer soon hit her: Despite acquiring several kinds of innerwear, she'd forgotten to put one of them on when she'd dressed that morning.

"Ugh…I completely forgot…"

It was easy to accidentally overlook something that one wasn't used to doing yet. Having come up with that excuse, Mira hurriedly pulled out a pair of bike shorts and pulled them on. With those firmly in place, she was ready to jump at a moment's notice.

A smile appeared on Mira's face as she continued to monitor the Lock-On M Type-2 eagerly while occasionally jumping into the

underwear discussion that had started between the sisters.

The topic was managing one's undergarments from an adventurer's perspective. The girls discussed how many pairs to bring into a dungeon, how often to switch them, and most importantly, how one washed the garments. On that topic in particular, their concerns seemed never-ending.

Mira, on the other hand, didn't really have to worry about any of that. Since she could use evocations, she could wash or change her underwear whenever she wanted. The more she talked about that, the brighter Nina's and her sisters' eyes got. They bowed down on the ground, thanking Mira once again for agreeing to teach their sister summoning.

"Um…what exactly is going on here?"

Having made his way to the third-floor balcony right at that moment, Julius stiffened like a board as he took in the sight of the sisters prostrated before Mira.

"What? Don't you worry about it. I just agreed to teach their sister the basics of summoning," Mira said, briefly explaining the situation.

Given how it looked, however, Julius couldn't quite wrap his head around the sight. He only managed to reply vaguely, "Huh…?"

Meanwhile, Mira wondered why he'd come all the way to the balcony. "Well, at any rate, you must be here for a reason, right? What's up?" she asked. "All that's left is for me to pursue Fuzzy Dice." She checked to make sure the thief hadn't yet moved.

The chief detective hadn't planned what to do from here on. It was Mira's choice now. Or could Wolf have thought up some plan and sent Julius to tell her about it?

As she considered that, Julius replied, "Yes, about that… The chief detective suddenly asked that I come get you. I'm not sure about the details either."

He appeared to be telling the truth, and a bemused look appeared on his face as he spoke. Apparently, right after he'd rushed from the mansion to the Mages' Guild, Wolf had asked him

to get Mira. Julius hadn't even had a chance to check out the situation at the guild.

"Hunh... I don't get it. But if that's what he asked, I don't have much choice."

Once Mira registered Fuzzy Dice's mana, her mission was supposed to be complete. Knowing the chief detective, though, he'd have a good reason for wanting her to rejoin him. In light of that, she immediately stood, then nimbly leapt from the balcony.

She used Air Step to race across the street in midair before quickly descending in front of the entrance to the Mages' Guild. Finally, before entering, she turned and waved at the balcony on which she'd just been standing.

"She's so light on her feet..."

"She really *is* incredible, huh?"

"Our sister will be too, with Mira as her teacher."

Mira had leapt off the balcony as if it were completely normal and run through the air as easily as if she'd been strolling through a park. If she could use the Immortal Arts at that high a level, just what was she capable of with summoning?

Hope and anticipation glittered in the sisters' eyes as they stood, hands clasped, with looks of respect, admiration, and even a bit of reverence.

Julius, who was still with the sisters, thought back to seeing the three bowing before Mira and took a small step away from them.

Inside the guild, the staff and around thirty adventurers were all trying to deal with the phantom thief's evidence. Seated firmly in the center of them all was the chief detective.

The enchantments on the evidence were seemingly proving particularly difficult to dispel, and the staff were focused solely on that task. In stark contrast to the employees, who were working feverishly, Wolf and the adventurers who happened to be present looked placid.

"So why'd you ask me to come here?" Mira asked the chief detective.

He slowly looked toward her and answered, “Oh, sorry for that. I’d planned to give you free reign from this point forward, but what can I say? I’m a detective, and old habits die hard.” Wolf spun his wheelchair around, then laughed bitterly that he just couldn’t stand to do nothing when Fuzzy Dice was right in front of him. “Even if I can’t physically go toe-to-toe with him, I’d still like to try something I thought up. I apologize for changing our plan.”

Now that they’d registered Fuzzy Dice’s mana, the chief detective’s plan had concluded, so this should’ve been Mira’s operation. But although Wolf apologized for barging in, Mira replied that she didn’t mind one bit.

“This was originally your sting. You should finish it as you see fit.” She didn’t mind indulging the chief detective and readily agreed to do so. If anything, she looked forward to seeing what sleuthing he had planned.

“Thank you, Miss Mira.” Wolf smiled cheerfully. Then, as his gaze made its way to her hand, his eyes lit up. “So how’d everything work out?”

“Hrmm… It all went without a hitch,” she replied, checking the Lock-On M Type-2’s display. She could still see a mark corresponding to her target’s presence.

“I expected nothing less of you, Miss Mira. I’m glad I left it in your hands.” The chief detective nodded approvingly.

Then Wolf quickly explained what had gone on up until then, as well as the current situation. After leaving Mira and the sisters, he’d headed to the Mages’ Guild to await Fuzzy Dice. Shortly after, he’d heard the crowds outside go wild as the phantom thief made his grand entrance.

Just like before, Fuzzy Dice had set his evidence—on which he’d placed active anti-theft enchantments—onto the guild’s counter. The moment he did, the chief detective gave a signal, and all the guild’s exits and entrances but the main one were locked down.

Wolf had also used a magical tool he’d secretly prepared to place a barrier around the guild. If anyone left, that tool would emit a sound that notified everyone immediately. Julius himself

had passed through that barrier on his way to get Mira, and it had responded, so they knew it worked.

"I've already considered that Fuzzy Dice might very well have tried to leave at exactly the same time as Julius," the chief detective added, addressing Mira's thoughts before she even had a chance to mention them.

But the barrier was designed to tally each individual person who exited through it, and the count was still at one. Looking at the chief detective, Mira noticed an unfamiliar box by his wheelchair displaying a *1*. It seemed that box was the magical tool producing the barrier.

As Wolf explained all this, Julius made his way back into the guild as well. Based on the fact that he'd come back in, he wasn't likely to be Fuzzy Dice in disguise.

"That brings us to now. Someone in this room is Fuzzy Dice, but incognito," the chief detective said with a sharp glint in his eye. He cast a glance at the adventurers.

They comprised men and women, as well as warriors and mages. Of course, more mages than warriors were present, considering which guild this was. But that was irrelevant, since Fuzzy Dice could disguise himself as whoever and whatever he wanted.

Furthermore, the chief detective said, if he were disguising himself as anyone, an adventurer was always a safe bet. Adventurers were always coming and going, so it wasn't terribly suspicious if no one recognized them.

"Forget about us. What about *them*?" one adventurer shot back, pointing at the Mages' Guild employees. If Fuzzy Dice *had* disguised himself as someone in the building, the adventurer insisted, they ought to suspect the staff as well.

"That's a good point. But wouldn't it be rather difficult for him to disguise himself as one of them?"

Speaking with the suspects was another one of Wolf's responsibilities as chief detective, and Mira thoroughly enjoyed the whole scene as she listened in.

Having stated that Fuzzy Dice would struggle to disguise himself as a staff member, the detective elaborated: The guild staff saw each other regularly. If Fuzzy Dice randomly disguised himself as one of them, they'd notice the stranger immediately, which would blow his cover. Thus far, that hadn't taken place.

Ultimately, the chief detective asserted, although it would be possible for Fuzzy Dice to replace a particular employee, he certainly hadn't. In his previous heists, the thief hadn't disguised himself as *somebody*, but rather as nobody special.

Did Fuzzy Dice have difficulty impersonating someone specific, or did he prefer not to? Wolf finally added that anyone the phantom thief disguised himself as might be unjustly implicated in a crime that they hadn't committed. Thus, he concluded that Fuzzy Dice had no choice but to disguise himself as a random stranger.

"I see. That means it's got to be one of us, huh?" said the man, seemingly convinced.

The man who'd spoken up looked his fellow adventurers up and down, adding that about half of the group weren't familiar faces in Haxthausen. He was an adventurer based out of the city, and he pointed out six other adventurers whose paths he claimed to have crossed many times over the years.

If two adventurers recognized each other, the chances that one of the pair was Fuzzy Dice were low. Since that made sense to the adventurers, they began checking to see whether any comrades they recognized were present. As they did, they reported their findings to the chief detective and moved to the other side of the room.

After the adventurers had concluded their independent checks for familiar faces, there were a little over a dozen left whom nobody recognized. If the chief detective's hypothesis was valid, one of them had to be Fuzzy Dice in disguise.

"Thanks for the help," Wolf told the adventurers who'd recognized each other, then gazed at the remaining adventurers and looked them up and down.

How exactly would the chief detective see through Fuzzy Dice's disguise? Seemingly excited to learn as much, the man from

before volunteered his assistance again, as if dying to help.

"So what's next?"

"Next, we ought to take a closer look at whoever Mira identifies," the chief detective said.

"Ah. Sure thing." Nodding, the man looked toward Mira as if to ask who it'd be.

"All right, then," said Mira. "Let's see..."

How would she uncover which of the adventurers was Fuzzy Dice in disguise? Despite being put so abruptly on the spot, Mira was unperturbed. After all, the key to seeing through the phantom thief's disguise was in her hands.

While the chief detective was speaking, she'd finally realized why he summoned her, and she began checking the Lock-On M Type-2. Their plan had been to register Fuzzy Dice's mana to pursue the thief, but this device could also identify him within a larger group of people. The magical tool made the impossible possible.

Fuzzy Dice had won every single battle, yet he was about to suffer his first defeat. The moment Mira pointed someone out would forever be recorded as a pivotal moment in the legend of the phantom thief.

Having masterfully succeeded in tagging Fuzzy Dice and registering his mana, Mira pointed dramatically at the display screen and announced, "The person behind these crimes is...*you*!"

Mira's tone of voice, bearing, and intensity suggested that she'd stepped right out of the pages of a famous detective novel. The line she'd used, as well, was exactly one a detective would say when confronting a criminal with cold, hard facts, having used their skills of deduction to chase said criminal down and expose their crimes to the light of justice.

Mira seemed to relish the line; it was more or less at the top of the list of things she wanted to try saying.

Then the helpful adventurer spoke up: "Um...there's no one there."

“Huh…?” Mira’s voice betrayed her befuddlement. She hurriedly turned her gaze to where she’d pointed—straight into the empty space created when about half of the adventurers had moved to the other side of the room.

Mira had gotten a bit ahead of herself and neglected to check where the Lock-On M Type-2’s cursor was now pointing. She’d prioritized coming up with a perfect pose over monitoring the device, so she hadn’t realized it was indicating an empty space.

Who could blame her? She’d verified beforehand that the device worked, using Julius; then she’d successfully registered Fuzzy Dice’s mana. There was no way she could have expected the Lock-On M Type-2 to suddenly give the wrong reading when it counted most.

“What’s…going on?”

Had the Lock-On locked up? Suspecting that, Mira began moving around, checking the display. Wherever she moved, it kept pointing to the exact same spot. The person whose mana she’d registered was certainly standing right there.

Unlike the utterly perplexed Mira, the chief detective stared at that exact spot and calmly asked the adventurer helping them, “Something must be there. Check that spot out, would you?”

“Sure,” the man replied, looking as doubtful as Mira. Nevertheless, he moved where the Lock-On M Type-2 indicated.

The device could only give them directions to a target’s location, so the man followed Mira’s directions to “just keep going straight.” He made his way roughly halfway across the guild floor before finally reaching a wall with several notices posted on it.

“Hm? What’s this doing here?” the man muttered, suddenly stopping to pick something up. “Hey, did someone drop this?”

He turned around, holding something aloft in his hand. It was a leather cloak, but it didn’t seem to be just any cloak.

“I didn’t, but I’ll take it.”

“No, that’s definitely mine.”

“It’s probably mine if there’s no name on it.”

They seemed to be half joking, yet all the adventurers began claiming that the cloak was theirs. Although it just seemed ordinary at first glance, it must've been quite valuable.

"Well, what's so different about that cloak compared to an ordinary leather one?" Mira asked the chief detective. All the adventurers could apparently tell, but Mira didn't notice anything special about the article.

"What, you don't know?" The chief detective looked a bit surprised. After a moment, he continued, "Well, considering your particular talents, I guess you wouldn't need one."

Deciding that that was the likeliest explanation, the chief detective began explaining the garment to her. It was known as an anti-fiend camouflage cloak, he said.

Whether a fiend spawned in an area was partly determined by that area's concentration of mana, as well as a few other factors—more often than not, the fiend's strength and particular type. When a fiend spawned, its level was always higher than that of the area's monsters. But the specific conditions that led to fiends spawning weren't yet clear, so adventurers still stumbled across high-level fiends while hunting monsters.

Fiends could also keenly sense living organisms' mana. To escape one, a person had to run not just out of the fiend's eyeshot but outside its mana-detection range. Of course, if a person suddenly ran into a fiend, escaping it was a tall order, given that fiends were generally high-level. That was where the anti-fiend camouflage cloak came in.

"Two magical tools are sewn into this cloak. The first simply circulates nearby mana, and the second conceals the wearer's mana inside the garment."

The cloak was basically a super useful tool that enveloped its wearer in their surroundings' mana, just as if they were wearing camouflage, allowing them to blend in perfectly and evade a fiend's mana-detection sense.

"I see... I had no idea this world had stuff like that."

Mira had known that fiends could sense mana. While still in the game, when she'd come across a fiend she had no way of

defeating, she often dealt with it using whatever mana-concealing items she had on hand while running away.

But times had changed, and now there were items that could trick even fiends' senses. Mira was mightily impressed as she looked at the cloak, which was a testament to ingenuity.

Chapter 20

"BY THE WAY, if you tried to buy that cloak, it'd cost about three million ducats," the chief detective added, concluding his explanation of the garment. While it might've looked plain, it went for serious money.

"Whoa! I guess that explains their reactions..." Mira said, gazing toward the corner.

The adventurers' jokes had suddenly taken on a life of their own; at some point, they'd begun playing rock-paper-scissors to determine who'd be declared the cloak's owner. It really was a bizarre sight.

But if someone had dropped the cloak, shouldn't it go to the guild's lost and found? Mira was still considering this as she snapped back to reality and checked the Lock-On M Type-2's display again.

"Ah...that explains it..."

The winner of rock-paper-scissors was holding the cloak aloft as Mira looked where the target cursor now pointed. Up until then, it had directed her toward the wall with the noticeboard. Now, however, it was clearly pointing elsewhere—straight at the rock-paper-scissors champion.

"Ah...I see... That must mean..." Mira took the Lock-On M Type-2 and began circling said champion. Sure enough, whatever she did, it pointed right at him.

"Um...can I help you?" the champion asked, seeming annoyed by Mira's odd behavior.

Mira just grinned slightly. "The magical tool I locked on to Fuzzy Dice with seems to be pointing at you."

Hearing this, the man holding the cloak said, "Let me see!" and dashed over to look at the display. "You're right. It's pointing straight at me, isn't it?"

Hearing this confession, everyone in the room stared at the man. The joy he'd felt in winning the cloak evaporated, and he suddenly shuddered.

"Wait, wait. It's not me!" he began to insist desperately.

Denying it only made him look more suspicious, and everyone stared more and more pointedly. In the very next moment, however, the stares turned into smiles.

"Well, I get it now. When you think about it, it's got to be the cloak."

The cloak had been located where the Lock-On M Type-2 first pointed, and was now pointing at the guy holding the garment. Once Mira thought about it for a second, it wasn't that hard to figure out that the tool was just reacting to the cloak.

The other adventurers who'd lost the rock-paper-scissors game all realized this, yet still glared at the champion, possibly out of a jealous desire for revenge.

Having obviously realized as much as well, Mira smoothly snatched the cloak out of the stunned adventurer's hand. She found a table to lay it down on and checked the Lock-On M Type-2 again. Sure enough, the display continued to point unfailingly at the cloak.

Could Fuzzy Dice have disguised himself within the cloak? The thought crossed Mira's mind, but she considered it unlikely and turned to Wolf as if to ask his thoughts on the matter. The other adventurers seemed to be on the same page; they all simultaneously focused on the chief detective.

"It seems he saw through my plans," the chief detective said matter-of-factly, staring at the cloak laid on the table. From the way he spoke, he'd evidently expected as much. Then, as usual, he launched into a story.

They'd used the Lock-On M Type-2 to register Fuzzy Dice's mana so they could pursue him. The magical tool was an older version and therefore had drawbacks, but still worked well. Once it registered someone's mana, there was no way that person could escape. That said, the tool had a major shortcoming: It simply registered the mana of whatever it hit.

It wasn't just living things that possessed mana. In fact, plenty of things in nature did. Equipment that granted buffs contained mana as well. The stronger the equipment was, the stronger its mana was, so the Lock-On M Type-2 apparently sometimes mistakenly registered the wrong target.

In short, under some circumstances, a person could completely avoid being tracked by the Lock-On M Type-2 by simply discarding their equipment.

That wasn't as easy as it sounded, though. The latent mana in equipment didn't readily present itself, and the device obviously prioritized registering people's natural mana. To get around this, Fuzzy Dice would have needed very powerful equipment, and who'd want to simply get rid of such valuables?

"That's where the cloak comes in."

The chief detective caught his breath, then reiterated the anti-fiend camouflage cloak's function and gave his conclusion. Since the cloak concealed the wearer's natural mana and enveloped them in a nondescript mana field, it was like the Lock-On M Type-2's archnemesis.

Furthermore, compared to powerful equipment that might cost from tens of millions to over a billion ducats, the cloak cost a mere three million. For those reasons, it was the perfect way to escape being tracked by the Lock-On M Type-2.

"Hrmm... You mean Fuzzy Dice already had this cloak on back then?" Mira asked.

If so, at some point, someone had leaked the chief detective's plan to use the Lock-On M Type-2. That would have to be how Fuzzy Dice had prepared such perfect countermeasures. But how the hell did that information get to him?

Mira remembered when they'd spoken about the plan...and suddenly felt uneasy. Now that she thought about it, they'd first discussed it on the corner of a main street. Could they really have counted on their strategy staying secret when they'd talked about it in a spot like that?

The moment Mira realized this, the chief detective broke into a grin.

Cloak still in hand, he slowly rolled forward toward one of the adventurers, then came to a stop. Staring right at the man, Wolf asked, “There’s something I’d like to ask you. This is yours…right?” As he spoke, he gently offered the man the cloak.

Wouldn’t you know it—the adventurer he’d spoken to began looking visibly anxious. However, he said nothing in response.

The chief detective elaborated: He’d actually gone around to all the stores selling that exact cloak in the days leading up to the heist. More specifically, he’d found a shop that had sold a camouflage cloak in the period between their discussion of their plan and that very night.

“From this gate, go west down the main street a bit, then turn down a side street by a café on the corner, and you’ll find it. It’s called the Survivor Magical Tool Shop, and it’s pretty popular among scouts. I asked them who bought the cloak, and you match their description perfectly.”

It appeared that Wolf had hit the nail on the head. It was more than plain to see that the man felt driven into a corner by the chief detective’s words.

“No way! It’s you…?!”

Since the guild had been sealed off and a barrier placed around it, the likelihood that Fuzzy Dice was still among them was high. Everyone else present knew that too, so one by one, they started casting suspicious glances at the man.

Hrmm. He’s acting pretty fishy too, isn’t he?

Just to be safe, Mira used Biometric Scan to check the guild’s interior. She wanted to see whether someone was hiding someplace, disguised as someone else. Nope—whoever Fuzzy Dice was, he was likely one of the adventurers in the room.

And at the moment, the most suspicious-looking person in the room was the adventurer the chief detective had pointed out.

The popular anti-fiend camouflage cloak was fairly expensive yet sold well. According to the chief detective, though, only one had been bought in the past two days.

Even if plenty of adventurers did pass through the guild doors, the chances that the sole adventurer who'd bought that cloak would just happen to be there at that exact time were slim.

"H-hold on! It's not me! I...I just...!"

The chief detective's reasoning was sound, and the other adventurers looked at the man more sharply. Feeling trapped, he stepped backward until his back was at last literally against the wall. "Just listen!" he yelled, feverishly trying to explain. "I... got asked to buy it!"

According to him, a man he'd never met had approached him the night before. He'd asked the adventurer to get him an anti-fiend camouflage cloak as soon as possible. Not only that, he'd also promised him a handsome reward. Since he'd received the money for the cloak up front, the adventurer agreed without a second thought.

The stranger had also paid half the adventurer's reward up front. He'd promised to pay the remaining half at this exact time and place once the adventurer had delivered the cloak after nightfall to the designated spot. That was why the adventurer had been lingering at the guild.

"Someone asked you to, huh...?" another adventurer murmured, eyeing him suspiciously. The others had more or less the same reaction. They seemed to think the man was coming up with stuff off the top of his head out of desperation.

Mira also felt that his excuse was flimsy. People accused of things often claimed someone else had asked them to do it. That said, would this man really try an excuse like this if he were Fuzzy Dice?

The chief detective apparently harbored the same doubts as Mira. His brow remained furrowed in uncertainty as he listened to the man's story. Then Mira remembered that Wolf had mentioned Fuzzy Dice giving off a much more bold, intrepid vibe.

If someone had managed to see through Fuzzy Dice's disguise, it seemed likely that he'd reveal his true form in grudging admiration. At least, that was how Mira thought of Fuzzy Dice.

With that in mind, she examined the man closely—then realized something.

“Hunh. Would you look at that?”

Surveying the other adventurers, Mira grinned as if convinced. However, she maintained her silence, thinking it was too early to disclose what she’d noticed. Fuzzy Dice and the chief detective were locked in single combat; it would be improper for her to suddenly butt into the pair’s duel from the sidelines.

“H-here’s proof!” the suspicious man exclaimed.

Within a veritable sea of distrust, he pulled a slip of paper from his belongings and thrust it at the chief detective. It was apparently an invoice of sorts; he’d evidently been told to bring it to get the other half of the reward.

“Hrmm. Is that a joker…?”

It was half a torn joker card. As the chief detective stared at it, another voice suddenly piped up from among the adventurers: “U-um, so you’re the guy?”

Turning to see who’d spoken, they spotted another man—apparently a very green adventurer. With all eyes on him, he timidly made his way to the suspicious-looking man and took a piece of cardboard out of a small pouch, his shoulders shaking. Right then, a sheet of paper slipped from his pouch and fluttered to the floor, landing smoothly beside the chief detective’s wheelchair.

“Oops, sorry!” The greenhorn rushed over and snatched the paper up. He collected himself before matching the cardboard he’d taken out with the torn joker card that the chief detective held.

“They line up perfectly.”

The two halves of the joker card used as an invoice matched. In other words, the first man hadn’t lied about getting paid to buy the cloak.

To corroborate that, the greenhorn asserted that he’d been asked to give the small pouch to a man with the other half of the joker card at this exact place and time. The greenhorn had also

been paid well to accomplish this task, as was evidenced by a sack of gold coins that he held up as proof.

Furthermore, the sheet of paper that'd fallen from his pouch apparently had more specific instructions written on it. When they asked to see it, they noticed notes about the promised reward.

"I'm glad I could get it to you," the greenhorn adventurer said, sighing in relief.

"And I'm glad you were able to make it," the cleared adventurer replied, also looking quite relieved. The two both smiled as if proud that they'd accomplished the jobs they'd been hired to do.

Another adventurer suddenly spoke up. "Hey, if he went out of his way to get that cloak, he had to have known this'd happen, right?"

The adventurer meant that, by arranging in advance for someone to show up and exchange the reward with him, the first man could throw off any suspicions leveled at him while lending credibility to his claim that he'd been asked to buy the cloak.

"Hmm. You're right. This is Fuzzy Dice we're dealing with, so that's certainly possible." The chief detective evidently agreed.

Truthfully, after the cloak was exchanged for the reward, all the suspicion aimed at the first man had utterly evaporated. Furthermore, that meant that everyone was once again equally suspicious of each other. Fuzzy Dice might well have maneuvered to create such a scenario. When asked who had contracted them, the two adventurers said it was someone who'd looked rather nondescript; Fuzzy Dice's go-to disguise happened to be that of a nondescript man.

Once someone was cleared of whatever suspicions were leveled at them, the chief detective noted, they were unlikely to be suspected again. There was also a good chance that others would naturally remove such a person from their list of suspects simply because they felt guilty for wrongly suspecting them.

"This could certainly have been Fuzzy Dice's aim all along." The chief detective fixed his gaze on the cleared adventurer once more, apparently studying him. After a moment, Wolf's expression

changed as he appeared to realize something. “May I ask your job?”

The former suspect cocked his head slightly. “You can tell I’m a swordsman.”

Sure enough, a long, light sword was strapped to his waist, and he was dressed in a swordsman’s typical fashion. Thus, he seemed unsure why the chief detective had asked. Wolf’s next question, however, clarified everything.

Judging from all his past experiences, Wolf elaborated, Fuzzy Dice was most likely a demonologist. “Therefore, would you mind using that sword to dispel my suspicions?”

Since Fuzzy Dice was probably a demonologist, the man just had to prove that he wasn’t a mage. Catching the chief detective’s drift, he made his way to an open space inside the guild. Unsheathing his sword, he unleashed a fighting skill. Only someone who belonged to the warrior class and could fully use their heightened fighting spirit could launch that technique.

“How was that? Did it clear your suspicions?” the man asked the chief detective, turning around proudly and taking a quick look at Mira. He’d shown them the technique casually, but it seemed to be one that he was confident using.

“That was an impressive technique, no doubt about it.” It *had* been the real deal.

A couple mages wielded swords, but none could use fighting skills. In short, the adventurer was a swordsman, like he’d said, which proved that he wasn’t Fuzzy Dice. The chief detective immediately turned to the man, whose name had been cleared again, and apologized for suspecting him.

The man replied that it was no big deal. Smiling bitterly, he added that he’d probably have suspected himself as well in their shoes. With a laugh, he told them it was water under the bridge, since he’d been handsomely rewarded while serving as a suspect.

At that point, only one adventurer had been cleared of suspicion, so Fuzzy Dice remained hidden among the remaining adventurers. Despite following his lead, Wolf was back at square

one. Thanks to the preceding exchange, though, he'd come up with another way of testing suspects.

"I'd hoped to avoid having to test everyone individually and instead unmask the phantom thief in one fell swoop…" The chief detective seemed a bit dejected, but the situation was what it was.

He moved to have the remaining adventurer suspects prove their innocence. It was a simple test: All they had to do was prove that they were in the class that they claimed to be, like the previous man. In other words, each had to show off a fighting skill.

This time, Mira got a bit excited. She knew a lot about skills as a mage and a Wise Man of the Linked Silver Towers. Still, she didn't quite know everything about *fighting* skills. She was curious to see which techniques the adventurers would use.

Unfortunately, it didn't seem as if the test would live up to her hopes. About half the remaining adventurers demonstrated fighting skills similar to the first man's. In the game, it had been said that the sky was the limit when it came to different fighting skills. But after so many years, they'd seemingly been studied and streamlined to such a degree that a lot of techniques resembled each other.

Well…maybe they just can't use any really big techniques inside.

They were where they were, and the adventurers just had to use a fighting skill to prove that they were who they said. Still, Mira was a bit disappointed that her opportunity to learn about current fighting skills was over so quickly. That said, the fighting skill the final adventurer showed off lifted her spirits a little.

"Mine's not quite as straightforward," the swordswoman prefaced, then asked for Mira's assistance. She apparently just wanted Mira to throw an apple.

"Hrmm… I just need to throw it?"

"Yes. As hard as you can, please." The swordswoman nodded, then closed her eyes.

The moment she did, Mira suddenly became aware that the woman had done something. It wasn't anything Mira could see or feel, and nothing about the woman seemed different from a

moment earlier. Yet Mira had a gut feeling that she shouldn't get anywhere near her.

The other adventurers seemed to feel likewise; a collective chill permeated the room.

At that moment, the swordswoman called, "I leave when you throw it, and where from, entirely up to you."

Wow. This seems like it'll be pretty cool! Mira couldn't help feeling excited. She waited until the perfect moment and even went into one of the swordswoman's blind spots before, as asked, throwing the apple with all her might.

In the very next second, the swordswoman spun and impressively dodged the apple completely. Not only that, in the very next moment, she whipped her sword from its sheath and sliced the fruit cleanly in two from behind while it still hung in the air.

A man happened to be standing in the perfect spot to catch both halves of the apple. He stared at them before declaring how incredible the feat was: "I'm not sure what to say other than… masterful."

That technique was apparently a crowd pleaser. The swordswoman hadn't just shown that she could use a skill that drew on fighting spirit, she'd also given everyone the impression that she was a master of the sword.

Mira also sensed that the masterful technique somehow relied on the fighter having honed her senses greatly. The chief detective himself said that it seemed like a technique a true master would use.

But the swordswoman wouldn't take the compliments. Instead, she began explaining how the technique was indeed a fighting skill.

"In the village I'm from, they call that Heaven's Might," she explained. "Only those without the aptitude to become mages can acquire it."

According to her, fighting spirit's application had evolved a bit differently in her village than everywhere else. As a result,

villagers there could project Inner Fire outward. Then, just like the swordswoman had demonstrated, they could apparently perceive whatever targets came within a certain range.

I see. It does seem to be a fighting skill, but that still doesn't mean one can't call it masterful.

Mages used mana to attack, recover health, and cast a range of support spells. Similarly, warriors used fighting energy for things other than just attacking. But unlike a mage's spells, which could be used for just about anything, fighting energy was primarily used for stat buffs.

Inner Fire provided precisely that. It was a fighting skill that temporarily boosted physical stats such as muscular strength, agility, and endurance. From what the swordswoman said, there were plenty more fighting skills like Inner Fire.

Right now, I'm up against a mage, but I could certainly find myself facing a warrior at some point.

Mira thanked the swordswoman for giving her such useful information.

Chapter 21

THAT ENDED THE TESTING of the warrior-class adventurers. Now, only the mage-class adventurers were left.

Julius had returned from deeper inside the guild holding a piece of equipment that looked as if it was for conducting experiments. It was apparently used to investigate a person's aptitude for becoming a mage, and they could use it to determine what kind of mages the remaining adventurers were.

"They let me borrow this and even taught me how to use it," he explained.

"All right," Wolf said. "Why don't we hurry up and get started?"

Hearing him say this, the rest of the adventurers quickly lined up as if to show that they wanted to prove their innocence quickly.

The aptitude test was simple. A couple adventurers completed it quickly and were determined to be innocent. No one so far had evinced an aptitude for demonology—or for summoning, so Mira was a little let down.

"Oh! He has an aptitude for divination as well as sorcery," Julius announced, reading the test results of a man who claimed to be a sorcerer.

"Wow. You don't say?" the man murmured, surprised. Apparently, he'd never taken an aptitude test, and this was the first time he'd heard that he was cut out for anything besides sorcery.

But if he'd never taken an aptitude test, how had he even known he'd make a good sorcerer? Why had he pursued that particular path? Upon asking that, Mira very quickly got an explanation from Wolf.

Proficiency in a certain discipline of magic was passed down from a parent, so sometimes a person knew what they'd have an aptitude for without ever taking a test. Depending how they were taught, they might simply end up developing whatever discipline

they'd inherited a knack for without ever learning about any others, the loquacious detective explained. The man's parents were apparently very accomplished sorcerers.

Next up was a cleric who also had aptitudes for multiple disciplines, including demonology. That meant that by mastering Endogenous Sense, they could use the Demonic Arts. However, gaining the ability to use Endogenous Sense would mean dividing their magic power.

The adventurer in question had used quite an impressive Holy Art, which meant that—even if they learned the Demonic Arts using Endogenous Sense—they'd quickly reach the limits of their magic power. It was unlikely that they could use Demonic Arts at Fuzzy Dice's level.

The chief detective went on to state quite confidently that he wasn't sure *anyone* could achieve Fuzzy Dice's prowess in Demonic Arts, even if that was the *only* discipline they focused on. He seemed proud that he knew this from firsthand experience, having faced off with the phantom thief in person.

The next test's results were in. The adventurer who'd just taken the test was a woman who claimed to be an exorcist.

"She seems to have aptitudes for banishing and summoning."

"Ah! So it's like that with me too," she murmured, smiling brightly. While multiple aptitudes were reportedly rare, from her aura alone, she seemed to have come from fairly impressive magical stock.

All that interested Mira, however, was that the woman had an aptitude for summoning.

"Summoning, huh? If I'd taken an aptitude test back in the day and gone with that, I wonder if I'd be riding high on the summoning boom right about now?" the woman mused suddenly. She was alluding to the fact that, thanks to Mira's proselytizing the day before, summoning had suddenly burst into the public eye.

Of course, Mira had to stoke the flames further. "It's not too late to start now. Learning of your summoning aptitude here must

be fate. How about trying to learn some summoning using Endogenous Sense? I can help!"

As if her big moment had finally come, Mira began listing the benefits of summoning. By using summoning circles for convenience, she could perform low-level summoning with Endogenous Sense. Plenty of people did very well without being able to summon beyond that level. Mira emphasized that weapon spirits, in particular, had a multitude of uses. If a person trained enough, they could use them as shields, decoys, or even bodyguards.

"Uh, yeah…I'll consider it," the female exorcist politely replied. In contrast to the impassioned Mira, she'd been half joking. Unable to bear Mira's smile, which shone at the prospect of having met a comrade, the exorcist quickly left.

Come to think of it, yeah… There are *people with summoning talent who never pursue it. If they could just develop those talents using Endogenous Sense, summoning would gain even more steam.*

Although she was in the middle of trying to unmask Fuzzy Dice, Mira's head spun with ideas about her next moves to revive summoning.

That's when it occurred to her that—up until then—she'd only thought of summoning being used as a main class, but summoning via Endogenous Sense was another avenue.

Plenty of successful mages probably had the talent for summoning slumbering within them already. No doubt some would try learning at least a bit of summoning for supplementary purposes if she showed them just how useful it was. If that helped them thrive, it'd probably entice others to make summoning their main class.

I'll make sure to study up on this in the future!

Luminaria and Mira had touched on Endogenous Sense while chatting once before. At that point, Mira learned that former players were fundamentally different from other people, so they apparently *couldn't* learn Endogenous Sense. Still, since she could use both summoning and Immortal Arts, Mira could do something

similar to it. Luminaria theorized that that was because Mira used Hidden Arts rather than normal skills.

The conditions for mastering the Hidden Arts were extremely complex and difficult to perform, so Mira hadn't been able to entice many former players who were mages to the path of summoning. This world's citizens, however, could learn Endogenous Sense, so they were a different story.

Having mentally glimpsed summoning's potentially bright future, Mira vowed to investigate summoning via Endogenous Sense.

As Mira fantasized about summoning's future, the magic-aptitude tests had continued, and the final person had just finished.

"Well now, what should we do?"

Seeing the results, the chief detective and Julius were stumped, and so were the rest of the adventurers in the room. They had believed that Fuzzy Dice concealed himself within the group, so the warriors and mages had all been tested to unmask him. But they'd determined that none of the adventurers fit the criteria to be the phantom thief.

"Hey, Chief Detective, what does this mean...?"

"Maybe Fuzzy Dice *isn't* a demonologist?"

One mage among the adventurers had an aptitude for demonology, but it wasn't anyone's main class. Some of the adventurers began discussing whether their original hunch that Fuzzy Dice was a demonologist might've been incorrect.

"No, he's most certainly a demonologist." Still, that was nothing more than Wolf's hunch.

Moreover, that conclusion was based solely on what the chief detective had surmised after countless scraps with Fuzzy Dice. It wasn't solid proof. But Wolf was convinced that it was true, and he asserted that Fuzzy Dice must've tricked them somehow.

"Hmm. Well, if you say so, Chief Detective..."

The adventurers would normally have aired their grievances at being put through the wringer for nothing, but that didn't

appear to be in the cards. It seemed that Wolf, who'd been an accomplished adventurer in his day, was still respected by his fellow adventurers.

"I just spoke with the guild staff. They say it's impossible to deceive the magic-aptitude test," Julius announced as he came back in, having apparently gone to ask the guild staff more details about the test. They said that the most obvious way to cheat it was to doctor the results afterward, and that under normal circumstances, the results displayed on the spot would be correct.

The adventurers had taken the test one by one for all to see. If anyone had done anything suspicious, they would've been spotted immediately. And it was virtually impossible to tamper with the testing device or its results.

"Well, what should we try next?"

Seventeen adventurer suspects were present, but they'd all been proven innocent. It was enough to raise doubts that the phantom thief was even still there. But the chief detective didn't seem dubious; he stared musingly at the line of adventurers. Seemingly prompted by his behavior, they also began looking at each other.

"Hunh... Where'd he go?" the man who'd bought the cloak for Fuzzy Dice asked suddenly.

Somebody called out, asking what was up. The man replied that he couldn't spot the greenhorn adventurer who'd had the other half of the joker-card invoice.

"What?!" another adventurer shouted.

Amid the sudden uproar, they did a quick roll call and determined that it was indeed just as the man said: The greenhorn had suddenly vanished.

"Could that mean... Was *he* Fuzzy Dice?" an adventurer asked.

The chief detective confirmed that that was indeed the case.

The greenhorn had stepped forward and cleared the first suspect. Thanks to his timing and the honest relief he and the first suspect had shared when the latter was cleared, everyone had naturally assumed that the two were a team. They hadn't realized

that, since the greenhorn adventurer had been so bold to step forward when he did, they hadn't ever suspected him.

The adventurers discussed this, concluding that Fuzzy Dice really was something else. Finally disappearing without a trace while no one was looking was another of the phantom thief's hallmarks. Perhaps because they'd seen something incredible right in front of their eyes, the adventurers abandoned their paranoid behavior and began chattering loudly with each other.

Then one adventurer spoke up: "I did notice something…"

The room again fell silent.

What he'd noticed pertained to the barrier around the guild. If someone had gone outside that barrier, they should've been notified of that—and yet, nothing. In other words, Fuzzy Dice had likely disguised himself as *someone else* and remained among them.

When he finished saying that, the sense of paranoia returned to the room.

At that point, Mira, who stood at the chief detective's side, casually looked at the magical tool producing the barrier. "Is the barrier down?"

All eyes instantly turned toward the chief detective, who was in charge of operating the device.

"It can't be…" Wolf turned and checked the device. Then he suddenly tensed and muttered, "How on earth…?"

The barrier device *was* shut off, just as Mira suspected. The adventurers started chattering again about when exactly it'd been deactivated. The chief detective likewise began to theorize about the same thing.

"It must've been then…" he muttered, smiling because Fuzzy Dice had put one over on him again.

Fuzzy Dice had probably turned off the device when the "greenhorn" dropped the instructions on how to carry out the exchange for the reward. He must've dropped the note on purpose to gain a chance to turn the device off, Wolf elaborated.

“Which means that…” While they’d been showing off their fighting skills and taking aptitude tests, one adventurer realized, Fuzzy Dice was long gone.

“Incredible!” someone muttered. That revelation eventually made its way around as well, getting the adventurers fired up again.

Then a guild employee came over and let them know that they’d disarmed the enchantments on the evidence.

“How’d it go?” the employee asked eagerly.

The adventurers began to explain what’d happened. Chief Detective Wolf’s plan had been flawless, but the legendary Fuzzy Dice was on another level. Their battle had truly been something to behold.

“Looks like he got you again, Chief Detective.” Julius hung his head as if accepting defeat.

Wolf’s despair at having worked so hard, only for Fuzzy Dice to escape once more, radiated through the room. But the sharp glint remained in the chief detective’s eyes, and a fire yet burned in them.

“No. I’m not sure that’s the case,” he answered, fixing his eyes on the adventurers.

Strangely, the words seemed to strike a chord with the adventurers, who’d been busy chatting about Fuzzy Dice’s impressive performance. All eyes in the guild fell on the chief detective.

“What is it, Chief Detective? Do you have another plan?”

“I don’t think it’s much use going after Fuzzy Dice now.”

Lavish praise for Fuzzy Dice, as well as eager questions about what the chief detective would do next, filled the room.

Amid all that, the chief detective spoke ambiguously. “Considering that Fuzzy Dice turned off the barrier without us realizing, we’re dealing with a guy who can *always* disappear without anyone noticing. He could’ve escaped at any time.” The chief detective continued to speak, as if checking his own answers, while he slowly reactivated the device that put up the barrier.

Keeping his gaze on the adventurers, he muttered, “I only just realized it the other day…” before pausing.

“Realized what…?” one adventurer asked, much to the chief detective’s delight.

Having apparently been waiting to hear those very words, he opened his mouth. “I only just realized that the phantom thief is more righteous than I thought,” Wolf declared, before at last unveiling his final hypothesis.

Fuzzy Dice always seemed to appear and disappear whenever he wanted, he reasoned. However, the phantom thief had led people to believe this by setting up situations in which it *appeared* that he could’ve left at any time. Really, he just stayed undercover in a guild and, once those present determined that he’d escaped, simply departed when everyone else left.

Then, predictably, someone asked why Wolf believed that to be the case.

“That’s simple. Fuzzy Dice needs to wait and keep an eye on the situation until *all* the enchantments are dispelled in order to avoid causing casualties,” the chief detective said, shifting his gaze toward the guild counter with a cocky grin.

The staff had finished preparing the evidence and were beginning to organize it. The evidence here and at the cathedral would be collected, and once it was submitted to the relevant authorities, the Dorres Company’s fate would be all but sealed.

That was in the best interests of the chief detective, who added that he’d had a strategy in place from the very beginning—namely, never clarifying how many adventurers were there. Both when the adventurers had initially split into two groups and when they’d split into warriors and mages, the chief detective had purposely never explicitly tallied them aloud. But at every point throughout the process, he revealed, he’d counted each group for himself.

“You counted us…? What’s that got to do with anything?” another adventurer asked, fascinated by the chief detective’s ambiguous phrasing.

Once again, those seemed to be the very words the chief detective had been itching to hear. “When you all first split up, Fuzzy Dice was most likely with the group of adventurers that nobody recognized.”

The chief detective smoothly continued his explanation with an even cockier look on his face than usual. He’d counted the adventurers at four points: First, when they separated into familiar and unfamiliar faces. Second, when they’d demonstrated their fighting skills. Third, during the magic-aptitude test. Finally, the fourth time was after they’d realized that the barrier had been deactivated.

“The first time I counted you, twenty of you recognized each other and seventeen didn’t. The second time, there were eight warriors and nine mages, while the third time, there were nine warriors and eight mages. And the fourth time…”

The chief detective stopped, as if his big moment had finally come. He surveyed the adventurers, who were hanging onto his words before him, before finally continuing.

“There were twenty-one and sixteen of you. That’s right—in all the commotion that broke out when we learned the barrier was down, Fuzzy Dice slipped into the group of adventurers with familiar faces,” he announced as if striking upon a decisive fact. He spun his wheelchair around. “When you brought out the joker card and celebrated having been cleared, we followed where you led us. But at that point, we didn’t have any conclusive evidence. This time it’s different.” The chief detective spoke very deliberately as he faced the adventurers off to the side. “Isn’t that right, Fuzzy Dice?” he demanded in a forceful yet quiet voice.

The moment those words left his lips, the room fell silent, and everyone followed his gaze.

“I-it’s not me!”

“It’s not me either!”

The adventurers who knew each other scattered to avoid the chief detective’s eyes, dispersing into smaller groups so that the large group of adventurers who were acquainted with each other

splintered. After all that sudden commotion died down, a shiver ran down the collective spine of everyone in the guild.

After all the adventurers had stopped moving, a single man remained where Wolf was looking. He looked rather plain, without any defining traits, resembling the kind of mid-level adventurer one would find anywhere.

The lone man didn't panic or start making excuses. He simply stared at the chief detective. Someone called out, asking whether anyone knew him, but not a soul answered.

"Hey... Is he really...?"

"The detective actually saw through his disguise..."

The entire room studied the man whom the chief detective had deduced was Fuzzy Dice, watching his every movement with bated breath.

Hunh. No doubt about it. That's Fuzzy Dice.

For quite a simple reason, Mira knew they'd identified him: That was the conclusion one came to upon using the Inspect function.

Fuzzy Dice's illusion techniques were really exceptional. Even Mira couldn't see through his disguise, and her skills were nothing to sneeze at. To really pull the wool over her eyes, a person would need to use Demonic Arts of an even higher caliber than the Wise Man Lastrada's. After they'd committed to such a disguise, anyone using Inspect on them would simply call up a fake profile.

But Mira wasn't deceived. When she'd used Inspect, the man had come up simply as *identity unknown*.

In this case, Fuzzy Dice's high-level Demonic Arts had actually backfired. If they'd been too low-level to fool Mira, then she'd simply have seen his profile like anyone else's, and that would've been that. And if she'd been unable to Inspect him at all, she'd only have known that he was a former player. They had no idea who Fuzzy Dice was or where he was from, so just knowing any of that wouldn't prove that it was him.

However, only high-level techniques like Fuzzy Dice's could be responsible for the man coming up as "identity unknown." Still,

Mira knew “identity unknown” didn’t mean for certain that he was the phantom thief. It was technically possible to cast such illusions on others.

He’s the only suspicious one now, though.

No one else in the guild had registered as unidentified, and she’d already used Biometric Scan to determine that no one else was hiding anywhere. She had little doubt that the man whom the chief detective had so impressively exposed was Fuzzy Dice.

Yet Mira merely continued keeping an eye on the situation. Having a former player’s eyes could be considered an unfair advantage in this kind of battle, so she avoided interfering unnecessarily. This duel was still between the chief detective and the phantom thief. It wouldn’t be right to butt into a showdown between the men. Mira couldn’t imagine intervening, and she didn’t intend to move a muscle until the duel concluded.

All eyes in the room quietly fell on the man. He had no distinct features; even his expression was vague. He looked like a guy one could find anywhere. Not showing the slightest bit of panic or bewilderment, he simply looked around, then straight at the chief detective.

“Well done, Chief Detective Wolf.”

With a sudden gust of wind, the man standing there vanished. In his place stood another man, his face concealed by a mysterious mask, wearing a cape that fluttered in the wind. The dashing phantom thief Fuzzy Dice had appeared.

A stir swept through the guild, probably because Fuzzy Dice had *never* revealed himself like this. The adventurers were at a loss for what to do next. At that point, of course, their eyes all turned toward the chief detective. Wolf had used his skills of deduction to see through Fuzzy Dice’s disguise—a grand accomplishment for him.



“I’ve finally caught you, Fuzzy…!” Overwhelmed with emotion, the chief detective had begun saying the words he’d long yearned to speak when the loud cheers of fans suddenly poured in.

“Eeeek! It’s Fuzzy Dice!”

“You’re amazing!”

“Look this way!”

Gazing toward the window, one could see fans pressed against the glass. A group of them had seemingly peeked inside and told the others who they saw. When Fuzzy Dice’s devotees saw the unprecedented situation in the guild, the festival-like atmosphere among them reached a fever pitch.

“I’m not sure how to put this, but…sorry.”

Fuzzy Dice empathized with the chief detective, perhaps owing to the fact that Wolf was his rival, and so regretted that the sleuth had been cut off during his big moment.

“No, it’s fine…really,” Wolf replied, trying to hide his noticeable disappointment. He cleared his throat and began again. “Now then, I’ve finally caught you, Fuzzy Dice!”

At that moment, Julius sprang into action. They must have come up with a plan beforehand. He and two burly men suddenly surrounded Fuzzy Dice, each holding a magical tool that they activated upon surrounding the phantom thief. A wall of light encircled Fuzzy Dice in a fraction of a second.

“Wow. I’m impressed.” The phantom thief looked around with apparent admiration.

It looked like he’d been captured in a cage of light. He appeared to have no chance of escape, although screams and shouts of encouragement rang out from outside.

“What do you think of this trap? It was no easy task getting my hands on you.” The chief detective smiled defiantly. Even at a time like this, he was as chatty as usual.

The magical tools they were using were designed specifically for captures, so they were high-powered and even employed by the Sentinel Institute. Using more of them made them even more

powerful. The only way for Fuzzy Dice to break free of the cage would be to shut off the tools held by Julius and the others or to break through the cage-like barrier by force.

Having explained all that, the chief detective wheeled himself toward Fuzzy Dice before stopping directly in front of him. Seemingly on cue, Julius and the men drew close to the cage of light.

“Apologies, but I’ll be using your code against you.” The chief detective stared at the phantom thief, a grin breaking across his face. Fuzzy Dice’s code was not to hurt anyone, no matter what.

It would be impossible for the phantom thief to somehow stop the magical tools that Julius and the men were using. His only option was to break through the cage. According to all their information, he’d certainly be capable of that.

But since the tools had officially been adopted by the Sentinel Institute, they were likely quite durable. Breaking the barrier they’d created would require considerable firepower, and destroying something that powerful would have serious consequences. Any technique strong enough to do so would likely also hurt the chief detective and the others now standing right beside the barrier.

The chief detective was using himself as a human shield to limit what Fuzzy Dice could do.

“I see… This makes things tricky,” Fuzzy Dice said, staring at the chief detective after carefully studying the cage of light.

He could just have focused on escaping, broken through the cage, and told whoever got injured that they’d brought it on themselves. But he didn’t seem to have any intention of doing so. Even if it put him at a disadvantage, he’d stick to his code—he wouldn’t harm anyone, not even his enemy.

His righteous conviction melted the hearts of the fans looking in through the windows, and they began to swoon. It seemed like their love for him would somehow grow even greater once again.

I had no idea the chief detective had this plan in his back pocket.

Wolf said that he hadn’t thought beyond registering Fuzzy Dice with the Lock-On M Type-2. But Mira gathered that wasn’t quite the case. The current situation had been his true plan all along.

The fact that Fuzzy Dice had gotten wind of their plan to register his mana suggested that he’d heard her and the chief detective discussing it somewhere. But Wolf had anticipated that. He’d told Mira that it was up to her what to do after their plan concluded, just so he could set up his own plan in secret.

Still, I’m guessing it’s almost my turn to step up to the plate.

Up until then, she’d gotten the impression that Wolf was simply a long-winded, somewhat bumbling detective with a sweet tooth. After seeing the masterful way he’d ensnared the phantom thief, she had a renewed respect for his skills. As she stood watching the scene unfold, Mira wondered what he’d do next.

Chapter 22

FUZZY DICE HAD finally been caught.

Amid the excitement over his own capture, the phantom thief smiled fearlessly from the cage of light in which he was imprisoned.

“That really was something. But you can’t hold me like this,” Fuzzy Dice declared, prompting nervous looks from the chief detective and his men.

What could he mean? Had he thought of a way to break out of the cage without using brute force? He was the legendary phantom thief, after all. The chief detective eyed Fuzzy Dice as if studying his every movement.

Fuzzy Dice, still smiling, held up his fingers and began to count. “Three…two…one…”

What was he planning? Everyone stood ready to react. By the time the count reached zero, they were hyperalert.

That was right when it happened: Lo and behold, the guild began to fill with white mist.

“What…? Is that…?!”

Seeing that mist, the onlookers first assumed that it was the sedative Fuzzy Dice was famous for using. Sure enough, adventurers started falling asleep left and right, as if to confirm that very hypothesis. The warrior-class adventurers went down first. Next, the mages began panicking before following suit and falling to the floor.

Upon closer inspection, the mist seemed to be floating in from behind the adventurers. In other words, it was coming from that direction.

“How in the world is he doing that?! He’s already inside!” Julius shouted, taken aback. The magical tools they were using not only shut a target in a cage of light, they also limited the range of

that target's skills and techniques. It should've been impossible to direct either at anything outside the cage.

Thus, Fuzzy Dice shouldn't have been able to activate his sleeping gas from outside the cage of light while he was still imprisoned in it. That was why Julius was so startled and why the burly men flew into such a panic.

"Masks on!" The chief detective's order rang out as the guild staff succumbed to the sedative one after another.

Hearing the composure in Wolf's voice, Julius and the men collected themselves and pulled masks from the bags around their waists, then quickly put them on.

"Oh, wow! They *do* work, huh?"

The mask the chief detective had put on was the same Amphibious Breathe-Easy Mask that Mira picked up at Dinoire Trading the other day.

Now Mira needed to step up.

She had high resistance thanks to Martel's specially grown fruit, but that didn't mean she was immune, so she quickly put on that very mask—which she'd brought with her—just in case. As she did so, the situation in the guild continued to deteriorate.

At last, the only ones left standing were Mira, the chief detective, his men, and Fuzzy Dice.

"But how did you use…?" The chief detective groaned, his eyes fixed on the phantom thief. The masks seemed to be working, but how in the world had Fuzzy Dice carried out a technique from within the cage of light?

In the very next moment, the thief's voice echoed from within the faint, hazy mist. "Why, that's elementary… I was never in there to begin with."

His answer didn't come from within the cage of light but from somewhere farther away. In fact, it came from the same direction as the mist.

"It can't be…"

Fuzzy Dice was still inside the cage of light. Yet when they all turned toward where they'd heard the voice, the phantom thief indeed stood there too. A shudder ran through the chief detective and his men as they wondered what exactly was going on.

The phantom thief's hand immediately released something, and Wolf hurriedly adopted a defensive stance. Then a small cry went up from Julius and the men.

"Julius, what's wrong?!"

Turning, the chief detective saw that their masks had been torn off by what appeared to be pieces of string.

That was a Demonic Art. I'm pretty sure the technique was Chain Spider's Silk.

In no time, Fuzzy Dice had snatched all three of their masks. Surprised by the sudden display, Mira carefully got into a guarded position. She realized that, since she didn't know the extent of Fuzzy Dice's true powers, she could end up knocked out after having her mask removed as well.

"Ngh... Sorry, Chief Detective..."

After breathing the mist in for a moment, Julius and the men promptly fell asleep. The magical devices they'd held fell to the ground as well. The cage of light dissipated, and simultaneously, the Fuzzy Dice inside it simply vanished.

Seeing all this, the chief detective realized what'd happened. "I see... So we only managed to capture a phantom."

The Fuzzy Dice inside the cage of light had been nothing more than an illusion. When he'd stood disguised among the other adventurers, they'd been dealing with the real thief, but he'd laid a trap the moment he'd revealed himself as Fuzzy Dice. As he unveiled his true identity, he'd switched places with an illusion and again mingled with the other adventurers. It was exactly the type of clever move one would expect of a phantom thief.

"Damn. That was brilliant."

It looked as if the chief detective had finally run out of cards up his sleeve. He turned to face Fuzzy Dice with a brisk smile and

gazed at the phantom thief standing among the sleeping adventurers.

“You were incredible yourself, Chief Detective,” Fuzzy Dice answered leisurely, although he appeared wary of Mira and thus kept his guard up. He added that Wolf had forced him to reveal himself.

“If I’d known all this would happen, I would’ve asked them to take it slower,” the chief detective said, staring within the curling white mist.

“If you’d done that, I would’ve been in quite the pickle,” Fuzzy Dice replied.

What were the two talking about? Mira tilted her head, but upon following the chief detective’s gaze, she realized what he meant. She saw the guild staff—the ones who’d successfully disenchanted the evidence Fuzzy Dice had brought in. Fuzzy Dice couldn’t have used an area-of-effect technique like the white mist while they were disenchanting the evidence.

But the fighting-skill and magic-aptitude tests had taken too much time, so they’d finished dispelling everything, and the phantom thief had been free to use his favorite knockout technique.

The only ones left awake were the wheelchair-bound chief detective and Mira.

“Hrmm… I guess the climactic phantom thief versus detective showdown is done?” Mira said, changing the topic.

She figured that was the case, given how things looked. In the continuously unfolding battle between Wolf and Fuzzy Dice, the thief had again come out on top.

“Yes, indeed. I’ve lost. Sorry for asking you to tag along,” the chief detective said regretfully, acknowledging his defeat. It had been a long battle of wits that he’d begun with plenty of cards up his sleeve. He looked over at Mira, and his eyes seemed full of anticipation at what she’d do next.

“No, not at all. I actually feel like I got to see a fantastic battle,” she answered. Then, switching gears, she turned to Fuzzy

Dice and declared, “Well then, allow me to be your next opponent.”

“…Nice to meet you,” Fuzzy Dice said pointedly. “You must be that adventurer they call the Spirit Queen, right? I’ve heard your abilities are really something.”

As he spoke, Fuzzy Dice struck first, letting loose some spider silk from his hand. The movement was barely noticeable, and the silk moved blindingly fast. In the blink of an eye, it flashed toward Mira’s face. He was trying to pull Mira’s mask off.

At that moment, though, Mira rapidly summoned an evocation. “You sure are impatient. But I’ve already seen you use that trick.”

A tower shield appeared to block the spider-silk thread, then instantaneously disappeared. Mira had coolly shrugged off the attack without so much as moving a muscle. Unperturbed, she threw her head back, standing in the exact same spot, as if to goad the phantom thief.

“That was a holy knight’s… I see. It appears that you’re in a different league than everyone else here,” Fuzzy Dice said, obviously alarmed. He’d caught on to how powerful Mira was.

Hrmm… That was close!

Mutually cautious of each other, the two began slowly walking in a circle while sizing each other up, just like they were having a showdown in some Western. This continued for ten or twenty seconds before someone finally made a move.

Fuzzy Dice suddenly sent multiple spider-silk threads flying. This time, however, they didn’t just fly at Mira but also struck the guild walls, ceiling, and floor in quick succession.

“Ngh… So now you’re using Waterfall Spider’s Silk!”

Mira quickly reused the same partial summon, and a tower shield intercepted the thread aimed at her.

Looking at the silk stretched around her, she realized what Fuzzy Dice was doing. It was hard to see through the remaining wisps of white mist, but the spider silk appeared to be covered in bubbles. Among the silk-based Demonic Arts, these were infamously the stickiest and most elastic threads.

Just what's he trying to do by creating a net in this enclosed space?

If Mira wasn't careful, she'd end up covered in spider silk, becoming less and less mobile. She could no longer make any big movements—but that should've been true of Fuzzy Dice as well.

How did he plan to fight her? As Mira pondered that, a sudden breeze passed through the supposedly sealed guild. As it cleared the white mist from the room, Fuzzy Dice's voice echoed.

"Well, my lady, there are still things I must attend to, and so I must be leaving." There, right beside a half-open door, stood the phantom thief.

"Wh-what?!" Having just begun her showdown with Fuzzy Dice, Mira was itching for a fight.

But the thief, for his part, had focused on escaping the entire time. He'd kept his eyes on his distance from the exit, then acted once he was near it. Having betrayed Mira's expectations and opted to make a quick escape, Fuzzy Dice gave a cool smile before making his gallant exit.

Once the Mages' Guild was free of the white mist, Mira saw that the interior was plastered from top to bottom in spider silk.

"Damn... That sly devil," she grumbled, calmly summoning a dark knight. It began zealously tearing the silk apart.

"Seeing all this proved that Fuzzy Dice is a demonologist. My hypothesis was correct after all," the chief detective noted. Only a demonologist could possibly have performed such a feat. Wolf was happy to confirm that, although it was just as they'd expected.

"Still, to think that'd he be on that level..."

Fuzzy Dice had somehow strengthened the spider silk, making it so sticky and stretchy that even the dark knight had trouble slicing through it. Mira tried to solve the issue of the difficult-to-cut threads by equipping the dark knight with the holy sword Sanctia, but the silk was still sticky. Severing it made it slacken, and that slack silk soon wrapped around the dark knight until it couldn't even move. Mira kept needing to dispel the knight after it cut a few threads, then summon it again. Considering that

there seemed to be a hundred or so threads, that method wasn't terribly efficient.

That said, focusing on efficiency didn't work well either. Mira tried using partial evocations to cut the threads, but whenever a silk-wrapped summon disappeared, the slack silk became a bigger hindrance that obstructed her path even more.

The easiest way to clear the spider silk would be to just burn it away. Waterfall Spider's Silk could easily be removed using flames. But of course, Mira couldn't use fire in a roomful of sleeping people. She had no choice but to clear the threads the old-fashioned way, so it would be a little while until she could chase Fuzzy Dice.

Three minutes had passed since she began battling the spider silk. Using her mana to successively summon dark knights, Mira finally secured a path to the exit.

"Do you really intend on pursuing Fuzzy Dice now, Miss Mira?" the chief detective asked the girl, who didn't appear to have thrown in the towel yet.

Although a mere three minutes had gone by, that was more than enough time for the phantom thief to make his way just about anywhere. Knowing full well that that was the case, the chief detective thought it'd be quite difficult to begin pursuing him. Up until now, they'd known where Fuzzy Dice would go. Now that Fuzzy Dice was free, the detective went on, catching him was no longer possible.

Then he added that, of course, that was just the received wisdom. "I can tell from your eyes that you've got some kind of plan."

"Hrmm. That's right. I prepared for just this occasion."

"I should've expected as much, Miss Mira. What's your plan?"

Mira answered, brimming with confidence, as the chief detective listened with profound interest on his face. He was keen to learn how she'd prepared for these circumstances, despite their original plans falling flat.

“Well, it’s simple. I’m having my talented comrades keep an eye on him,” Mira answered nonchalantly.

She’d always expected that Fuzzy Dice might escape. Actually, if they were really going to go at it, she’d prefer that they change locations. Having answered the chief detective’s query, Mira announced to the groggy adventurers that she’d let them clean up the remaining spider silk, then hurried out of the guild.

“I see…” Wolf said to himself. “A plan based on summoning. How interesting.”

Understanding her strategy at last, the chief detective began envisioning all the things summoning was capable of. As he did, he wheeled himself over to Julius, figuring he might as well wake his assistant up.

Chapter 23

HAVING LEFT THE GUILD, Mira immediately made her way to the roof. Once she did, she naturally heard fans' voices below, saying things such as:

"What was up with Mr. Fuzzy Dice?"

"That never happened before."

"Do you think the chief detective landed his first win?"

"He went that way, right? Want to go look?"

After dropping off the evidence at the Mages' Guild, Fuzzy Dice had engaged in a battle of wits with the chief detective before disappearing. The fans milling around had come to get a peek at the spectacular finale, but something must've happened this time, since Fuzzy Dice had exited from the guild's front door. That departure from his MO baffled the fans outside while simultaneously piquing their interest.

He did *say he had more to do, didn't he…?*

The phantom thief's heist should've ended with his trip to the Mages' Guild, but now that Mira thought back on it, he'd claimed that he had to do things afterward.

The phantom thief had already stolen the evidence and money from the evildoer's mansion and delivered the evidence to the cathedral and Mages' Guild. The only thing left was for him to deliver the money. On that note, by saying that he had more to do, could Fuzzy Dice have meant donating the money to orphanages?

The fact that he always donated it anonymously made that seem unlikely. Still, there had to be other phantom-thieving-related activities he needed to look after. After all, the stream of reports coming in from all Mira's evocations seemed to substantiate that.

"He's continuing straight east right meow. But he can't escape me no matter meow hard he tries!" First Pupil, who'd been waiting atop the guild's roof, had begun pursuing Fuzzy Dice the

moment the thief rushed out. He found leaping from rooftop to rooftop a piece of cake.

"I can confirm his location from where I'm stationed as well, Mira. A man's figure is jumping between rooftops, heading east," Wasranvel reported, keeping an eye on things from the sky. He was mounted atop Hippogriff, and they were employing optical camouflage.

"I've confirmed the target, Master, but he doesn't seem to be trying to escape. It looks almost as if he's attempting to attract attention…"

That report came from Elezina, the second Valkyrie Sister. She also happened to be the sister who was most skilled with a bow and had the best eyes for surveying and keeping watch. She was so skilled at that that she could see every corner of the city while stationed right in its center.

"Oh, he's hamming up his escape…? That's unlike him, isn't it?"

If Mira and Wolf had really forced Fuzzy Dice to flee, he should just have found a secluded spot a short distance away and changed his disguise. That would've ended his phantom thievery for the night. But he hadn't; instead, he was heading somewhere else, still in costume. Furthermore, if the reports Mira received were correct, he was flaunting his presence, not even bothering to keep a low profile.

A report came in from Christina: "He's looping back to the cathedral! Wait… Ah. He just passed it and went somewhere else."

He'd gone far out of his way to return to the cathedral, but then hadn't done anything there, and headed elsewhere? Why would he do that? As Mira pondered that, she heard Christina again.

Apparently, the fans waiting outside the cathedral had begun following Fuzzy Dice. And since the phantom thief was traveling along the rooftops, they could keep him in their sights as they did so.

It almost sounds like he's going out of his way to get them to follow him. What on earth is he up to?

Before Mira knew it, the fans in front of the Mages' Guild had begun moving as well. Someone at the church must've contacted one of their friends, and now word had spread to everyone in front of the guild. Hordes of people poured through the streets like a giant wave.

"I guess he doesn't need to keep a low profile or anything anymore," Mira decided, considering the reports she'd received and the situation unfolding in front of her. Instructing Christina to continue her pursuit, she summoned Pegasus.

Mira immediately jumped atop her mount, then headed in the same general direction as Fuzzy Dice. *Where will his next destination be?*

She left the navigation to Pegasus and sat focused on synchronizing her consciousness with Wise Popot's. From the phantom thief's appearance until now, the owl had kept a constant eye on things from up in the sky. Mira had only just learned Synchronized Senses, yet she saw quite well through Popot's eyes. Looking down from above, she clearly identified Fuzzy Dice in the center of the city.

Seeing him, she asked Wise Popot to go faster. After a moment, the owl's speed picked up. They at last left the phantom thief far behind, and Mira looked ahead at where he was going.

"Huh...? That's..." He was heading straight toward the Dorres Company president's mansion.

Mira surveilled the scene below as she circled directly overhead. Things had certainly taken a dramatic turn at the mansion. The sedative had seemingly worn off; pretty much everyone had woken up. That included the president, who was shouting something with an exasperated look. His subordinates seemed split into two camps: Half looked utterly stunned, while the other half didn't seem too concerned at all.

The mercenaries, meanwhile, had divided into their respective groups and were speaking among themselves. Occasionally, one displayed some sign of visible irritation. They must've been very confident going in, yet a single phantom thief had easily bested them. Mira couldn't blame them for being angry.

Fans were still milling around outside the mansion. Did Fuzzy Dice plan to appear in front of them and lead them somewhere as well? As Mira wondered that, the phantom thief suddenly and dashingly descended onto the mansion's grounds.

Mira still couldn't use Synchronized Senses to hear, but she could tell from the mercenaries' frenzied movements that they were shouting at each other. One mercenary immediately picked up his weapon and charged at the phantom thief. Fuzzy Dice easily avoided the blow and leapt atop the outer wall.

As soon as he did, the other mercenaries rushed him, incensed. Perhaps he'd said something to goad them. They looked utterly livid.

Honestly, what's he doing...?

Fuzzy Dice even turned and waved to the crowd to rile them up before, unbelievably, leaping onto the grounds of the mansion next door. Inside was a rather tacky garden lined with statues.

This must've been what he meant when he said there were still things he had to attend to. But what was he planning by going into a place like that while simultaneously leading his fans and provoking the mercenaries?

While Mira was still wondering what exactly Fuzzy Dice was trying to do, the situation at the scene of the crime devolved further. Unbelievably, the mercenaries—in an apparent fit of rage—began scaling the next-door mansion's walls. *Now* they're *getting caught up in all this?*

As they entered the neighbor's grounds and began attacking Fuzzy Dice, that mansion's security guards rushed out in a panic. But this didn't seem to perturb the mercenaries, let alone Fuzzy Dice.

Looking at the fans, Mira noticed soldiers pushing their way through their ranks. With so many people and so much confusion, they were having trouble getting through.

The whole situation then took an even more chaotic turn. There was a sudden flash of light, and the mercenaries began acting bizarrely.

That must've been Mystical Will-o'-the-Wisp. Incredible. That technique worked perfectly on them.

Judging from the technique's effect, Mira guessed that it was a Demonic Art that disoriented its targets and made them hallucinate. She was pretty sure all the statues now looked like Fuzzy Dice to the mercenaries, given their odd behavior: They were destroying the statues like there was no tomorrow.

I don't feel any different, though. And I don't feel like I resisted the technique or anything.

The Mystical Will-o'-the-Wisp that Fuzzy Dice had unleashed was supposed to affect whoever glimpsed its light. But Mira had looked right at it, and she didn't feel the least bit different. If she'd completely resisted the technique, she would at least have felt it being used on her, but she hadn't.

Mira asked Wise Popot, whose sight she was sharing, what the situation looked like to her.

"The phantom thief keeps getting knocked down, but then getting right back to his feet," Wise Popot responded.

The owl was hallucinating as well; she'd evidently been within the technique's area of effect.

I guess that means Mystical Will-o'-the-Wisp can't affect me so long as I see it via Synchronized Senses.

Mira couldn't think of any other reason it wouldn't impact her. Depending how she used the ability, that could very well be her ace in the hole against status abnormalities inflicted via light. She'd suddenly found a trick she hadn't known about, thanks in no small part to Fuzzy Dice.

"Hm…what're you trying to do?"

While she thought that over, Fuzzy Dice entranced the security guards in addition to the mercenaries, then made his way into the mansion.

The estate that happened to be next door to the Dorres Company president's mansion shouldn't have had anything to do with the phantom thief's plans. But from his behavior so far, he was definitely up to something.

Observing as much, Mira adjusted Synchronized Senses. She couldn't see inside the mansion from Wise Popot's perspective, but there were others still in hot pursuit of Fuzzy Dice.

When Mira switched to Cat Sith's vision, the first thing she saw was a room somewhere. It was unfurnished, drab, and apparently closed off. First Pupil ought to be pursuing Fuzzy Dice; since his target was nowhere in sight, what could he be doing?

"First Pupil, what's the situation? It doesn't look like anyone's there."

"Party Leader, there's a slight problem, meow!" First Pupil replied hastily, then detailed what had happened. According to him, it'd all corresponded with the "light flash"—his shorthand for the sudden illumination of the Mystical Will-o'-the-Wisp.

Right after that "light flash," First Pupil began seeing hallucinations of the target, losing sight of the real Fuzzy Dice. But he wouldn't be defeated that easily. This only meant that he could no longer rely on his sight; he could still use his considerable mana-detection abilities. Having determined that he was seeing illusions, he continued chasing the real phantom thief.

Leaving the garden and heading into the mansion, he'd run down a corridor and into a basement. He'd gone farther inside until he came to a hidden door, which he'd only just opened.

But First Pupil went on to explain that a problem had arisen, since it was difficult to ascertain a target's distance from their mana's scent.

"He's being as quiet as a meowse. Even if I can't tell how far away he is. I can still track him using his mana, but I'm afraid I might somemeow end up in his detection range. Anyway, I'm going after him carefully."

First Pupil's report had started off rather brisk and matter-of-fact before gradually getting weighed down with excuses. It seemed he'd proceeded a little too carefully and was now some distance from the target. As he reported this to Mira, the scenery began changing; now that First Pupil had gone deeper inside the drab room, she could see a stone wall that was unnaturally askew.

"Ah. Well, that certainly looks suspicious, doesn't it?"

It was a hidden staircase inside a hidden room, descending so far downward that Mira couldn't see where it led.

Considering the lengths someone had gone to in order to hide whatever was down there, the whole thing reeked of secrecy—or criminality. Assuming that that was the case, Mira asked First Pupil, who was looking down the stairs, for another report on the space.

"It somemeow smells a bit like water."

"Like…water?"

Hearing that, Mira remembered what Anrutine had said the previous day about the underground aqueduct. There hadn't seemed to be a clear way into it, so something was very likely hidden there. Additionally, she'd been told that there were traces of human activity to the northeast.

Hrmm… Maybe that waterway was here.

When she'd come by to check out the president's mansion by herself, Mira had confirmed that it was indeed in the direction Anrutine had specified. At that point, she'd been sure that it had something to do with the Dorres Company—but lo and behold, it was actually connected to the mansion next door.

As Mira reflected on this, Cat Sith made his way down the stairs, and Mira saw the underground waterway before her at last. Through Feline Search Eyes, she could see five channels stretched out before her, some narrow and some wide. Most noticeably, a layer of green moss covered everything.

"First Pupil, do you see anything else out of the ordinary?" Mira asked.

His vision panned around for a moment; then Mira saw the ground. "There're footprints, meow. Wanna bet the phantom thief left them?!"

Unlike the rest of the area around them, the ground looked scrubbed clean; it was clear of any moss. For that reason, the footprints were conspicuous. First Pupil's thoughts aside, Mira had been right: This was definitely the northeastern location with recent traces of human activity that she'd learned about.

Now then…what's going on here?

Mira brooded. She'd gotten plenty of information, but something just didn't feel right. Fuzzy Dice's behavior was the first thing that struck her as odd. She couldn't quite figure out why he'd fled into the waterway.

He'd chosen this escape route; the traces of human activity here suggested that he'd scouted it out beforehand. And he could freely leave the city without anyone noticing his use of the waterway, so it was perfect for making his escape. Thinking along those lines, Mira certainly understood the case for escaping via the waterway.

Yet…while such a path would indeed be an effective escape route for a common thief, Fuzzy Dice was no "common thief." He could simply have hidden for a bit, then blended right back into the crowd.

And why had he so very conspicuously gone back to a mansion unrelated to his target and embroiled it in chaos? It all seemed very un-Fuzzy-Dice-like.

It could be that they *have something to do with all this…*

Since Fuzzy Dice had gone out of his way to cause a disturbance at this second mansion, the waterway must be hiding some vital secret. Deducing that much, Mira instructed First Pupil to continue his pursuit, then stopped using Synchronized Senses and hastened toward the waterway.

Hurrying on Pegasus for several minutes, she eventually reached the neighboring mansion's grounds. Looking down from the sky, she saw that the grounds were crammed full of people.

Aside from the mercenaries, soldiers and several personages from the mansion had also made their way through the throngs of Fuzzy Dice fans. There were crowds of those fans outside, of course; it felt very much like some sort of party.

Boy, they sure get around quick.

There must have been quite a few mages among the fans who were either skilled at moving quickly or had several means of

doing so. Mira had made all possible haste to get there on Pegasus, yet even she hadn't outpaced them.

Meanwhile, the situation at the mansion had gone from bad to worse. The statues had been smashed to smithereens, and the garden now resembled a mountain of rubble. The mercenaries who'd done the smashing, meanwhile, continued to howl in anger.

"All right. What's going on?"

Touching down on the grounds deftly, Mira looked toward two people arguing there. One was a mercenary, the other someone from the mansion.

"I told you, Fuzzy Dice is already inside," the mercenary insisted. "We saw the bag he stole from me on the floor. Since it's there, he must be in the mansion."

"That's precisely why *we're* conducting a search of it. We ask that you please wait. There are many valuables and confidential documents on the premises, and so we're only permitting relevant parties inside."

The mercenary was desperate to enter, and the mansion's representative was desperately trying to stop them. They continued bickering beside the entrance.

The soldiers, meanwhile, were trying to calm both sides while discussing with the mansion's owner how they might work together to catch Fuzzy Dice. The owner, however, insisted that he needed no such help.

This sure has become a debacle.

Slipping between the mercenaries to get a peek, Mira saw that a bag—apparently one Fuzzy Dice had stolen—indeed lay inside the mansion's ruined entryway. It certainly seemed as if he'd left it there on purpose to let everyone know that he'd escaped into the mansion.

The phantom thief was obviously inviting them to go after him. But why? As she mulled this over, Mira suddenly caught sight of a familiar face from the corner of her eye. At the same moment, that person seemingly recognized her as well and ran over cheerfully.

“Well, I’ll be. If it isn’t Mira.”

It was the guard captain from the other day. He was once again with his men, and when they saw Mira, they grew excited to bask in the presence of someone A-rank.

“Looks like you guys aren’t going anywhere fast,” Mira noted.

“Nope. You’ve certainly hit the nail on the head. I tell and tell that guy that we should search the mansion interior in case Fuzzy Dice is still hiding inside, but he keeps saying he’s got enough people on the job already.”

However much people called the phantom thief “gentlemanly,” what they were really dealing with was a burglar—one who specifically targeted criminals. That being the case, Fuzzy Dice had likely been stealing valuables from inside the mansion this entire time. Thus, the guard captain had indeed voiced his protests unabashedly.

Judging from the way the guard captain spoke, though, the mansion’s owner was seemingly none too pleased at the prospect of them snooping around. Scrutinizing the owner, who was glaring at the captain, Mira thought he certainly had the look of a criminal. Then, as the man shifted his gaze to her, she realized he might be more of a pervert than a crook.

As she shuddered abruptly at his ghoulish expression, another shout cut through the air.

“No, I never asked for it back! I asked that you let us search the mansion! He clearly ran inside, didn’t he?!”

Looking over, she saw that someone from the mansion had politely returned the mercenary’s bag. The man—who had the air of a butler—countered that if Fuzzy Dice *had* left that bag there, it would be like announcing his escape route. That would have been a pretty odd thing for a phantom thief to do.

That was honestly the most reasonable thing to think. Fuzzy Dice could have left some evidence behind deliberately, diverting attention away from himself, before slipping away and escaping from a spot where security had suddenly become lighter. That certainly seemed like a trick that a thief would use. At least, that

was what the calm, composed butler advised the mercenaries itching to get inside.

On the surface, the butler was seemingly just telling them to calm down. But thanks to First Pupil, Mira knew the truth, so she viewed anything that those from the mansion said as suspicious as heck.

Fuzzy Dice had definitely gone in, and en route, he'd made sure to draw plenty of attention to himself. Now, there was this whole thing with the bag. It seemed evident that the thief was, beyond a shadow of a doubt, trying to lure the mercenaries inside.

But why? From the way he'd gone about his work thus far, there was only one answer.

Hrmm... Perhaps he's targeting this property as well.

But if that really were the case, he would've left clues there too, so the people in the mansion probably would've realized it quickly. That made Mira think that they must have a very good reason for hedging and working so hard to obstruct the scene. And they didn't want anyone to know that reason.

In that case, I need to find the spot he ran off to. And the only destination she could imagine was the underground waterway.

"Fuzzy Dice *definitely* ran into this mansion," Mira said, standing among the mercenaries as they continued to argue.

The moment she did, the angry shouts going back and forth suddenly died away, and everyone's eyes fell on her.

"Yeah, I knew it! Hey, the...uh, Spirit Queen, yeah?—*she* says he went inside too! It's got to be true! Let us search!"

Bolstered by Mira's support, the mercenaries got fired up again. Even the soldiers, who'd been calmly discussing the situation, used her words to pressure the mansion's owner further.

"Dear me. Please don't go around spouting that nonsense. We've scoured every inch of the mansion and haven't found any sign of the 'phantom thief' or whatever you call him. You think he's in disguise? We haven't had a single report of a suspicious character slipping in among the staff. We can assure you with the

utmost confidence that there's no phantom thief inside," the butler insisted.

He'd once again attested so adamantly that Fuzzy Dice wasn't in there that he seemed truthful. Staring at Mira, he added that searching the mansion would be an exercise in futility, since there was no evidence that the phantom thief had entered.

"My bag was evidence!" a mercenary angrily shot back before Mira even had a chance to say anything.

The butler simply answered that he didn't know what the mercenary was talking about. He didn't seem to plan to entertain them for much longer. That flippant attitude further goaded the mercenary; Mira gently held his hand back from attacking.

Staring straight back at the butler, she let a slight smile slip. "First of all, allow me to correct you: Not once did I say that the phantom thief was still *inside* the mansion. I merely said that he ran into it."

The moment she said this, the soldiers and mercenaries began murmuring with each other. Then they focused on Mira, as if expecting her next words to clarify her meaning. The butler's expression, on the other hand, remained unchanged—but a hint of anxiety seemed to flicker in his eyes.

"Fuzzy Dice ran into the mansion, but now he's fled elsewhere. He is indeed *no longer* inside the mansion," Mira added, confirming the butler's statement.

A stir rose among the soldiers and mercenaries.

"Huh? Are you sure…?"

"Hey, what do you mean?"

It wasn't difficult to imagine why they were so bewildered: Just when they thought Mira had come to help start the search, she'd implied that there was no need for one.

In any event, Mira was also the fabled Spirit Queen—an A-rank adventurer—so her words carried quite a bit of weight. For that reason, there no longer seemed to be any reason to search the mansion. Still, those had been precisely the words the mercenaries hadn't wanted to hear.

Most of those from the mansion, for their part, glared at the mercenaries as if telling them to hurry up and leave. The butler, however, looked at Mira more keenly than before.

“Correct. Now that you understand that, you should no longer have any business here, should you? Rather than wasting time here, I suggest broadening your search efforts,” the butler said indifferently, eyeing the soldiers and mercenaries. He took a decisive step forward as if to say that he wouldn’t allow any of them in, since there was no need to search the mansion.

Now lacking a reason to investigate the residence, the soldiers’ and mercenaries’ spirits fell. But then Mira flashed a defiant smile and pressed the butler once more. “You still intend to play innocent, huh? Listen, hurry up and get out of the way so we can catch up to him.”

The moment the words left her mouth, Mira detected an ever-so-slight shift in the butler’s expression. At that same moment, the soldiers and mercenaries suddenly grew flummoxed. If Fuzzy Dice wasn’t in the mansion, what reason could Mira have for wanting to go inside?

“Well now, whatever are you going on about…?” Cracks formed in the butler’s poker face as he grew angry.

In response, Mira puffed out her chest and retorted bluntly, “Shall I explain it, then? The details of where he ran to?”

Since she knew the truth and was sure she’d win, Mira spoke with even more confidence than usual, as if speaking to the criminal in a detective novel she’d once read.

“Beforehand, though, allow me to apologize for something,” she prefaced.

“For whatever nonsense you’re about to spew, I take it?” the butler asked, tongue in cheek, as he stared defiantly at Mira.

Loath to dignify the comment with a response, Mira gave an exasperated shrug. “No, not for that. It’s a rather minor thing. It’s just…my friend Cat Sith got a little too caught up in chasing Fuzzy Dice and actually entered the mansion already.”

The moment Mira said that, visible alarm flickered in the butler's eyes. "What...?!"

He must've thought that, even if Fuzzy Dice discovered the mansion's secret, they could simply hide it as long as no one else saw it. Having learned of the presence of Mira's tiny witness, the butler now grimaced.

"Not only that, Cat Sith followed Fuzzy Dice out of the mansion and down to the underground waterway."

From the look on the butler's face, Mira decided that it was time. Just like a detective revealing the answers in a case, she slowly, thoroughly laid bare the truth that those from the mansion were trying to hide.

A large waterway ran under Haxthausen's streets, and there were no ways to get into or out of it. But despite that lack of distinguishable exits or entrances, beneath the mansion and past a hidden room, there was evidence of people frequently coming and going to and from that waterway.

"I should mention that Cat Sith is currently on Fuzzy Dice's tail in that underground waterway."

Mira carefully examined everyone's reactions to the truths she'd revealed. The very first to respond were the soldiers and mercenaries.

"A waterway, you say?"

"You mean, besides the sewers?"

Most people really seemed unaware of it, which was why the sewers immediately crossed their minds and somewhat uneasy looks passed over their faces.

Mira simply told them exactly what Anrutine had told her: The waterway remained almost untouched by the humans living above it.

"Sure, all right. In other words, they're trying so hard to stop us 'cause they're hiding that waterway. Hey! What're you doing with that secret waterway?" the mercenary from earlier demanded, seizing the opportunity to glare at the butler.

The butler seemed to have finally run out of excuses. He looked at the mansion’s owner, pleading for backup. Unfortunately, the owner stood motionlessly facing the guard captain, white as a sheet.

Chapter 24

"THAT'S COMPLETE HOGWASH! There's nothing like that under my mansion!" the owner suddenly shouted when the guard captain pressed him about the underground waterway.

The crude way in which he spoke made it clear to everyone that he was getting desperate. Still, he dug himself in deeper: He maintained that Cat Sith hadn't seen any such thing and questioned how Mira had received reports from someone who wasn't there in the first place.

"It's a skill we summoners have: We can communicate with our summons without physically speaking to them." That was a fundamental part of summoning; anyone could quickly learn about it if they looked it up. Mira said exactly that, then paused.

In that brief silence, she flashed a cocky grin, staring at the master of the mansion. "I just got another report from Cat Sith. I guess he followed the phantom thief's footsteps and discovered a door."

First Pupil's progress report told Mira that, while tracking the target, he'd come across a door that appeared to be used frequently. Not only that, beside that door, he'd found a man who'd been knocked out.

Hearing that, Mira suddenly had a hunch that the evidence of whatever evil deeds the mansion's owner had committed lay right behind that door. She figured Fuzzy Dice had run into the waterway to uncover that evidence. Otherwise, what he was doing didn't make much sense.

Mira therefore felt that, at this point, she might as well play along with whatever the honorable thief was doing.

"And the phantom thief's footprints abruptly stop there," she added. "Could his hiding place, perhaps, lie right on the other side of that door? We'll at least have to check it out."

According to First Pupil's report, the thief's footprints indeed ended there. But since Fuzzy Dice was still being followed by First

Pupil, there was no way he'd have led them to his hideout. Mira had said what she did despite knowing this.

"Th-that's just a storage room! It couldn't possibly be his hiding spot!" the mansion's owner cried, asserting that the only things through that door were valuables.

That was a fatal mistake. Had he at least said that he didn't know anything about the place, he could've feigned ignorance as to what was in there. But after claiming that he had no idea that the waterway even existed, neither excuse was credible any longer. He'd explicitly acknowledged knowing about that area.

The butler buried his head in his hands at the owner's carelessness and stepped back, as if admitting defeat.

"According to Mira, the only known entrance to the waterway Fuzzy Dice fled into is below this mansion. So we'll have to use that entrance to search for the phantom thief's hideout," the captain explained matter-of-factly to the mansion's owner.

Having clearly articulated the reasons for their search and why it was justified, he took out some sort of emblem and thrust it forward.

"I invoke my right to enter private property for the purpose of conducting or following up on an investigation, as granted to me under Special Authorization Article Two. You won't have a problem with that, I assume?"

"What...?! There's no way...!" The mansion's owner stared resentfully at the captain. Upon checking the emblem, however, his face suddenly looked ashen, and he found himself lost for words. "It can't be... It's real..." he murmured in shock, collapsing to the ground.

The emblem seemingly had quite an effect. Any resistance on the owner's part rapidly vanished. The soldiers and mercenaries then made their way straight past the people from the mansion, who'd utterly stopped resisting, and marched inside. Once again managing to slip into their ranks, Mira continued along with them.

Stepping inside the mansion, the captain was immediately taken aback by the scene that lay before him. "Is that...wine?"

What on earth had happened? The entire mansion reeked of alcohol. Looking around, he saw that the floors were littered with smashed bottles and slick with wine.

Seeing the mansion's servants cleaning the floors, Mira immediately thought something was off. *Hrmm. I guess Fuzzy Dice probably made sure to leave his footprints here.*

Upon careful inspection, it became clear that the servants weren't actually interested in cleaning up the wine or broken glass; rather, they were focused on wiping away all the footprints that had dotted the floor.

The owner must've ordered them to do so. Knowing that the footprints led to the underground waterway's entrance, he'd intended to immediately cover them up.

Well, that sure was a waste of time and effort.

Even if they managed to wipe away Fuzzy Dice's footprints, there was no hiding the threads of spider silk stuck to the ceilings. Mira smiled wryly to herself at the thoroughness of Fuzzy Dice's trail, following it just as he'd intended.

When they explained that they were investigating the premises under Special Authorization Article Two, the servants destroying the evidence inside the mansion quickly complied and ceased their activities. They'd apparently started by wiping the footprints from the waterway's entrance, since Fuzzy Dice's tracks disappeared entirely once they made their way into the underground room.

Removing the spider silk, however, had proven a much more difficult task. The servants in the room were covered from head to toe in spider silk, and some had been rendered immobile and fallen over. Stepping inside, the captain showed them his emblem; the servants, seemingly shocked, quickly fled elsewhere.

"By the way, that badge gets quite a reaction. What on earth is it? And what's Special Authorization Article Two?" Mira blurted out as they followed the spider silk clinging stubbornly to the underground room's ceiling. Having witnessed how quickly people met the captain's demands after seeing the emblem, she wondered what exactly it and "special authorization" meant.

The mansion's size made it clear that the owner had considerable influence. Yet simply by saying he had special authorization and holding out the emblem, the captain had changed the man's face to a mask of despair. It had almost seemed like the reaction of an evildoer upon being shown an undercover detective's badge.

"Don't tell me you're actually a member of the royal family masquerading as a captain?!" Mira demanded.

The captain simply looked like a good-natured guy, but maybe he was really some blueblood. For a moment, she guessed that was the case, but then laughter broke out among the soldiers.

"No friggin' way."

"You're suggesting that a guy who stocks up on too much to carry home during sales is in the royal family...?!"

"Just yesterday, he freaked out about having to deal with a messenger from the Ministry of Justice. *He's* royalty?!"

The captain was apparently a peasant through and thorough. After their laughter and interjections, his subordinates began referring to the man—apparently named Desmond—as if he *were* royalty.

"Please watch your step, Master Desmond."

"Lord Desmond, I can see the stairs."

"You guys...we're on duty..." Desmond protested.

"My apologies, Your Highness."

"We'll make sure it doesn't happen again, Your Lordship."

Desmond stopped before the stairs, turning to glare at the men; the soldiers quickly snapped salutes in perfect unison.

Fuzzy Dice, whom they were pursuing, was already in the waterway beyond. No one could fault the soldiers for wanting to cut some of the tension. But while they might've sounded like they were goofing around, they moved nimbly. They didn't appear to be leaving any room for mistakes.

They’re actually a more cheerful bunch than I thought, Mira noted.

They could move flawlessly while cracking jokes. They must’ve trained extensively to be able to coordinate so well with each other.

Reaching the eerie stairway that stretched down into the darkness, from which anything imaginable could pop out, they gracefully let the mercenaries take the lead. The teamwork they displayed while doing so was really something to behold.

Since Desmond’s men had swapped places with the mercenaries, Mira asked him to finish explaining the emblem and special authorization while descending the extremely lengthy stairway.

“Well, stuff like this happens sometimes, right?” he prefaced.

From what he proceeded to say, Mira began to think that they’d gotten pretty lucky.

First off, the article Desmond had invoked—Special Authorization Article Two—stated that those with investigative powers generally couldn’t be denied entry someplace, so long as the presence of persons or evidence related to a crime was confirmed.

However, that special authorization was only issued if a criminal or piece of evidence would, without a doubt, be found upon carrying out the investigation. Only if the existence of such had been conclusively determined could one invoke special authorization. That stipulation was strict, but the provision came with a significant advantage: No duke, duchess, or even monarch themselves could obstruct an investigation carried out under special authorization. Furthermore, those given special authorization while investigating a case were allowed to use force even against nobility. That was a special privilege for the most special cases.

“Wow. You really have quite a bit of power now, huh?” Mira said, showing a tad more respect toward Desmond after learning that he’d received extrajudicial authorization.

“It all happened yesterday, actually,” Desmond replied, smiling sheepishly, before continuing.

Special authorization wasn’t normally something a soldier could exercise, evidently—until the day before, that was, when a messenger from the king had paid a visit and given Desmond a written missive granting him the emblem, as well as the authority to invoke special authorization. The king had apparently arranged that, thinking that it might prove useful for pursuing Fuzzy Dice.

“Oh ho…I see,” said Mira. “And then this all happened.”

The king had been marvelously farsighted to anticipate that this would take place. Now, thanks to the authority to invoke special authorization that he’d granted to the captain, Desmond had been able to subdue the mansion’s owner and continue chasing Fuzzy Dice.

While Mira thought that’d been a great move, something was bothering her. Namely, all of Fuzzy Dice’s heists up until then had ended at the Mages’ Guild. The chief detective had corroborated that, so she didn’t doubt it. In that case, though, what was going on now was completely off script. None of this whole chase back to the mansion would normally have happened. Even if Fuzzy Dice had thought this far ahead, how could he have predicted that this would unfold?

He must’ve planned for all this too, huh?

Looking back, several facts led her to that conclusion: First, in the guild, Fuzzy Dice said he still had matters to attend to. Then he’d made a point of showing himself to his fans before making his way here. At that point, he’d been kind enough to leave clear signs that he’d entered the mansion, then left them a trail to follow inside. There was also the fact that he’d never usually have picked the underground waterway as an escape route.

To get the captain past the owner—who he *knew* could try to hinder them—and into the mansion, Fuzzy Dice might’ve gotten the king to confer special authorization on the man. It was certainly possible.

Hrmm. Haxthausen lies in the kingdom of Linkslott. So…

Could the prince she'd met in the game over thirty years ago have ascended the throne? Curious about that, Mira asked the captain whether the king's name happened to be Judas.

The captain nodded, answering as if it were incredibly obvious. "Yes, that's right. His Majesty Judas Linkslott XVI."

Mira had dealt quite a bit with Prince Judas back in the game. She'd gotten the sense that he was a paragon of justice.

The prince was righteous and hot-blooded, but made use of subtle strategies, even utilizing bands of thieves on occasion. Those strategies were quite successful. On that note, it was later said that the thieves Judas enlisted eventually put their criminal days behind them, moving on to peaceful lives tilling the land with which he'd rewarded them.

If that same Judas was now king, it was well within the realm of possibility that he was working with the renowned honorable thief, Fuzzy Dice. If so, something was definitely going on in the waterway that both the king and Fuzzy Dice felt was unjust. Mira and Desmond would discover whatever it was on the other side of the door she'd found.

He's totally leading us around by the nose. Still, I can't let the whole plan fall apart now.

Judging by what Fuzzy Dice had accomplished thus far, the phantom thief's plan would certainly end once more with justice being served. So Mira couldn't simply bail on it. That said, if she kept doing exactly as he wished, he'd most likely end up making an easy escape.

"Why did you want to know about His Majesty King Judas?" Desmond asked, sensing something from Mira's demeanor.

She was still considering whether she should tell the captain what she'd realized and the conclusion she'd come to. *Hrmm... I guess I will...this time.*

A few moments after putting two and two together, Mira separated slightly from the group and beckoned Desmond over. She asked him to indulge her for a moment, then whispered her hypothesis into his ear. She told him how she'd reached her conclusion, strengthening her case by connecting it to the whole

episode of his special authorization. Finally, she informed him that Fuzzy Dice's objective was likely for them to find whatever lay through the door.

"I see," said Desmond. "So it's not the phantom thief's hideout…but some shady place instead. I'd thought it was strange that His Majesty sent a messenger to grant me special authorization…" He apparently found Mira's explanation convincing and agreed in a low voice that it was certainly possible.

"If we keep going like this, we likely won't be able to capture him," Mira said. "But if we turn back now, we won't discover whatever evil he's trying to expose. And listen…"

She quietly told Desmond, who seemed to understand her thinking, about the plan she'd just come up with. She prefaced it by stating that it was the best possible option she could figure out at the moment.

The group finished making their way downstairs, reaching the underground waterway. The soldiers and mercenaries carried lamps to light the area for their search. A few moments later, Mira and Desmond made it to the bottom.

"To think this place was down here the whole time…"

"Where the hell does it even connect to?"

"It's pretty creepy…"

The chamber looked exactly as it had when Mira first saw it though First Pupil's eyes. Taking a quick look around, she quickly found footprints resembling Fuzzy Dice's.

The mercenaries perked up when they saw that the tracks continued straight in one direction, and they immediately began following them. Desmond instructed half of his troops to continue pursuing Fuzzy Dice and the remaining half to stay and investigate the area.

"We could go after Fuzzy Dice, but this area really does interest me," Desmond said, before telling his remaining troops what Mira thought. He then suggested that they might as well try the plan Mira had proposed.

It really was quite simple: The soldiers and mercenaries would continue doing just as Fuzzy Dice wanted and figure out whatever was down there. Meanwhile, Mira would lie in wait for Fuzzy Dice.

"Yeah, I got no problem with that," one soldier said after a moment. Although he was truly caddish-looking, his expression gave the sense that he'd only spoken after paying serious thought to their current situation.

What was more, the other soldiers didn't have any particular objections either. Before Mira even knew it, they'd all signed on to her plan as well.

"It really doesn't seem like we'll catch him if we just keep doing what we're doing, after all."

"Yeah. I mean, he completely wiped the floor with not only us but those mercenaries as well. So even if we did go after him…"

"Right? The only one with any shot at him is the Spirit Queen. We're better off clearing out another of the evils plaguing this city."

Since the honorable phantom thief had led the soldiers and mercenaries this far, some kind of evil was most likely afoot. The idea that this had to be the case began spreading through the soldiers' ranks. Although Fuzzy Dice was currently their target, that apparently didn't stop any of them from attesting to his heroism.

Well…I suppose I'd rather be a hero who crushes evil than one who chases after an evil-crushing hero.

Every man had, at least once in his life, fantasized about becoming a hero and fighting for what was right. That was probably why the men had enlisted as soldiers in the first place, and Mira saw immediately that the change of plans had really lit a fire under them.

"Hrmm. You have my thanks," she said. "Now, let's quickly discuss how we'll go about this…"

Following Fuzzy Dice's trail, they'd found a likely crime scene. Since they couldn't simply ignore that, they'd prioritize securing the scene and leave pursuing Fuzzy Dice to Mira.

As they coordinated their plans, one soldier raised a question: If they were going to follow Fuzzy Dice's footprints, how exactly would Mira get *ahead* of the phantom thief?

"Well, that's quite simple," Mira said, struggling to conceal just how eagerly she'd awaited that very question. She then briefly explained exactly how she'd do it.

If Fuzzy Dice had entered the waterway, he obviously needed a way out. The area was difficult to navigate, and even the phantom thief would have trouble getting around quickly. If Mira just waited overhead, she could quickly overtake her opponent from there, however he moved around.

In short, Mira confidently asserted, as long as she could anticipate what Fuzzy Dice would do, she'd easily beat him to the punch. She added that Cat Sith was also hot on the phantom thief's trail.

"I see… It's a strategy that's limited to a summoner, huh?" Desmond said, impressed with the plan that only an A-rank summoner could think up.

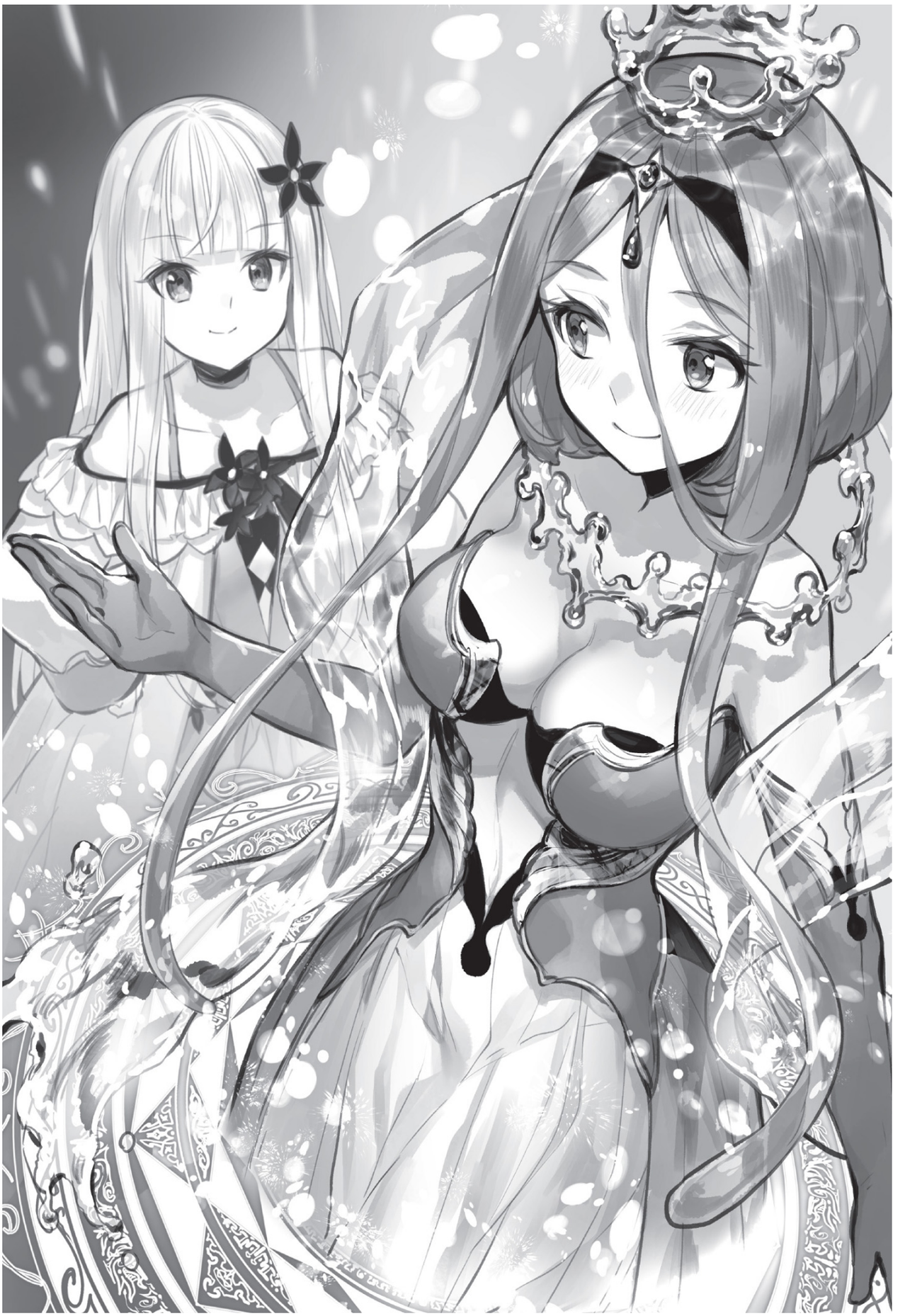
The soldiers were more impressed with Cat Sith's scouting skills, which were evidently far superior to theirs. It seemed as if they were starting to look at summoning more favorably.

Satisfied by that development, Mira went ahead and summoned another evocation. A magic circle emerged in the area she'd lit up using [Ethereal Arts: Illumination], and the water spirit Anrutine emerged.

"My turn came pretty quick, huh?" she asked.

Perhaps because this was the first time she'd been summoned, Anrutine was in high spirits. She'd seemingly gotten a play-by-play from the Spirit King and already had a firm grasp of the situation.

"Well, I know it's a bit sudden, but would you mind pinpointing Fuzzy Dice's current position?" Mira requested.



“Sure thing. Leave it to me!” Anrutine replied upon hearing Mira’s request.

She dove headlong into the channel and used the water to glimpse the entire place. Nearby, the soldiers had gotten very excited that one could even summon a spirit that looked like a mature, attractive woman, but that was neither here nor there.

Quickly switching gears, the soldiers began planning what they’d do once they reached the crime scene. Code words flew left and right, and—perhaps having already practiced a variety of coordinated drills—they quickly worked out how they’d proceed from there.

However, opinions were divided on what to do about the mercenaries, who were only there to go after Fuzzy Dice. There was a chance they wouldn’t be fond of the updated operation, which more or less entailed giving up on catching the thief.

The group’s next stop was presumably the scene of some crime, and with no idea what awaited them there, they needed the mercenaries’ fighting strength. But under the circumstances, there was a good chance they’d walk off the job, and that the soldiers would have to do without their help.

“In that case, how about bringing along one of my trusted companions?” Mira suggested to the men, who were groaning about what they should do.

She activated the summoner skill Evacuation Order. It allowed her to instantaneously summon a faraway evocation to her location, and so Christina suddenly appeared at that very moment.

“Ah…!”

The moment she saw Mira, her face froze, and her eyes darted self-consciously. The reason for that, of course, had to be the bun in her hand. Judging from the bite marks in it and the cream remnants around Christina’s mouth, it was clear what she’d been doing while awaiting instructions.

“Ah, Master… Hold on a minute! I have a very good explanation for this!”

Just as Mira was about to call the Valkyrie's bluff, Christina hurried near and began to cry. Apparently, she *did* have a good explanation.

When Mira asked to hear it, Christina answered that Fuzzy Dice's fans were handing the buns out left and right. She'd initially turned down the pastry she was offered, since she was on duty, but she'd struggled to hold out against the zealous, overbearing fans. Eventually, seeing no other choice, she'd relented and accepted a bun.

"Well…it's no big deal."

Seeing Christina in distress, Mira smiled to herself; she couldn't help wanting to tease the Valkyrie a bit. Christina, however, had no way of knowing that Mira felt that way. She was simply thrilled that she wouldn't need to do any extra training as punishment.

"All right, now, Christina…"

Focusing, Mira explained that the Valkyrie would accompany Desmond. Despite her beauty, Christina was more than a match for any swordsman there. Even if the mercenaries decided not to help Desmond's soldiers fight, the martial strength she brought to the table would likely be more than enough.

"Mission…hngmph…confirmed!" Christina crammed the rest of the bun into her mouth, her posture remaining ramrod straight. Then she bowed.

Given how the whole exchange had looked, the soldiers couldn't help still having doubts. Going on about how their "backup" was a cute girl, they quietly looked over at Desmond.

The captain whispered back that they could definitely, probably, *most likely* count on Christina in battle. At any rate, the Spirit Queen herself had gone out of her way to enable them to bring the evocation along as support, so it should be all right. He seemed to be trying to persuade himself as much as the soldiers.

Chapter 25

“ALL RIGHT, MIRA, we’re going to hurry ahead and regroup with everyone else.”

Their meeting had been short and simple, and they’d decided Christina would assume a commando role. Once the Valkyrie showed the soldiers a glimpse of her skills to give them an idea of what she was capable of, they’d rapidly changed their tune.

After all, despite her demeanor and looks, she’d demonstrated truly world-class fencing techniques. The soldiers had realized firsthand that she was more than a pretty face. Desmond, for some reason, had told them boastfully to get a good look, and that he’d expected no less of the Spirit Queen.

Now convinced that their fighting strength was no longer an issue, the soldiers moved quickly. They’d run ahead immediately to catch up to those in front and explain the plan, Desmond announced.

“Hrmm. Okay. I’ll leave it to you.”

Whatever Fuzzy Dice was after in the waterway, it had to be connected to some villainy. Watching the soldiers disappear as they ran farther into the passage, Mira instructed Christina to update her with regular status reports.

“Sure thing! Right now, we’re following his footprints!” Christina replied, updating her *immediately*.

Mira told the Valkyrie that she only needed to update her whenever the situation changed.

A few moments afterward, Anrutine’s head popped up out of the water, and the water spirit declared that she’d found someone resembling Fuzzy Dice.

“It’s a man in a gray cloak,” she recounted. “Is that who you saw?”

Anrutine’s special ability was using water to “see” any areas connected to that particular water source. For certainty’s sake,

she'd used that ability to scour the entire waterway and managed to locate a man matching the phantom thief's description. Apparently, he was still disguised. He probably planned to blend in with the rest of the crowd as some anonymous adventurer once he escaped.

"Hrmm. That's got to be him," Mira replied. "So which way was he heading?" There would likely be an exit to the waterway in whichever direction he went.

Hearing Mira's question, Anrutine briefly closed her eyes as if deep in thought, then answered that he was heading toward the nearest outlet.

"An outlet, huh...? I see. Then he must be preparing to escape the city, right?"

When Mira thought about it, that honestly seemed like the least risky option. If he botched escaping through an exit directly into the city, he could distract the public or security personnel from the waterway he'd worked so hard to focus everyone's attention on.

It was in the phantom thief's best interests to leave Haxthausen without being seen, so everyone's attention remained on the waterway. According to Anrutine, the outlet was in the middle of a large river to the southeast.

That sounded a bit complicated, so Mira asked Anrutine to guide her to the outlet's exact location once she was near it. "All right. Please keep an eye on him, Lady Anrutine. I'll take to the sky."

First and foremost, Mira had to make sure she could beat Fuzzy Dice to the outlet. With that in mind, she dashed toward the steps.

"Sounds good," Anrutine answered, once again sinking into the water. She quickly informed Mira that, if the phantom thief continued on the shortest course to his destination at his current speed, he'd reach the outlet in about ten minutes.

"I need to hurry..."

Just going down the stairs had taken a considerable amount of time; going up them would naturally be harder. Worst of all, running upstairs would expend a considerable amount of Mira's strength.

But since she'd upped her summoning skills, Mira was now capable of new things. She decided to try a new technique—Arms Evocation: Dark-Knight Frame.

When she initiated the technique, a magic circle appeared at her feet and rose upward. From it emerged a dark knight. In the very next second, its armor covered Mira's entire body, transforming into brand-new equipment for her arsenal. Soon, the magic circle dissolved into black flames and merged into a single point, rendering the evocation's power fully material.

"This is the first time I've tried this out for real. Everything seems good, though."

Mira looked almost like a jet-black Valkyrie. She moved around a bit to test how the technique felt, then dashed up the stairs in one go. Through her new technique, she'd uncovered a new power. This was a brand-new direction in summoning that let her use an armor spirit as her own equipment.

There was still quite a bit she didn't know about the technique, but having researched it whenever she had a free moment, she'd confirmed that it provided something a bit like power armor. She could supplement her own physical abilities with an armor spirit's power, as well as boost her defensive power using the armor itself. If she could finish testing the evocation and popularize its use, it could help address summoners' Achilles heel: their physical weakness. That would definitely be a turning point in the summoning world.

"Hrmm... Marvelous. It's like I sprouted wings!"

With the Dark-Knight Frame's help, Mira made easy work of the stairs. Waiting ahead was the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice. Having seen his true power firsthand, Mira figured he was the perfect opponent to test the frame's capabilities against.

Plotting to both squeeze information about the orphanage from Fuzzy Dice and use him as a guinea pig, she found herself

back in the underground room before she knew it.

“Huh…? What’s going on?”

Looking around the underground room, Mira tilted her head in confusion. She’d taken the same route back, yet for some reason, she couldn’t find the way out. In short, the underground room connected to the waterway was now truly a secret chamber.

“It should be right around here…”

Mira carefully examined the wall where she remembered the exit being located. Above her stretched nothing but a simple stone wall. She couldn’t find a hidden door or anything resembling a secret switch.

“This must mean that…”

The wall in front of her had sealed off the underground room entirely. It would be impossible for a normal person to make their way out of that room now that thick stone walls surrounded it.

And behind Mira lay a complex, difficult-to-navigate underground waterway. She, of course, could simply ask Anrutine for help and escape with no problems. But what about the soldiers or mercenaries? If they weren’t careful, they might end up wandering around down there forever.

Glaring at the wall, Mira realized that might very well have been the mansion owner’s intention. He surely planned to seal everyone down in the waterway to sweep everything under the rug.

“He’s taking pretty extreme measures, huh?”

It was a very shortsighted plan. Plenty of people outside had witnessed the soldiers and mercenaries entering the mansion. Even if those people weren’t aware of the underground waterway, they’d certainly become suspicious that something was going on in the mansion if no one returned.

“Well, it’s not like it’ll do him any good.”

[Evocation: Gnomide]

Standing in front of the stone wall, Mira dispelled Gnomide—who was standing by in Haxthausen—and resummoned her to her

side.

The small spirit emerged from its magic circle. Gnomide was an earth spirit; resembling a young girl, she stood about a foot tall, yet effortlessly carried a stone hammer about the same size as herself.

“All right, help me out, Gnomide. Can you put a hole in that wall?”

Upon receiving that direction, Gnomide nodded heartily and hefted the hammer onto her shoulder. She quickly made her way to the wall and held the hammer aloft, then swung it all the way down. Sure enough, part of the stout stone wall suddenly turned to gravel and collapsed.

That wasn’t all. The mountain of gravel Gnomide’s blow had produced started moving like a living being, getting out of the way so as to not block the path.

“Hrmm… Well done. Very impressive.”

Commending Gnomide’s efforts, Mira picked up the earth spirit—who’d been jumping up and down at her feet—and gently patted her head. That must’ve delighted Gnomide, since she started swinging her hammer around.

“Oh ho! Look who’s in a good mood!”

The hammer was made of heavy stone; whenever Gnomide swung it, its weight made Mira sway from side to side. Although the spirit was a perfectly huggable size, the hammer-wielding Gnomide was actually quite heavy. Had Mira not been equipped with the Dark-Knight Frame, she probably couldn’t have stayed upright.

“Thanks for your hard work,” Mira told Gnomide before dismissing her.

Satisfied with the strength boost the Dark-Knight Frame gave her, she again began running, passing straight through the gaping hole in the wall.

“They cleaned up quick, huh?”

Whatever she had to say about the mansion’s owner, its servants really were top-notch. The first time Mira had seen the

hallway, it'd been littered with broken bottles and all kinds of other stuff. Now, there was no trace of any of that. This time, she only saw servants collapsed on the floor, utterly exhausted.

The moment the servants saw Mira, their expressions transformed from fatigued to shocked. They started to ask her to wait, but their voices never reached her as she dashed effortlessly down the hallway.

Finding herself back at the mansion's entryway, she considered what she'd do next. Once outside, she decided, she'd summon Pegasus and make a beeline for the waterway's outlet.

Then the sound of two people arguing came from the other side of the entrance.

"They did come, but they aren't here any longer. They left a long time ago."

"Don't play games. I asked around, and they were seen entering this mansion, but not a single person saw them leave."

That voice... Is it the mansion's owner? I wonder who he's talking to. On top of that, what were they arguing about? Curious, Mira stopped in front of the door and listened in stealthily.

As the argument continued, Mira began to understand what it was about. From what she could tell, the mansion's owner was arguing with someone named Commander Geez, who was essentially Desmond's boss. They seemed to be having a disagreement about what had happened earlier.

When Geez heard that Desmond's unit had entered the mansion to investigate, he'd come to provide backup. The owner, however, maintained that—while Desmond's troops *had* come—they'd found nothing out of the ordinary and already left.

Geez wasn't buying it. He asserted that they must still be inside. His claim was primarily backed up by the testimony of the Fuzzy Dice fans surrounding the mansion. They'd all seen Desmond's unit go into the mansion, but none had seen them reemerge.

Yet the mansion's owner brazenly declared, "They're no longer in the residence." He went on to insist that he'd even

subject himself to a trial by sword to prove it.

Mira grinned wryly yet incredulously at those words. *He's certainly got a lot of nerve to suggest that.*

The great nation of Grimdart venerated the God of Justice, one of the gods belonging to the Trinity. Within that nation existed a sacred sword. It was imbued with the gods' power and was exceedingly strong. In addition, the light it gave off reputedly exposed any falsehood.

The "trial by sword" the mansion's owner brought up was a ritual in which a statement's truth was tested using the sword's power. Any verdict it rendered was considered conclusive. Thus, it needed to be used with careful discretion. That was why Mira felt such contempt for the way the man had so casually thrown out the words "They're no longer in the residence."

That *was* true. Desmond and the others weren't in the mansion anymore. Since they were in the underground waterway beneath it, they were indeed gone.

With neither man budging, the mansion's owner put forward a suggestion in an apparent bid to compromise. "All right, fine. If you still insist, you can go ahead and look around as much as you like. If you find somebody, you can do whatever you like with me. But if you don't...I hope you'll be ready for the consequences."

Desmond and his men really weren't in the mansion, so—while the owner proposed this idea as if he'd been coerced into it—his words were deeply duplicitous. It sounded as if he was luring Geez into a trap.

The truth was, however much Geez searched for the men, he'd never find them. But he didn't yet know that. He also had no idea that Mira heard them speaking, or that she was even there.

"All right, then... If you'll excuse me, I'm going to look around," Geez replied.

After thinking it over, he must've decided to go with his gut, as well as the fans' testimonies. A moment later, he opened the door and stepped into the entryway.

"What?! You're..."

That voice came from the mansion's owner. Seeing Mira on the other side of the door, his expression—which, only moments earlier, had been one of smug satisfaction at having laid his trap—did a complete one-eighty.

But who could blame him? Judging from the conversation Mira had just overheard, she was the exact last person he wanted to bump into. The owner had seemed pretty confident that he'd managed to seal away the room, and that Geez would never figure out that there was another chamber underground.

He did *do it on purpose, huh?*

Mira was supposed to have entered that very place, but she now stood in front of him. As if to contradict the mansion owner's expression, she brandished a defiant smile.

"He's actually not lying," she said. "But he's also not quite telling you the whole story." She glared at the clearly flustered owner, letting him know that the jig was up, before turning her gaze to the other man.

"Is that so? And just who might you be, miss?" This man looked late middle-aged. Judging from his grizzled demeanor, he had to be Geez. He turned toward Mira immediately.

She briefly introduced herself, saying that her name was Mira and that she was a summoner. She made sure to emphasize the latter part.

"That would make you the Spirit Queen I just heard about, wouldn't it?"

"They *do* call me that these days."

The Fuzzy Dice fans had apparently told Geez that the Spirit Queen was also there. He seemed to know everything, including that she'd entered the mansion with Desmond and the others.

In a bid to move things along, Mira gave a bare-bones explanation of everything that'd happened thus far: how the servants had worked to destroy the trail Fuzzy Dice had left behind; how, by following the trail, they'd come to the entrance of an underground waterway; and finally, what'd happened when she tried to go back.

“I see… So that’s why he phrased it like that.”

From Mira’s explanation, Geez likewise realized what the mansion’s owner had been scheming. He turned around to glare once more at the owner, who was so visibly shaken that he pled with his butler to help him. The butler, seemingly just about at his wit’s end, simply responded by shaking his head.

“I’ll hurry up and get to that underground waterway, or whatever you called it, so I can lend Desmond and his troops a hand,” Geez said, moving forward.

Mira, meanwhile, moved in the other direction, toward the front door. “He left a fairly obvious trail. If you just follow it, you should find them.”

As she passed by Geez, the commander suddenly asked, “Aren’t you going to show me how to get there?” He apparently thought Mira had come back to get reinforcements at Desmond’s behest.

“No. I just left so I could waylay Fuzzy Dice from outside the waterway. Desmond never asked me to get reinforcements or anything.”

When Geez heard Mira’s response, an exasperated look crossed his face. “Really? Again…?” he muttered.

According to him, the captains considered Desmond a bit of a black sheep for his inclination to always operate based solely on his instincts, not consulting the other captains. That said, his instincts apparently never led him astray.

“Well, thanks for the intel,” Geez told Mira, recomposing himself after airing his grievances.

Grabbing hold of a servant to have them lead the way, he quickly headed deeper into the mansion.

“Don’t try any other funny stuff, all right?” Glaring at the mansion’s owner, Mira summoned a dark knight to drive the message home.

The owner nodded vigorously.

“Well, I’ve got to hurry up too,” Mira remarked.

While all this was going on, Fuzzy Dice had been nearing the waterway's exit. According to Anrutine's reports, Mira had less than three minutes left. She burst out of the mansion, immediately summoned Pegasus, and nimbly took off into the sky.

Chapter 26

"HRMM... THE EXIT'S down here, huh?"

Flying into the sky, Mira took the absolute straightest, quickest route to her destination: a large river right beside Haxthausen that seemed to split the plain in two. The waterway's outlet was just below the river's surface. If Anrutine was right, then Fuzzy Dice would emerge there at any moment.

"Okay. I guess here should be fine."

Mira threw her camouflage cloak around her shoulders as if it were about time for her big moment. She also put on her gas mask and night vision goggles, then dropped to the ground, fully prepared.

Not only was Mira away from the bright lights of the city, the sky was also rather overcast, so the pitch-black night shrouded everything around her. Night camouflage was particularly effective under those circumstances, so she was especially difficult to spot.

Mira's other advantage was that, thanks to Anrutine's reports, she could figure out exactly how much longer she'd need to wait for Fuzzy Dice. Awaiting an adversary while unsure when they'd show up taxed the nerves, but this time, she didn't have to worry about that. Just knowing exactly when she needed to focus would give her a significant edge.

In addition to improved vision from the night vision goggles, Mira also had access to the very useful Biometric Scan ability. Thanks to that, as long as Fuzzy Dice was within range, she wouldn't lose track of him even if she lost her goggles.

Mira also held a blasting stone in her hand. The rock was so small that she'd instantly lose sight of it if she threw it into the gloom. But she'd crafted it the night before for just this occasion; there was more to it than met the eye.

Then came Anrutine's final report: "Ah. He dove in. He'll be there soon!"

The outlet was underwater, so if Fuzzy Dice was submerged, then he was finally right in front of the exit. Mira lifted herself a tiny bit, readied the hand holding the blasting stone, and took a deep breath. She focused on the water and used Biometric Scan to look for Fuzzy Dice.

There he is!

Detecting things under solid ground was difficult, but that wasn't true of things underwater. Mira picked up on something large below the surface. That was Fuzzy Dice, without a doubt. Keeping her eye on what she'd detected as it slowly floated upward, Mira tightened her grip.

At last, the figure broke the river's surface, and the human-looking shape that floated upward made its way to the riverbank. He must've been about twenty or so meters away from Mira.

The figure rose out of the river with a splash. At the very next moment, his mana began to flow. That was usually a sign that someone was about to use a technique or spell, and Mira waited to see what he'd do.

Really? He's just drying his clothes? It looked like he was using the same Ethereal Art she used to dry her own hair.

Observing the figure, Mira suddenly moved. If he was already using an Ethereal Art, he wouldn't be able to use any other techniques, so this was her chance.

The moment the figure turned away from Mira, she popped up and hurled the blasting stone toward him. It cut through the air and vanished into the darkness. Though it landed a bit off the mark, it still blew apart impressively close to the figure. There was a blinding flash and a deafening bang. Based on its effects, the blasting stone Mira had crafted might as well have been a stun grenade.

Immediately, she heard a small cry. She rushed over, a binding cloth in hand. Even the legendary phantom thief's senses surely wouldn't be perfectly intact after he'd been on the receiving end of a blast like that. Having tested the blasting stone's effects on herself the night before, Mira was confident that she'd apprehend him.

Just over five meters separated them now. Making it to the point where her target was just a bit farther away, Mira could clearly confirm the humanoid shape's identity through her night vision goggles.

At first glance, the man who stood there—as well as his clothes and other features—could only be described as *normal* and utterly nondescript, so much so that he could've melted into a crowd and become impossible to pick out. For that reason, she knew he was Fuzzy Dice.

It's over!

The blasting stone had been effective; Fuzzy Dice still appeared dazed and was moving unsteadily. Seizing the opportunity, Mira unwound the binding cloth before letting it fly.

Then it happened.

"What?!"

When she was one step away from him, something suddenly caught and immobilized Mira.

"You used Gravekeeper Spider's Barrier Silk, huh? You've got some nerve..."

Looking closely, she saw that the spider silk was black, and that it was protecting Fuzzy Dice. In fact, it was stretched all over the nearby area. Once she'd stepped into that area, the spider silk had flown at her and stopped her in her tracks.

"Wow. I'll admit, you took me totally by surprise."

Not only that, it seemed as if Fuzzy Dice had fully regained his senses in that brief time. He stared at Mira as if rather impressed.

"I don't even know what to say... Are Special Forces finally coming after me?" he asked, looking at her attire.

Smiling faintly, he took Mira's gas mask, night vision goggles, and binding cloth. Right after doing so, he peered at Mira, and a slightly surprised look appeared on his face.

"I never would've thought..."

She couldn’t tell whether that meant Fuzzy Dice was surprised that the Special Forces were now apparently recruiting young girls or whether he simply recognized her.

Either way, he acted as if nothing was amiss, adding, “It’s the first time anyone’s caused me this much trouble.”

With the tables now turned, Fuzzy Dice strode toward Mira with the binding cloth in hand. Even someone with Mira’s talents would be helpless if tied up with that item. To be fair, Mira was already mostly immobile due to the spider silk. Only her fingertips could really move.

“Hey, could I ask you a quick question?” Mira asked, desperation clear on her face.

When she did, Fuzzy Dice paused for a moment. “You want to ask me something? Is it about that day underground…? No, perhaps you want to ask whether I know about an orphanage deep in the woods?”

Indeed, Fuzzy Dice had correctly guessed what Mira wanted to inquire about. “Mm-hmm. Yes, exactly. It seems you really did overhear my talk with the chief detective.”

Fuzzy Dice’s response, and his actions at the guild, suggested that he’d already gotten wind of everything they’d spoken about while hatching their plans. Guessing that this was the case, and not particularly surprised, Mira asked whether they could cut to the chase.

“That depends on the reason you’re looking for the orphanage,” Fuzzy Dice replied. Peering into Mira’s face, his expression changed. Perhaps he was trying to determine whether she was telling the truth, or maybe he had some other purpose. Regardless, his eyes suddenly took on a stern, deadly serious glint that she hadn’t yet seen.

Well, yeah. If I don’t explain that much, he probably won’t tell me.

By talking with Fuzzy Dice, she stood a chance of finally figuring out the location of the orphanage she was after. To do that, though, she’d have to give him a justifiable reason to spill the beans.

Orphanages were, by definition, crowded with helpless children. And Mira was looking for one particular orphanage out of all the orphanages in the world. That would certainly seem fairly suspicious to anyone else. Someone actively supporting such a facility would have even more reason to be wary. In short, there was no way Fuzzy Dice would ever tell her its location if she didn't justify herself well.

She couldn't tell him the real reason yet, though. And even if she dodged the question slightly by saying that she'd heard her friend was there, he'd likely just ask who exactly that friend was.

She needed to provide a clear reason that she could convince him of, but she couldn't just straight out tell him that she needed to learn whether the orphanage's director was Artesia. After all, that constituted a state secret, so even Mira couldn't just go saying it to someone whose true identity she wasn't yet sure of.

She was left with only one option: She'd have to capture Fuzzy Dice and force him to spill the beans, just like she'd originally planned. Perhaps there was some other way, but there wasn't one that came to mind.

Mira decided to move quickly. "The reason I'm looking, huh...? That's a secret," she said, staring straight back at Fuzzy Dice. She immediately unclenched her fist and squeezed her eyes shut.

In the very next moment, the small stone she'd let slip from her hand fell between them and burst with a blinding flash and deafening bang.

"Ngh...!" a voice grunted faintly.

This attempt to stun Fuzzy Dice had apparently also been successful.

That said, since Mira had also faced the blast directly, she was stunned too. She'd closed her eyes, blocking the full flash, but the powerful shock of the sound waves sent her head spinning. Still, she somehow managed to use [Immortal Arts Earth: Enveloping Blaze], burning the spider silk away with the flames from both her palms.

"That's *scorching*!"

She brushed away the spider silk, which had instantly burst into flames, and—still dazed—pushed herself backward so forcefully that she tumbled to the ground. She felt plenty hot, but thanks to the Dark-Knight Frame, she didn't suffer any burns or even a single scratch from her nasty fall.

This invention will absolutely go down in the history books! It looked like the Dark-Knight Frame would definitely be usable in real battles against monsters. Still not quite steady on her feet, Mira smiled unconsciously at how useful she found her new technique.

That reaction lasted only a moment. Having regained her senses before Fuzzy Dice, Mira quickly tried to check on how her opponent was faring. But he'd taken her night vision goggles, and she couldn't make out much with the naked eye.

"This is…inconvenient."

Although she couldn't really see, she still perceived Fuzzy Dice's mana spreading around the area. After getting hit by the blasting stone, he'd apparently once again instantaneously thrown up a spider-silk barrier. He had both skill and tenacity in spades.

The barrier he'd put up before could bind whoever got close to it, so what would this one do? Despite being called "spider" silk, the threads were produced by a Demonic Art, and there were many different varieties. In the darkness, it was impossible to make out exactly which kind Fuzzy Dice was using.

Looking at her current situation, however, Mira deduced what all the threads had in common: a weakness to fire. She decided to try a brand-new summoning technique.

[Evocation Conversion: Vermillion Frame]

This new summon was a special one that let her utilize the Spirit King's blessing to imbue her brand-new Dark-Knight Frame technique with the power of the fire spirit Salamander. Mira had dubbed the method "Evocation Conversion."

Since her Vermillion Frame contained the power of fire, any spider silk that attempted to bind her would burn away.

“I almost feel kind of bad about exploiting your weakness like this,” Mira remarked. “But business is business.”



The Demonic Arts could create fire-resistant varieties of spider silk, but the majority weren't nonlethal, so Mira presumed that an honorable thief like Fuzzy Dice definitely wouldn't use those.

Sure enough, as she stepped into the area fenced off by the brilliant-red spider silk, strands of that silk flew toward her. However, they burst into flames, just as she'd expected.

"Now!" she cried.

Her opponent's sluggish movements indicated that he was still dazed and struggling to get to his feet. Mira immediately unwound the binding cloth and leapt into the air, looking as if she intended to throw her arms around him. She managed to wrap Fuzzy Dice beautifully in the cloth.

"Nh..." Mira grunted. "This texture..."

Mira crashed to the ground; in all the excitement, she'd wrapped Fuzzy Dice up as thoroughly as possible before he had any chance to resist. The bonds in place, however, she felt that something was off and turned around.

Sure enough, the spider silk on the ground where Fuzzy Dice had been standing suddenly rose up like a cocoon, and the phantom thief nonchalantly emerged. "Wow. You sure use some unusual techniques. That was a close call."

Looking down to check her hands, Mira saw that she'd tied up nothing more than a doll made of flowers. "To think you'd set up a trap within a trap..."

Fuzzy Dice had projected an illusion of himself. Considering Mira's substantial magic power, even the highest-caliber demonologist shouldn't have been able to completely fool her. But in the pitch-black night, she wouldn't have been able to tell whether it was really him in the first place, so even an illusion that was only half effective was more than enough to work.

The real Fuzzy Dice had been hidden under flame-resistant spider silk coiled on the ground. Since he'd been directly beneath the doll, he'd deceived Mira's Biometric Scan as well.

This guy's a trickier foe than I imagined.

What impressed her most was that he'd borne the full brunt of the blasting stone and still been able to execute all his plans. It seemed wise to assume that he could deal with any weaker attacks she threw his way.

Well, I guess I have no choice but to use my ace in the hole.

At the end of the day, Mira's primary objective was to get information. The quickest way to do that would be to capture Fuzzy Dice—and, if possible, to avoid injuring him. That said, the phantom thief was only using nonlethal attacks, so would beating him by pelting him with full-strength attacks really be a victory? Mira's foolish pride resurfaced to object.

The truth was, that was nothing more than an excuse. What Mira was afraid of was Fuzzy Dice's fans. If she pulled out all the stops in order to defeat the righteous hero who never hurt anybody, his fans would doubtless go from seeing her as a mere challenger to the main villain. Worst of all, she'd forever be known as the person who'd brought down their hero.

I'd definitely rather not look over my shoulder for the rest of my life…

Thus, Mira had begun thinking that it was absolutely essential that she use only nonlethal methods, so that the battle would be on equal terms and she could capture him fair and square.

"In that case, this is about all I've got," she mused.

Mira took something out of her bag. It was just about the only nonlethal means she'd prepared that would have an effect on someone of Fuzzy Dice's caliber. She looked once more at the phantom thief.

Fuzzy Dice, meanwhile, was in a cautious stance, his eyes still fixed on Mira's hands. Although he'd managed to bounce back from the two blasting stones she used on him, it wasn't as if he was immune to them. They did work, and there were only so many ways to deal with them. That was why he was so cautious.

This won't be so easy anymore, huh? From Fuzzy Dice's reaction to her clenched fist, Mira observed that he was very much wary of her using a blasting stone.

Having noticed this, she made her move. Instantly using Shrinking Earth to disappear from where she stood, she moved to Fuzzy Dice's flank, a spot where she could see the river opposite her.

"See how you like this!" Mira shouted, sending about a dozen blasting stones Fuzzy Dice's way with a single throw. She lobbed the stones much more blatantly than both the previous times, her attack now reliant on quantity over quality.

"Huh...?!"

Fuzzy Dice reacted very quickly to Mira's sudden appearance beside him. Still, he must've anticipated her next attack from where she'd been before, since he cried out in surprise as she sent the stones flying at him.

Because he'd had his guard up, though, he dealt with the stones rapidly. The spider silk that he let loose caught them all almost instantaneously. He wrapped them in a cocoon, in which they exploded. A feeble glow and faint sound emanated from the cocoon, and then it was over.

Hrmm... He must've switched to using Predator Spider's Silk, huh?

That was a type of silk conjured using Demonic Arts that could catch flying objects. The technique could survive even a hail of arrows, and Fuzzy Dice had evidently used it to deal with Mira's blasting stones. The silk itself wasn't very strong, but it had apparently been enough to trap the blasting stones, which were meant to stun and lacked real destructive power.

Now that Fuzzy Dice was using that silk, sending blasting stones straight his way was no longer an option. But Mira was unfazed and simply put on a cocky smile. Predator Spider Silk's strength was unmatched against flying objects, but needless to say, that meant it required a lot of focus on its user's part.

Therefore, Fuzzy Dice's eyes were focused squarely on Mira.

Chapter 27

“WE’RE JUST GETTING STARTED!” Mira cried, loosing another handful of stones.

These weren’t blasting stones—just everyday flare stones sold by Dinoire Trading. That said, they were more than enough to set fire to the highly flammable silk. Furthermore, in the dead of night, there was no way for Fuzzy Dice to tell that these stones were any different from the blasting stones she’d been using.

Mira immediately hid another stone in her hand. It was a blasting stone much larger than any of the others she’d used. Fuzzy Dice’s powers of observation were good enough to catch what she’d done, however.

“Well now, that was obvious.”

Evidently putting together what Mira would try to do, Fuzzy Dice simply let the flare stones fly into his zone of defense, leaping aside without using spider silk to catch them. His guard still up, he once again focused wholly on Mira’s hands. The stones which had missed their mark scattered into the river behind him with several small plops and promptly sank.

“I see. So you planned to set fire to my spider silk *again*.”

He seemed to have deduced Mira’s plan from how she’d behaved. Not only that, he even seemed to have caught on that she’d had her ace in the hole in hand. He stared even harder.

“Ngh… You little…!” Having completely missed her target, Mira hurled her secret weapon in a fit of desperation. The stone was large, tracing an arc through the sky as it headed for Fuzzy Dice.

“Is that…?!”

Whatever the stone was, it was immediately clear from its size that it contained immense power. Aware of that, Fuzzy Dice shifted his attention to the sky, albeit slightly.

Right then, he figured out what Mira was trying to do. She hadn't thrown the stone in a fit of desperation but rather very deliberately, in such a way that he would look upward.

The phantom thief quickly looked back at Mira. She'd carefully drawn his attention to what he'd thought was her secret weapon, only to now use her real ace in the hole. It was a simple yet effective technique. Fuzzy Dice realized that he'd been outsmarted.

Suddenly, he heard a faint whistle come from the side. At the same time, an arrow streaked through the air before sticking into the ground in front of his feet. It had been loosed by the second Valkyrie Sister, who stood atop the city wall just outside his detection range.

Not only that, a small stone was tied to the arrow. For a moment, it appeared as if the stone would unleash some kind of blast. The arrow was nothing but a feint, but the phantom thief had no way of knowing that, so he wasted no time in shooting spider silk to flawlessly contain the blast.

He moved so quickly that he seemed to do so instinctively. It was enough to make Mira wonder whether it was even possible to consciously do something with that kind of speed.

Furthermore, Fuzzy Dice hadn't forgotten about the other stone, despite diverting his attention for a moment. To someone like Fuzzy Dice, who could wield spider silk, the large blasting stone posed little threat as it sailed through the air in a gentle arc.

"You caught it, huh?" Seeing that, Mira immediately flashed a cocky grin. She'd been planning for that all along.

The stone, still wrapped in spider silk, detonated. But rather than unleashing a flash of light and a loud bang, an explosive gust of wind whirled forth.

"This is...!"

Unable to withstand the wind, the silk holding the stone was torn to shreds. The blast swelled outward in all directions, sending Fuzzy Dice soaring into the air.

As if on cue, First Pupil leapt out of the river. After meeting up with Anrutine, he'd waited underwater for the perfect opportunity.

"Meow's the time!"

Thrown completely off his guard, Fuzzy Dice could do nothing to stop First Pupil from getting close. The cat fairy wrapped his arms around the thief in midair. Even as they tumbled to the ground, First Pupil kept clinging to him.

The moment he saw First Pupil, visible bewilderment washed over Fuzzy Dice's face. "Huh...? Aren't you...?!"

But at that same moment, he glimpsed the blasting stone hanging from First Pupil's neck like a pendant. Fuzzy Dice tried to wrench free, but Cat Sith had adopted a rock-solid stance, determined to hold on at any cost. He flashed a defiant smile as if fully prepared for what would happen next.

"I'll meet you in hell. Ciao meow, baby!" First Pupil said, continuing to smile as if for a camera. On his back was a placard that read TELL MY FAMILY I LOVE THEM!

It was worth noting that First Pupil didn't have a family.

The blasting stone activated. It would likely detonate in the next couple seconds. Right then, though, Fuzzy Dice began tickling First Pupil's sides and the base of his tail. Sure enough, that made the oh-so-determined First Pupil suddenly let go.

"Meow could you?! That's not fair! I'm ticklish, meow!"

First Pupil writhed as if on fire. It was the kind of reaction that ensued when someone discovered exactly where someone else was ticklish.

"I knew it...!" Not about to miss his opportunity, Fuzzy Dice wrenched free and, without hesitating for a moment, hurled First Pupil away.

"Catgone it!"

Launched into the air, Cath Sith quickly disappeared into the night sky with a loud bang and a dazzling flash.

Something had caught Fuzzy Dice's attention. Paying no heed to the cat fairy he'd launched so magnificently into the sky, the phantom thief walked toward Mira.

"Spirit Queen…are you…?"

Just then, a small stone plunked onto the ground in front of Fuzzy Dice, dropped by Hippogriff and Wasranvel. They'd been overhead, suppressing their auras high in the dark night sky and waiting for that exact moment.

Fuzzy Dice hurried to react, but the attack took him completely by surprise. The stone detonated instantaneously, unleashing a torrent of light and sound.

"That was my real ace in the hole!"

Mira had a feeling that Fuzzy Dice had been about to say something. Still, believing this to be her best chance, she dashed toward him, binding cloth in hand.

"Ngh…"

This time, everything was set up perfectly. Fuzzy Dice had staggered and was now on his knees. But then spiderwebs quickly began to shoot from him in every direction.

That's Phantom of the Id, isn't it…?

Seeing that rather powerful technique, Mira made sure her guard was up.

Phantom of the Id was among the highest-level Demonic Arts. It activated once its user was incapacitated, temporarily projecting their inner shadow, which would use Demonic Arts to protect them.

In other words, Phantom of the Id would counterattack automatically without taking Fuzzy Dice's conscious thoughts into account. That basically meant it might use any attack, nonlethal or otherwise.

"Like they say, fortune favors the bold and stuff!"

In spite of everything, Mira charged forward. She wasn't sure what counterattack would come her way, but if Fuzzy Dice wasn't

consciously launching those attacks, there'd be plenty of openings to exploit.

The moment she stepped inside the web, countless spider-silk threads flew at her. They all burnt up, however, thanks to the Vermillion Frame encasing her.

Next, more spider silk was thrown her way. This time, the threads were razor-sharp.

This is the first time Fuzzy Dice has actually attacked me, isn't it?

Mira intercepted the steel-like threads by partially summoning a tower shield. Nimbly leaping over it, she partially summoned several dark knights and tried to cut apart the black figure standing in the center of the web: the Phantom of the Id itself.

The moment she did, the spider silk around her vanished, and only the still-incapacitated Fuzzy Dice was before her.

"I've got you!"

Mira quickly closed the distance, unwound the binding cloth, and lunged at Fuzzy Dice. She was only an inch or so away from Fuzzy Dice when something happened—the phantom thief, who should still have been dazed, suddenly thrust out his arm.

"What?!"

Due to the considerable difference in their heights, his arm reached her first and latched cleanly on to her chest. It only touched there for a moment before firmly squeezing. Then his other hand shot out and, wouldn't you know it, darted straight between her thighs.

Having caught Mira midjump, he only held onto her for a brief moment before utilizing her momentum to toss her gracefully into the air.

"What was that?!"

Hurled a dozen or so meters high, Mira scrambled to collect herself, using Air Step to firmly plant her feet in the air. She made sure Fuzzy Dice hadn't launched a follow-up attack before slowly descending to the ground, checking to see how the thief was faring.

She saw that Fuzzy Dice was standing there as if he'd long since recovered from being stunned. There was a faint black shadow around him.

Could it be that…that was actually the Phantom of the Id?

That technique simply used spells autonomously, as Mira understood it. However, that information was from over thirty years ago. Perhaps it had evolved since then, she mused.

Indeed, it *had* evolved to the point that it could move the user's body to rapidly evade attacks.

"Yeah, this really isn't his normal self…"

Having made her way back to the ground, Mira cautiously approached Fuzzy Dice. The phantom thief, meanwhile, neither moved nor looked at her. That was exactly how Phantom of the Id worked; so long as she stayed out of its range, it wouldn't engage.

In that case, Mira began thinking, she simply needed to draw its attention to one side. Then the black shadow enveloping Fuzzy Dice suddenly dissipated.

"Hang on… Time out," Fuzzy Dice said, suddenly turning toward Mira. He'd seemingly just regained his bearings, so he still wobbled a bit as he lifted his palms toward her.

There was definitely a chance that he was just trying to buy time. But she had trouble thinking that Fuzzy Dice would do that kind of thing. She stopped in her tracks.

"What? Do you surrender?" she asked, with a distant hope that, afraid of her power, he might reveal the orphanage's location.

"Well, that's just what I was considering…" he said with a bitter smile. "But there's something I'd like to ask you, O Spirit Queen. Depending on how you answer, I may give you the information you seek." He turned to look straight at Mira, a very earnest expression in his eyes.

He wants to ask me something? Mira wondered what in the world he could want to know. Though still quite wary, she began to think that this offer might be her chance. "I can't tell you why I'm looking for it."

"Yes, I understand that."

She'd reminded him just in case, and now that he'd readily acknowledged that it was fine, she really had no idea what he would ask her.

"All right, then. What would you like to know?" Mira asked, now aloud.

Fuzzy Dice briefly checked their surroundings. Then, acting as if he'd spotted something, he pointed to where he'd been looking. "That Cat Sith over there. That's First Pupil, right?"

First Pupil lay right where Fuzzy Dice was pointing. Pressed against the ground, he looked ready to pounce. The moment they noticed where he was, though, he let out a "meow" and tried behaving like a regular feline, attempting to pass himself off as a normal cat.

"...That's what I'd guess, seeing the very unique way he's acting. Am I right?" Fuzzy Dice asked. The look in his eyes said he was quite confident.

At the same time, Mira realized what his question implied. "If you know First Pupil, then that must mean... Could it be that you're...Subaru Hoshizaki?!"

The moment that name left her lips, Fuzzy Dice's entire demeanor changed. "Yes! I'm the single ray of light that pierces the darkness of night! Indeed, 'tis I, the meteor of righteousness, Star Justice, formerly known as Subaru Hoshizaki!"

Even the way Fuzzy Dice spoke suddenly changed. He'd gone from cocky and full of himself to a very...passionate superhero nerd.

"I wondered if it might be you. To think it really is...!" Mira couldn't help smiling indulgently at the sudden transformation.

Although she'd thought Fuzzy Dice might be Lastrada, she'd second-guessed it for reasons that were largely what made his transformation so remarkable. Fuzzy Dice's personality had nothing in common with Lastrada's overzealous, goofy behavior; they were as different as night and day.

Now Mira was sure of it, though. Fuzzy Dice's true identity was Wise Man Lastrada, the Quirk of Fate. Subaru Hoshizaki wasn't

his real name but his superhero name.

“I’m shocked too! To think that someone with so much gravitas suddenly became a lovely heroine!” Laughing heartily, the superhero Star Justice—formerly Fuzzy Dice—gazed at Mira and gave her a thumbs-up. “Nothing’s more righteous than how cute you are!”

Mira looked much different than she had when she’d been Danblf, yet he’d guessed her true identity from seeing First Pupil. The cat was apparently fairly distinctive.

“Let’s not talk about it.” Mira looked away.

She dispelled the Vermillion Frame and dismissed everyone standing by to help, making sure to thank them all. Now that she knew that Fuzzy Dice was Lastrada, Mira had no reason to fight him. In much the same way, Lastrada dismissed whatever techniques he was still using.

“Jeez. This would’ve gone way faster if I’d just known you were the phantom thief to begin with,” Mira groused.

He was precisely whom she’d been tasked to find. She could’ve had an answer without beating around the bush, telling him she was looking for an orphanage, by cutting straight to the chase and simply asking if Artesia ran it.

“Actually,” she continued, “right now…”

As she told him about her orders to find the remaining Wise Men, they heard voices cut through the air.

“Hey, this way! Somebody’s over here!”

“Bring a lantern over, quick!”

The voices were coming from the direction of the city.

“Uh-oh. Doesn’t look like we have time to stand here and chat!” Lastrada exclaimed.

Looking toward the voices, Mira saw a steady stream of adventurers and guards heading their way. They must’ve heard all the blasting stones she’d used; they seemed to be investigating the ruckus.

Seeing that, Lastrada took off his top and turned it inside out, then put his mask back on. It looked as if Fuzzy Dice had been reborn from his plain-looking self of mere moments before.

“Wow…” said Mira. “That’s how you do it, huh?”

At first glance, Fuzzy Dice appeared to be wearing multiple layers. However, his clothes were constructed quite simply so that he could quickly switch outfits. Mira was impressed by the speed with which he’d changed his appearance.

“Well, you can tell me the details later. Wait a little while and I’ll contact you!” Lastrada said, throwing something to Mira.

Mira caught it without thinking and was shocked when she looked at it. “What the hell…is this?!”

Lastrada had given her a pendant set with precious gemstones. Mira was about to ask what exactly she was supposed to do with it when the area around them suddenly brightened. The guards’ lamps had begun to light up the area.

“Fuzzy Dice is here!”

“Oh, wow, the Spirit Queen’s here too! She chased him all the way here!”

Looking over, Mira saw several squads rushing toward them.

“All right. I’ll leave the rest to you,” Lastrada whispered, then leaped dramatically backward. “Looks like I don’t stand much chance. I should’ve expected as much of the adventurer they call the Spirit Queen. I guess I’ll be throwing in the towel!”

Having said this in his Fuzzy Dice voice loudly enough for the guards to hear, he scattered something on the ground nearby. As he did, great plumes of smoke began pouring forth, enveloping the entire area within moments.

“Well, farewell, friends!”

Nothing was visible in the smoke; only Fuzzy Dice’s far-off voice could be heard as his aura melted into the night and vanished. It was an exit truly befitting a phantom thief.

Well…I ended up discovering his true identity. That’ll have to do for now.

She hadn’t gotten the information she was after, but she’d managed to learn something that would lead her to that information. And she’d actually come away with information that was even more important.

Fuzzy Dice was Lastrada. She’d come searching for Artesia, but had stumbled across another Wise Man. That was quite a stroke of luck, but she regretted not having had a chance to really talk to him.

He said we’d talk again later, but I wonder when that’ll be.

While she pondered this, the smoke screen cleared, and the soldiers—as well as the Cross-Border Judicial Force members assigned to the Fuzzy Dice case—sprinted toward her.

Chapter 28

"WE CAME TO INVESTIGATE all the noise, but it was just you, Spirit Queen. We heard about you—specifically, we heard that an exceptionally talented A-rank adventurer was lending us a hand. Wow! Judging from the racket, it must've been quite the battle," the captain said, his eyes brimming with excitement as he set foot on the scene. This wasn't Desmond but the captain of another troop.

"You got caught in that smokescreen, huh? Well, who could've guessed he could escape like that?"

This speaker was a man from the Cross-Border Judicial Force. As he addressed Mira, he stared into the distance toward where they'd last heard Fuzzy Dice's voice before it faded. Because the man knew so much about the phantom thief, he looked shocked to see such an escape.

At the same time, perhaps because the Cross-Border Judicial Force secretly conspired with the thief, he seemed to speak of Fuzzy Dice with a certain admiration. That said, he remembered to acknowledge Mira's efforts.

"It's quite impressive that you got as far as you did," he noted. "A-rank adventurers really are astounding, huh?"

"He was a tougher opponent than any I've ever faced," Mira answered humbly before remembering the necklace in her hand. Fuzzy Dice had given it to her, and she figured she might as well ask the men about it. She showed them the necklace. "By the way, do you know anything about this...?"

"Whoa! That's Eurus of the Silver Sky!" The Judicial Force agent's eyes widened.

The soldiers fidgeted; even the captain stared intently at the necklace with astonishment. "You recovered that from Fuzzy Dice?! That's quite the find!"

The moment he said that, the soldiers and Judicial Force agent began chattering about how Mira was now a billionaire, and

how she'd virtually won the lottery.

"Um…I don't get it. Is this thing really that special?" Mira had thought it was just some trinket that Fuzzy Dice had tossed to her. Not really understanding all the fuss, she could only ask what exactly "Eurus of the Silver Sky" was.

"It's incredible that you recovered it without even knowing what it was… I'm impressed!"

Seemingly even more shocked and fired up, the captain began giving her the details. Eurus of the Silver Sky, which she'd supposedly claimed from Fuzzy Dice, was an incredibly valuable treasure prized by the Dorres Company president. The jewels that it was set with, as well as the incredible workmanship with which it had been crafted, made it a work of art. Furthermore, the natural colors that graced it were in such perfect harmony that no one believed it could've been made by mortal hands.

The necklace was meant to represent the stars shining in the night sky and was said to be imbued with the blessing of the God of Trade. It was apparently worth no less than three *billion* ducats.

"Wow… Three billion?!"

The starry "sky" in her hand cost an arm and a leg. Not only that, the Cross-Border Judicial Force agent elaborated, the necklace's price would probably go up after the incident it'd just been involved in. The stuff about it containing the God of Trade's blessing was no joke, but now that it'd been recovered from Fuzzy Dice by the famous Spirit Queen, its value was sure to rise.

There was apparently also a legend that said whoever got their hands on the necklace would become one of the most successful merchants of their lifetime. That hadn't just happened once or twice, but enough times that it couldn't be written off as mere coincidence. The miraculous boons the necklace granted extended to trade routes as well. Companies in possession of it suffered very little damage from either bandits or monsters.

And now, the necklace would be known for being recovered after its theft. That meant that if Mira put it up for sale, she'd immediately have *dozens* of company presidents on her doorstep making bids, he continued excitedly.

“Jeez, I’m jealous,” he remarked. “If I had three billion, I’d just spend the rest of my life having fun.”

With that fortune, he could live in the lap of luxury. Despite being an agent of the Cross-Border Judicial Force appointed by the church, he let his imagination run wild just like anyone else.

The captain, meanwhile, said, “I’d probably start a business.”

He proceeded to detail his dream of marrying a woman whom he’d fatefully meet while he worked there. Hearing what their captain said, the soldiers laughed that he wouldn’t find anyone without making money first.

“I was going to hire you guys as personal bodyguards. I sure as heck won’t now,” the captain retorted, miffed.

The soldiers took back what they’d said, trying to smooth things over.

What a peaceful scene… Mira smiled indulgently to herself as she watched the men become impassioned as they talked about their fantasies.

Then she suddenly started to feel uneasy. The captain and Cross-Border Judicial Force agent had both talked about Eurus of the Silver Sky as if they themselves owned it. But if what they said was true, Mira reflected, it was stolen. In that case, it was their duty to return it to its owner.

When she mentioned this, their responses were unexpected.

“That’s right. You’ve been chasing Fuzzy Dice this whole time, huh?”

“So you wouldn’t have any way of knowing.”

They explained what they meant: While Mira chased down Fuzzy Dice, a bunch of things had gone on behind the scenes, all related to the phantom thief’s evidence.

The church had carefully examined the evidence he’d left at the cathedral, uncovering the evil deeds that the Dorres Company had committed. Personnel had then immediately left to apprehend the president. After combining that evidence with what Fuzzy Dice had submitted to the Mages’ Guild, they’d opened a

court case against the Dorres Company, and it had been ruled that the business would be dissolved.

Furthermore, all its assets had been seized. The necklace had already been stolen at that point, though, and so it wasn't subject to seizure.

In other words, there was no longer a Dorres Company to which to return the necklace. So since Mira had recovered it from Fuzzy Dice, ownership had passed to her.

"Wow… Really…?"

Without even knowing it, she'd come into possession of a treasure worth three billion ducats. Hearing that, Mira looked at the necklace and grinned triumphantly, amazed at her unexpected good fortune. Fantasies danced in her head as she thought about whether she should sell it or keep it and take advantage of the blessing of the God of Trade or whatever.

Then a thought suddenly crossed her mind: Why had Lastrada given it to her when he did? *What was he up to?*

After thinking that over for a moment, the answer came to her. More than anything, it had become clear upon seeing the soldiers' and Cross-Border Judicial Force agent's reactions.

Mira was an extremely skilled adventurer who'd managed to recover treasure from Fuzzy Dice. At least, they'd said as much. But what would they have said if Fuzzy Dice had just run off, never giving her anything? In that case, it would simply have looked like he'd escaped from her.

It was fair to say that they were old friends, and so he'd probably given her the necklace to help her save face.

That was considerate of him.

Understanding why she'd received Eurus of the Silver Sky, Mira thought she was obligated to be equally considerate. If she hadn't shown up, Fuzzy Dice would've invested the money from selling that pendant into the futures of a host of poor orphanages. What she had to do was clear.

"If this is really mine, then…I guess I'll donate it to the church. Send the money to help the children in its orphanages."

As part of its charity work, the Church of the Trinity ran a large network of orphanages. Announcing that she wanted to donate the necklace's value to that network, Mira handed it to the Cross-Border Judicial Force agent.

"Are…are you serious?"

With the necklace right in front of him, a clearly conflicted look rose on the agent's face. The captain, for his part, was utterly speechless, looking at Mira as if she were insane.

"I wouldn't joke about something like this. Sorry to say it outright, but I'm not that hard up for money. And I've got no plans to start a business. If it really grants some boon from the God of Trade, it'd be better off with someone who can put it to good use, right?" Mira answered. She added that it might be a good idea to stipulate that whatever merchant ended up with the necklace also supply orphanages at a low price.

"You really are serious, huh…? All right. Understood!" The Cross-Border Judicial Force agent took Mira at her word, but added that he couldn't take the necklace at that moment. Suddenly, he declared, "If you plan to donate something this precious, we ought to have a donation ceremony at the cathedral!"

He insisted that he couldn't possibly just accept this type of donation there, under such modest circumstances. He was intent on preparing a proper setting for Mira to donate the necklace directly to the archbishop, who happened to be in Haxthausen at that very moment.

For the record, the agent's sudden suggestion was half because he feared carrying something so valuable and absolutely wanted to avoid doing so.

"Um…I'm not sure that's really necessary…"

"No! We should go about this properly! Letting everyone know that you're making such a large donation will deter anyone on the inside from trying to get their own cut."

The moment Mira showed the slightest uncertainty, the agent doubled down. He might've worked for the church, but that didn't stop him from readily suggesting that there were those

inside the institution who would embezzle the funds as he very earnestly emphasized the importance of a donation ceremony.

It'll be such a pain, though.

Those words entirely summed up Mira's resistance to his idea. Lots of people, including herself, weren't fans of such formal events. Furthermore, she'd have to stand opposite the archbishop, a high-ranking church official, at the ceremony. If at all possible, she really wanted to leave the necklace to the Cross-Border Judicial Force agent.

"All right, then, I'll take my leave! And I'll tell the archbishop your donation plans as soon as I can. It'll probably take two or three days to prepare everything, so if you can come to the cathedral whenever you get a chance, that'd be great!"

The agent must've guessed what Mira was thinking, since he quickly left after saying this, as if fleeing the scene. Before hurrying off, he finally added, "Ah—and I'll just let him know that you might be coming."

Might be coming. No doubt he said that just in case Mira had a change of heart.

"This has become a whole dog and pony show…" But she wouldn't rethink whether to donate the necklace, which meant they'd really have a ceremony. Eurus of the Silver Sky still in her hand, she sighed deeply and quickly shifted her gaze to the captain.

Reading from Mira's expression that she was practically begging him to donate the necklace in her stead, he took a couple steps backward. "Well…it's about time I go back to give my report," he said quickly, then added, "All right, then. Good luck with the ceremony."

He hurried off briskly, followed by the soldiers. They praised her generosity, chattering about how they expected nothing less of the Spirit Queen.

After the agent and captain had fled—or rather *left*—Mira got the details on what'd happened in the underground waterway from Christina, who was still on the scene.

“Hunh…I see. So it was that sort of place. Well, good work. Have a nice rest… Hm? What…? Oh. In that case, tell them that I said to take tomorrow off. Mm-hmm. No, I don’t mind.”

With those final words of praise, Mira dismissed Christina and reflected. While she’d been locked in her epic showdown with Fuzzy Dice, quite a lot had gone down in the underground waterway.

“They really were hiding something criminal. Still, to think…”

According to Christina, they’d followed Fuzzy Dice’s trail until they reached a stout iron door. Inside it, they found five suspicious-looking men and twelve bound children. They managed to neutralize the men quickly and recover all the kids unharmed. Interrogating the men had confirmed that the spot was a base of operations for human trafficking. In other words, Fuzzy Dice had led everyone there to bust the place.

He escaped into that underground waterway specifically to uncover the trafficking base. Jeez… That’s so like him. Finally understanding Fuzzy Dice’s inexplicable behavior, Mira laughed at how little her old friend had changed.

The owner of the mansion above the waterway’s entrance had been detained for questioning regarding his involvement in the trafficking, along with his staff. Christina said that, while they weren’t sure about the servants, the mercenaries agreed unanimously that the owner was absolutely a perpetrator.

“Well, that’s one case closed.”

Fuzzy Dice’s work had exposed the evil deeds of both the Dorres Company and another nobleman. From his point of view, Mira was sure, this must’ve been a great success that went exactly according to plan. Mira also knew Fuzzy Dice’s identity now and had gotten her hands on the treasure known as Eurus of the Silver Sky. She’d get the details from Lastrada later.

Although she now had to participate in a donation ceremony, Mira had managed to save twelve children that night. In high spirits, she mounted Pegasus and headed back to the city.

Chapter 29

RETURNING TO HAXTHAUSEN, Mira found that the atmosphere had completely changed. Only a few people remained on the main street that had been so packed and full of life. Had all the fans swarming the streets gone off somewhere? Considering this, she landed Pegasus near the Mages' Guild.

"It feels a bit like the day after Christmas."

Mira thanked and dismissed Pegasus before looking out on the main street which, far from being as bustling and full of life as on the previous day, now felt somewhat lonely.

Catching sight of the shops that lined the other side of the street, Mira understood what was going on. Huge throngs of Fuzzy Dice fans were at an amazing sweets shop that the chief detective had recommended. It was apparently run by a fan, and they were holding a post-heist party there.

What would happen if, as Mira expected, word reached them that the Spirit Queen had stolen a treasure from Fuzzy Dice? Regardless of her reasons for doing so, she'd been the first person to hand him a defeat.

"I should try to steer clear of them."

Shuddering at the thought of any number of unimaginably awful scenarios, Mira stealthily headed down the street, bursting into the Mages' Guild to seek refuge. She was utterly taken aback to see just how wild and full of excitement it was inside.

"Jeez... This place is pretty lively too."

The guild lobby had been transformed into what felt like a New Year's Eve party. Long tables had been arranged and topped with mountains of food and booze. Men and women were loudly drinking and singing with one another.

What exactly was the reason for all this? Mira asked a nearby guild member. They answered that they were having a "consolation party" for the chief detective.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen such a huge party for someone who lost…” On the surface, this certainly looked like a celebration for some great victory.

Peering around the guild, Mira saw the chief detective and walked toward him. Spotting her, another adventurer called out, “The Spirit Queen is back!”

Perhaps because she’d worked alongside the chief detective, the sea of adventurers immediately parted, creating a clear path to him.

The moment Wolf recognized her, he gave Mira a hearty handshake. “Well now, Miss Mira, you’re back! Why don’t we go over here? Would you tell me in detail how it all went after we parted?”

No one there seemed to have a clue what’d happened after Fuzzy Dice escaped. Just about the only thing they knew was that he’d gone to some mansion.

“Hrmm. If you haven’t been updated, I’ll tell you everything I know and learned.”

Mira sat opposite the chief detective and poured herself a glass of fruit wine. Polishing it off in a single gulp, she cheerfully began explaining what’d happened after they left the guild. She told him about the mansion they’d chased Fuzzy Dice to and how he’d left a trail there. She detailed how, by following that trail, they’d discovered a human-trafficking base. Then she talked at length about Christina’s report and finally summarized what the captain had said about the Dorres Company’s fate.

“So…that’s the story. Fuzzy Dice’s goal was definitely to bust that place.”

“Quite a bit happened, didn’t it? I’d have loved being there to see it,” the chief detective said, lamenting the state of his legs. Still, he smiled as if he’d expected nothing less of Fuzzy Dice.

“Man, he really is a convincing righteous hero,” Praising the phantom thief, Mira turned the fruit wine bottle upside down. She laughed dryly to herself at how absurd it was that a superhero nerd had become a real hero.

Once her story had ended, those in the guild grew even more boisterous. Wolf and Mira began hearing shouts of “That’s what you get, Viscount Denveroll!” and “I can’t believe he took down two of Haxthausen’s most disgraceful citizens!” It seemed that both of Fuzzy Dice’s targets were rather infamous.

Others present asked how Fuzzy Dice had learned about the crimes the men had committed, while others still lobbed questions about how he’d fingered those responsible. Their comments finally revealed to Mira that the mansion’s owner was a viscount called Denveroll.

“Well, it’s not like I care.” There was no point learning the name of some criminal who’d already been found guilty. Mira wiped the name from her memory and grabbed a second bottle of fruit wine, filling her glass.

“Then what? What happened with Fuzzy Dice?” Wolf asked.

Mira had only explained what’d happened up until they followed his trail to its end. The chief detective wanted to know what took place between them and the phantom thief after that.

When Wolf again asked her to relate that, a cocky grin appeared on Mira’s face. She stood as if her big moment had come.

“Well…he left a trail so that we could find the trafficking base…but I picked up on that pretty quickly and got the jump on him!”

After declaring that triumphantly, Mira asked whether she could add a little more context. Upon realizing what Fuzzy Dice was trying to do, she explained, she’d joined forces with Captain Desmond and split their group into two.

“Given Fuzzy Dice’s usual MO, I had the distinct impression that something would lie at the end of the trail he left, so we needed to follow it and see where it led. We couldn’t, though—if we did, he’d just easily escape. That was when I turned to my evocations!”

The phantom thief’s whole scheme had been for his pursuers to find the base and then for him to disappear without a trace. Flashing a grin, Mira asserted that she hadn’t intended to let his

plan go quite that smoothly. Using a water spirit's power, she'd had no trouble determining his exact location. Furthermore, she'd guessed exactly where he was heading.

Puffing out her chest, Mira then proudly proclaimed that—having done so—she'd gotten ahead of Fuzzy Dice by riding Pegasus to the exit he'd been making for.

"There, I faced off against him using only nonlethal force, the same as him."

Fuzzy Dice would never have done anything to harm an opponent, so she'd fought him on similar terms. Launching into their battle, she explained that Fuzzy Dice had primarily relied on various types of spider silk. She'd then used a brilliant combination of techniques to detonate a blasting stone that she'd slipped through his defenses with her evocations' help.

"And so our battle ended as a tie."

Wrapping up the highly embellished story, which highlighted the usefulness of summoning, Mira took a gulp of the fruit wine and let out a spirited laugh. About halfway through her explanation, she'd begun feeling pretty tipsy and started to slur her words. Still, she'd successfully kept from spilling the beans about the most crucial element: Fuzzy Dice's true identity.

"That's incredible! You're amazing, Spirit Queen!"

"It blows me away how you fought him on his terms!"

It certainly seemed as if Mira wasn't the only one who'd gotten drunk. Regaled with tales of her exploits, the crowd began getting thoroughly fired up.

Further emboldened by their voices, Mira yelled, "And this is what I got for my efforts!"

She pulled out Eurus of the Silver Sky and held it up. The appearance of a treasure worth no less than three billion ducats whipped the onlookers up even further. Yet no one dared to get within a certain distance of Mira; it was such an extraordinary treasure, they perhaps feared for their well-being should something happen to it.

The chief detective, meanwhile, smiled happily as he carefully took in the details of Mira's showdown. "I believe the Sentinel Knights have a weapon similar to that... Yes, indeed. Used properly, a blasting stone really could knock someone silly."

Evidently stun grenades similar to Mira's modified blasting stones were part of the Sentinel Knights' arsenal.

Already focused on his next showdown with Fuzzy Dice, the chief detective had begun working out his next plan. Hoping to gather more information, he asked, "About that spider silk that you just mentioned, Miss Mira..."

Mira answered every single question he had.

The extraordinarily bacchanalian consolation party went late into the night before ending with about four-fifths of the participants drunk as skunks. Mira was sloshed as well. Afterward, Nina and her sisters carried Mira back to her hotel before throwing her into bed, where she promptly fell asleep.

Slowly coming to her senses the next morning, Mira wondered how she'd made it back. The last thing she remembered was wildly making merry at the Mages' Guild.

"I guess someone brought me here, huh...?"

Whoever it was had helped her change into one of the hotel's sleeping robes. Mira silently thanked them while going about her morning routine. She relieved herself, then showered and changed clothes. This time, though, she didn't change into her specially made technomancy robes. Rather, she pulled a dress she'd brought as casual attire from her bag and put her arms through it. After yesterday's battle with Fuzzy Dice, her normal clothes were sweaty and filthy.

"Hrmm... Yeah, this is pretty comfortable!"

Changing her underwear, Mira decided she might as well put on the cooling conditioner she'd bought from Dinoire Trading under her top layer. The product worked impressively; even after Mira stepped onto the balcony under the bright summer sun, her entire body felt wrapped in a layer of chilly refreshment. She expected nothing less of an item sold under Dinoire Trading's name.

Satisfied with the cooling conditioner's performance, Mira left the room, her technomancy robes in hand. On her way down the hallway, she turned her clothes in to be washed before heading down to the lobby.

There, she saw a couple of familiar faces—none other than Wolf and Julius. The two were talking to a man who appeared to be a merchant, as well as a woman who looked like an adventurer.

"All right. So we'll leave in an hour. Thank you very much," the man said, turning around. He left with the woman, giving a slight bow as he passed Mira.

"Well now, good morning, Miss Mira."

"Good morning."

"Hrmm, morning."

After their casual greetings, Mira eyed the direction in which the man they'd been speaking to had gone. "He mentioned leaving. Are you guys departing the city already?"

"Yes, that's the plan." The chief detective nodded. He and Julius seemed about as busy as they had been the day before. With a reluctant smile, he added, "Our business here wrapped up yesterday, and we don't have any reason to stay longer."

Then Julius, who stood behind him, leveled with Mira. "If we don't get back right after finishing the job, his wife will yell at him."

While Wolf gave off the impression of being free-spirited and always doing as he pleased, it seemed that he was like most husbands, in that he couldn't say no to his wife.

The chief detective glared in silence at Julius, who'd somewhat spoiled his cool line. His assistant simply stared into the distance as if he didn't notice, and Wolf changed the subject.

"Miss Mira, have you eaten yet?" he asked, his eyes yet again filled with anticipation.

"No, but I'm about to."

The moment that answer had left her lips, Wolf pointed eagerly toward a restaurant—the same one where they'd eaten pancakes the day before. He remarked that it was offering a

limited-time dish only available for a week at the start of the cathedral's seasonal liturgy. That dish was apparently so incredible that it featured in books on fine dining.

"Hunh. Then I suppose I'll tag along."

"Yes, you can't miss it."

Mira had agreed readily, and the chief detective raced forward in his wheelchair.

They ordered the special: deep-sea custard. It was a striking plate of fluffy, moist pancakes. The truly extravagant dish was heaped with a generous portion of the restaurant's signature custard; the pancakes were literally drowned in a thick custard ocean. By putting that custard on one of the thin pancakes that accompanied it, one could savor its full flavor.

The trio thoroughly enjoyed what amounted to a top-notch dessert first thing in the morning. The flavor was sweet without being excessive; it lingered in one's nostrils. However heavy it might've looked, it was a perfect treat for breakfast.

Finishing their breakfast and returning to the lobby, Wolf, Julius, and Mira bid each other farewell.

"All right, Miss Mira. May our paths cross again."

"Thanks for everything," said Julius.

"Mm-hmm. Take care."

The chief detective loved sweets about as much as he loved to talk, so if they weren't careful, he and Julius would miss their departure time. Both would be traveling with a caravan, acting as escorts and advisors. The man from before had apparently been a representative of that caravan. They must not have had much time left to arrive at the meeting place, since Julius ran off pushing the wheelchair.

Watching the amusing duo hurry away, Mira smiled to herself. "Guess I should get going too, huh?"

When he'd left the previous night, Fuzzy Dice said he'd come find her, but she wasn't sure when that'd be. So what should she do?

Even as she pondered this, Mira smiled at the fact that she finally had some free time. She headed into the city to take in the sights.

Chapter 30

TWO DAYS AFTER the tumultuous events with Fuzzy Dice, Mira was going about her morning routine with a vacant stare when saw that a sealed envelope had been slid under her door, just like in the movies.

In a horror movie, the envelope's message might've said something like "You're next." But under the circumstances, Mira guessed who'd written it. Thinking that it'd come a bit quicker than she expected, she picked up the letter and looked it over.

Just as she anticipated, the letter was from Lastrada. In it, he'd written about a couple small tasks he wanted her to do, as well as where they'd rendezvous.

"I wonder whether he'll spring a request for the necklace back?"

The day before yesterday, she'd proudly declared that she'd be donating it, which the captain and Cross-Border Judicial Force agent had been excited to hear. If she returned it to Lastrada, they'd for sure think that she'd been blinded by greed and changed her mind.

Still, the phantom thief would probably say he'd only lent it to her so she'd look better and then ask for it back. That worried Mira—who tended to be both frugal and tightfisted—as she made her way to the rendezvous spot.

"All right, I'm here. But where is he?"

She'd arrived at the exact spot where her epic battle with Fuzzy Dice had taken place two days earlier. Surveying the area, she saw the landscape flecked with remnants of their heated fight.

And wouldn't you know it—as she looked around, she heard a splash and saw something rise to the river's surface. Mira was taken aback for a moment. Then, scrutinizing the figure, she recognized exactly who it was.

"Oh, you're already here. That was quick. Well, sorry if I kept you waiting!" a peppy voice called.

The figure accompanying that voice was garbed as a normal, everyday mage. Yet the man standing there with an insufferably overenthusiastic smile was none other than Wise Man Lastrada, the Quirk of Fate. At the moment, his true face was revealed, and he looked exactly as Mira remembered.

"No. I just got here too," she replied. "But it looks like you came from the aqueduct again. Is something still down there, or...?"

Directly below the mid-river point where Lastrada had emerged was an outlet connected to the mysterious sprawling waterway that ran under Haxthausen. Thus, Mira presumed that Lastrada had been up to something down there. She was apparently right on the money.

"Ah...yes! It's something I want your help with, Commander." Lastrada answered, his face utterly aglow with righteousness. Everyone knew that when he got that look on his face, there was no stopping him. "First off..."

For the record, "Commander" was Lastrada's nickname for Danblf. It was apparently because Danblf had appeared the most sage-like of the Nine Wise Men, and Lastrada considered him something like the group's figurehead. The nickname also fit his sentai sensibilities. Meanwhile, he referred to Solomon as "Commander in Chief."

Lastrada started by explaining why he'd chosen to become the phantom thief Fuzzy Dice. A phantom thief who actually sent out calling cards or whatever was just absurd, so why in the world was he doing that?

Sure enough, it had apparently started with Artesia. Over seven years earlier, a child had been abducted from a small village orphanage Artesia ran.

That very much angered her, of course, so she'd utterly wiped out the bandits who'd perpetrated the abduction. Furthermore, she got her hands on all the evidence incriminating a certain noble for child trafficking and had them judged and punished by the law.

What surprised Mira about that story was that the noble mentioned in it was the same one she'd heard that Fuzzy Dice's

first heist had targeted. However, the way his heists were carried out had changed quite a bit since then. She'd brought that up with Solomon. Now she understood why that was: In the very beginning, Fuzzy Dice had actually been an entirely different person.

"I was surprised by how bold Artesia was," Lastrada continued. "But seeing the difference she'd made in the streets, I gave her strategy my seal of approval."

So how exactly was the first Fuzzy Dice connected to the current Fuzzy Dice? When Mira broached that question, Lastrada elaborated.

At that time, Artesia had simply been known as a mysterious whistleblower, and her actions resonated significantly with the public. They said that a righteous hero had come to bring the hammer of justice down on the wicked nobleman.

Then there was Lastrada, who at that point—or ever since arriving to this world, more accurately—had been battling the evil that ran rampant in the criminal underworld. He'd been hot on the trail of an especially large human-trafficking syndicate when he'd found himself in the same city as that nobleman. There, he saw the stir that Artesia had caused firsthand.

As for the nobleman, plenty of evidence implicated him, and he'd been sentenced within a couple days. But that sentence was given a little too quickly and was exceedingly harsh.

"It's possible that they delivered the sentence that quickly to keep him from revealing anything they didn't want him to," Lastrada said tersely.

That nobleman had also held clues that Lastrada was after. But because of his sentence, Lastrada added, his leads had dried up.

He'd refused to give up, however, and began searching for the whistleblower in hopes that she'd have information. He laughed that he'd been shocked to discover that it was Artesia.

Just like that, they'd reunited. After they exchanged information, Lastrada had successfully gathered intel on the shadowy syndicate he'd been after. Artesia, for her part, realized

that the nobleman she'd brought down was only the tip of the iceberg.

Unable to sit idly by while knowing that a human-trafficking syndicate was preying on children, Artesia teamed up with Lastrada to bring about the group's ruin. Combining the identity and MO of the mysterious whistleblower so well received by the public with Lastrada's superhero-loving sensibilities, they created "Fuzzy Dice."

The phantom thief's true objective was to gather evidence tied to large human-trafficking syndicates and bring them to justice. That was why all his targets were involved with those organizations. Furthermore, he didn't turn all the evidence in to the church or Mages' Guild. He apparently actually brought back evidence tied directly to such syndicates.

"I see. So that's how it all happened. In that case, that orphanage must really be run by Artesia."

As Lastrada spoke, that one fact had finally become clear. Just as Mira expected, the Wise Man Artesia had set up the orphanage.

Regardless of Fuzzy Dice's goals, coming to the city had revealed to Mira that Artesia was indeed still active—and, sure enough, connected to Fuzzy Dice. Not only that, the two had apparently taken on a big adversary. It didn't seem like Mira's work would be quite as simple as just finding them and bringing them back.

"So my work this time is just about wrapped up. One tricky part has come up, though…" Having finished talking about Fuzzy Dice's origins, Lastrada moved on to the current situation.

He'd managed to sneak into a cell in the guardhouse and get information from the criminals who'd been in the underground waterway's back room. The first thing he'd learned was that the men were dealers who were there to prepare their "products." Furthermore, Viscount Denveroll had been promised a cut of their profits for allowing them to use the space.

When Lastrada interrogated the group further, details of a mysterious man soon emerged. Apparently, this man took orders from above and had hired all of them. Whenever they began

working, he'd always be right there beside them, watching and observing. But he'd gone off somewhere the day before, so he wasn't among those captured.

"In short, if we find him, he might be the key to identifying the syndicate they took orders from!" Lastrada said, summing up his investigation's results. But, he continued, there was an issue as to how he'd proceed. "I've searched every nook and cranny of that room in the underground waterway, but I can't find a single shred of evidence I could use to identify him. I expanded my search today, but I still didn't have any luck."

According to the information he'd received, the mysterious man who'd assembled the traffickers had indeed entered the room in the underground waterway, but apparently no traces there led back to him.

"But now I've run into you again, Commander! That was when I remembered—doesn't one of your friends specialize in investigation? The God of Justice themselves must've arranged for our paths to cross, right?!"

He was out of leads to pursue the mysterious man, but he figured that Mira's evocations might just be able to help find him.

"Hrmm. I think you have a point there. Woofson's powers might well be able to track him down. Don't forget, there might be evidence your eyes alone can't detect," Mira replied nonchalantly.

She brimmed with confidence; meanwhile, Lastrada's eyes glittered eagerly.

Choosing to help with Lastrada's goal, Mira decided to pay a visit to the guardhouse with Woofson. Unlike Lastrada—who'd had to sneak in—Mira simply asked to check on the men who'd been captured in the waterway. The guards immediately let her head to the men's cell, perhaps owing to how much she'd helped with the case.

"Hrmm. This is all of them."

"All right. I've got their scents, woof!"

The plan Mira had come up with was both the most straightforward and the likeliest to work: They'd use Woofson's

nose, which could sniff out any scent. He wasn't just able to track anything he'd smelled before; he could also exclude scents he recognized and track whichever ones he didn't.

Now Mira could take Woofson to the room in the waterway with the traffickers' scents fresh in his nostrils. Any unfamiliar scent there would undoubtedly belong to the mysterious figure.

Mira's reputation even helped her at Viscount Denveroll's mansion.

"I see. Got it. Sure, go on through," a guard told her.

In just one night, she'd become so well-known that all the guards recognized her name and face. She had no problem going about the place, although it was crawling with guards conducting investigations.

"I'm starting to think we should just have met up and checked the place out together," Lastrada admitted.

Mira smiled wryly at how, only a bit earlier, Lastrada had been sneaking around and checking the place out stealthily, while she was free to do the same thing by simply walking around in the open. Perhaps the guards were a bit lax, or trusted Mira enough to let her do so. Even if she'd brought Lastrada, they'd probably just have let him through without checking him, since they hadn't checked Woofson either.

The guards had sealed off the underground room, but upon learning that she wanted to investigate the area, they quickly let her inside.

"All right. Here we are. I leave it to you, Woofson," said Mira.

"I'm counting on you, Woofson!" Lastrada added.

"Leave it to me, woof!" Woofson confidently replied.

With all their hopes pinned on him, he hurriedly began distinguishing the room's different scents. Quite a few actually still lingered. They weren't only the scents of the traffickers but those of the mercenaries, guards, and others as well... Dozens in total. Regardless, Woofson distinguished them calmly and skillfully.

"Woof! This one's new... I'm pretty sure this one's from yesterday, woof..."

He wasn't just differentiating where the scents came from but *when* exactly they were from as well. Basically, although there were so many new smells in the air, he could quickly tell which were from guards or mercenaries.

Woofson was looking for a single particular scent: one that had been there a long time—but that he didn't recognize.

They'd been in the underground room for just over five minutes when Woofson found it: the scent of the mysterious man who'd regularly visited the traffickers.

"I got it, woof!"

"Good jo—" Mira began.

Just as she was about to praise Woofson, Lastrada's voice rang out, commending Woofson enthusiastically. "Fantastic job…!"

The lead that'd gone cold might now heat up again, which explained why Lastrada was beside himself with excitement.

"All right. Where are they?! Let's go find 'em!" he exclaimed, putting Woofson under his arm and bolting away.

Knowing full well that there was no stopping Lastrada once he got like that, Mira ordered, "Don't go carrying him like a purse!" then hurried after them.

They made their way out of the underground waterway, through Viscount Denveroll's mansion, and onto the street. There, Woofson hopped out of Lastrada's arms and lay flat on the ground.

"Now get ready to see my real skills, woof!" he said before enthusiastically casting a spell.

The magic Woofson used allowed him spatial awareness of any scent he recognized. On top of that, he could ascertain how much time had passed since a scent had been produced. In other words, so long as a smell lingered, he could simply pinpoint where it was freshest without having to follow it.

"Woof… They were here!"

If Woofson's target had gone outside the spell's range, he'd have needed to track him once again, but the mysterious man was

seemingly still in Haxthausen. Using his magic, Woofson followed the scent and located the culprit in no time at all.

“Wow—you did it! I shouldn’t have expected any less of you, Woofson.”

Mira lifted Woofson up before Lastrada had a chance to snatch him. She told Lastrada, who was clearly in a dire hurry, to calm down before asking Woofson where their target was.

Following his directions, they found themselves in an unremarkable magical-tool shop. And the man Woofson pointed to looked to be an unremarkable man. From his appearance, he could’ve been an adventurer, perhaps. He looked like a typical adventurer at first glance, since he was reasonably well armored.

“Hrmm. Maybe he dresses like that so he can blend in, eh? It’s actually the kind of thing *you’d* do.”

The human traffickers must’ve operated while disguised as adventurers. Sharing this hypothesis and noting how similar it was to Fuzzy Dice’s strategy, Mira looked over at Lastrada.

“Don’t lump me in with them. My disguises are much more sophisticated,” he retorted. “He just looks like he got some good loot and wore it to show off.”

Casually criticizing their target’s fashion sense, the pair watched and followed him from a distance. The mysterious man wasn’t doing anything suspicious at the moment; he’d left the magical-tool shop and gone to stock up on groceries.

Now carrying quite a bit, he arrived at his last destination—a place called a “guild house.”

When Mira asked Lastrada what the location was, he responded that it was a facility run by the Adventurers’ Guild Union for guilds organized by adventurers. They could use it as a place to live, store things, or meet up. It was equipped with a range of amenities.

“Ah. This is a bit of a problem. To enter the guild house, you need to belong to a guild,” Lastrada said.

They’d followed the mysterious man this far but couldn’t go any farther. The guild house’s security was apparently tight, and it

was equipped with crime-prevention measures. There was also a dedicated checkpoint at the entrance; it wouldn't be easy to disguise themselves and slip inside.

It sounded like Lastrada himself had once needed to enter a guild house and tried various ways to sneak inside. However, he said, the facilities were equipped with various countermeasures specially made by the Hinomoto Committee, so he hadn't been able to investigate thoroughly.

"The person we're after is particularly important," Lastrada noted. "If possible, I'd like to just go in normally and search the place high and low…" Yet in their situation, it'd be difficult to take their time searching.

Having gone off to the side, he suddenly opened his Item Box and took out a small booklet.

"What's that?" Mira asked.

Looking at it, she saw that it was a pamphlet containing written instructions on how to use guild houses.

"It'd be great if some info in here helped us find a way in."

The pamphlet was full of strict rules. The first rule that caught their eye was about how to form a guild. In the worst-case scenario, the two of them could just form a guild themselves. But to do so, they'd first need to pay thirty million ducats. Seeing that stipulation, Mira crossed that option off the list.

Lastrada, on the other hand, said nonchalantly, "Thirty million, huh? I can afford that… But it takes them a week to process the request, so I guess that won't work."

First and foremost, he wanted to investigate the mysterious man as soon as possible, so what was hardest for him to stomach was seemingly the seven-day wait.

"Hrmm… You're right! Thirty million is reasonable, but we can't wait a week!"

Feeling the pointless need to compete with Lastrada, Mira calculated to herself that she surely wouldn't make less than thirty million if she sold the rest of her mobility stones.

Continuing to read the pamphlet, they stumbled upon another passage that piqued their interest. It described how guests could enter the guild house.

"I see... You can use the guild house even if you don't belong to a guild. You just need an invitation from someone in charge of the house."

Taking a closer look, they could evidently be issued invitations as soon as a guild leader gave them permission. At the moment, that seemed like the quickest and most surefire method they'd come up with—but it was easier said than done.

If someone who'd received an invitation caused a problem, that would become an issue for the entire guild. Thus, even if they could get hold of a guild leader and request invitations, they doubted anyone would grant them. To get an invitation, one needed to be considered very trustworthy.

Lastrada seemed disappointed not to have the slightest idea whom he could ask for an invitation. He mostly had connections that he used for gathering intel, so his network was fairly spread out and shallow. He didn't seem to have any acquaintances that'd trust him enough to give him an invitation.

That said, he and Mira had finally found the mysterious man and identified a way of getting into the guild house. And considering that this was a guild house, there was a high chance that the man's friends were in there as well. This was the perfect chance, and they couldn't let it slip through their fingers.

Thinking about what they ought to do, Mira suddenly remembered a guild she knew. "Hrmm. I suppose it's my turn to step up. Luckily, there's a guild I'm on good terms with."

Unlike Lastrada, Mira was very confident that she had fairly strong connections. The guild she'd rely on was none other than Écarlate Carillon. If she could contact the guild's leader, Cyril, then no doubt she'd get her hands on a couple of invitations.

Their objective this time was to get information on a human-trafficking syndicate. In other words, they were defending justice. Cyril was always going around doing good deeds, so Mira was confident that he'd definitely lend them a hand.

“Oh ho. I might’ve expected as much of you, Commander! In that case, hurry and work it out with them.” Hearing that Mira could suddenly make possible something they’d ruled out, Lastrada had high expectations of her.

After hearing this, however, Mira froze. *Speaking of which… how do I contact him…?*

If she left Cyril a message at the Adventurers’ Guild Union, they’d give it to him when he next visited. The drawback of that was that Mira had no idea when he’d get it. She needed to figure out a way of getting the invitations right away. To do that, she needed a strategy to contact Cyril quickly.

I’m pretty sure the guild has a paid communication device…

Communication devices connected the guild branches scattered across the continent. If she used one, she could quickly describe their situation to Cyril and explain why they needed invitations. But to use one of those, she’d need to contact Cyril and have him go to the nearest Adventurers’ Guild Union.

Hrmm. What’s the best way to contact him in an urgent situation like this…?

While worrying over what she should do, an idea suddenly popped into Mira’s head.

“That just might work!”

Convinced that there was definitely a chance, she confidently dashed off.

Chapter 31

TO GET INTO the guild house, Mira needed to ask Cyril for invitations. In order to do just that, she headed to the Adventurers' Guild Union.

"So, Commander, have you come up with something?" Lastrada asked, hopes high.

Hearing his query, Mira smiled boastfully. "Well, allow me to explain…"

Haxthausen was a big city, she pointed out. Furthermore, it had hosted the previous day's Fuzzy-Dice-related festivities; some of that excitement, in fact, still lingered around the city.

Noticing that, an idea had popped into Mira's head: Since the city hosting the festivities was so large, it wouldn't be a surprise if at least *one* Écarlate Carillon member had joined the revelry.

That was particularly true considering the guild's size. According to what Cyril had told her, it had members actively helping people all over the continent. Mira had even bumped into some members in the past—once in Grandrings, where the Ancient Underground City was. So the odds were good that there were members in Haxthausen.

Those guild members were the key. There had to be situations in which some urgent matter came up for them, necessitating that they contact their guild leader, Cyril, quickly.

"That's the gist of it," Mira concluded. "Basically, I think they must have their own way to contact each other in emergencies."

Once she'd laid out her general reasoning, they finally made their way inside the Mages' Guild.

Seeming to concur that there was a good chance that was the case, Lastrada followed up with his usual refrain: "Commander, you're always on top of things!"

The moment Mira stepped through the guild's door, she heard people shouting heatedly about how the Spirit Queen had

arrived. They practically gave her a standing ovation for being the first one to take on and recover something from Fuzzy Dice.

“Hrmm. Well, that’s just the kind of thing a summoner’s capable of!”

At being celebrated so grandly, Mira completely forgot why she’d come in and started preaching the merits of summoning.

But that only lasted a moment. “Hurry and get to the point,” she heard Lastrada insist.

“Ahem…” Clearing her throat, she changed topics. “I was hoping to ask something: Are there any Écarlate Carillon members here?”

Since everyone was focused on Mira to begin with, her question spread quickly through the guild.

Then, amid the hubbub as everyone discussed this, a man began, “Ah, if that’s who you’re looking for…”

According to him, no one belonging to that guild was there at the moment, but he’d seen a member enter a shop about half an hour earlier. Some kind of event had been going on there, he added.

It seemed that Mira’s presumption had been correct, and that there was indeed an Écarlate Carillon member in Haxthausen. Furthermore, Mira had managed to get a hint as to where they might be. If she and Lastrada left right away, they might still be able to catch the member.

Mira asked for the shop’s location before saying, “Thanks for the info!” and leaving.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen!” Lastrada added, then exited as well.

That caused the entire guild to noisily ask who in the world he was. The Spirit Queen’s attendant? Servant? *Lover,* perchance? Some men suddenly began enthusing over the fact that she’d unexpectedly shown up with a man despite having never done so before.

“Hrmm. This is it.”

Mira and Lastrada arrived in front of the shop the man had told them about. A placard hanging on the door read FULLY BOOKED. They could hear a chorus of female voices inside.

“Wonder what they’re doing.” Curious, Lastrada listened in.

The shop certainly seemed pretty lively. Just what kind of event was it holding? With no clue, and needing to speak with the member of Écarlate Carillon, the pair opened the door and went inside.

No one stood at the reception desk; everyone seemed to be congregating in a room further inside. That said, Mira and Lastrada solved the mystery of just what kind of event was being held. The answer was written in big letters at the reception desk: FUZZY DICE AUCTION & SWAP MEET.

The conditions for entrance were written there too. To join the event, a person apparently needed something proving they were a Fuzzy Dice fan, such as an object they wanted to show off or auction. Or they could present a special membership card.

“Looks like we managed to find ourselves at quite an extraordinary event.” Surprised that there even *was* such an event, Mira looked at Lastrada to see how the phantom thief himself would react.

The moment she did, Lastrada beamed. “I’m pretty popular, aren’t I?” he said, letting out a hearty laugh.

“Don’t let it go to your head…” Lastrada’s self-satisfied demeanor kindled a competitive fire in Mira, who began grumbling about how *she* had a fan too.

Right then, a woman in a hat that read *host* came out from farther inside the shop. “Welcome. Will you two be participating?” She must’ve heard them blathering to each other and realized there were new guests.

“Oh, sorry. Actually…” Mira gave the host a brief rundown of the situation: There was an Écarlate Carillon member they needed to speak to inside, and they were wondering whether they could.

“Um…we’re actually right in the middle of the Fuzzy Dice meetup. This is a *very* important event for all of us. Do you think

you could just wait until it's over?" The host looked down for a moment, as if thinking to herself, before adding, "I'm sorry."

Their goal was urgent, as it had to do with human trafficking, but that still didn't mean they could crash the fun the women inside were having.

"Mmm. I see. Okay, then... Around what time will you wrap up?"

"Well, probably sometime this evening," the host answered.

That was at least seven hours away, so what could they do? Mira groaned.

Unexpectedly, however, Lastrada immediately produced something and held it out. "Would you let us through with this?" he asked, a cape in his hands.

The garment was soiled at the bottom. Mira had absolutely no idea what had gotten on it or how, but it was stained *neon pink*.

"What's that? It looks filthy." She snickered. They weren't at a laundromat, so she wondered why he'd pulled out a piece of dirty laundry.

On the other hand, the host's expression suddenly turned to disbelief. "May...may I take a closer look at that?!" she asked with the utmost courtesy, wide-eyed and trembling in astonishment.

"Sure. Inspect it as much as you'd like," Lastrada said with a triumphant nod, then gently handed her the cape.

"I'll...I'll need to authenticate this!" The host's voice shook.

She hurriedly put on a pair of gloves and took the cape, then scrutinized it so closely that she looked as if she was trying to see through it. She scanned every inch of the cloth before pulling dozens of photos from a bag slung over her shoulder, then compared the cape with the pictures repeatedly.

"This...this is...this is it! It's Fuzzy Dice's cape from the heist in the city of Seakrick, when he evaded a fluorescent-dye trap the chief detective set, right?! He dodged it, but one of the dye balls burst late, so it got on his cape's hem. It's that cape, right? The one from when the chief detective first tried to strike back at Fuzzy Dice and wound up causing a huge scene!" The host gave that

appraisal breathlessly and, still goggling, pressed Lastrada for confirmation.

What she'd said suggested that the cape's pink stains matched whatever substance had been in the paintballs the chief detective used. There was evidently no way to rinse out that dye once it got on cloth, and Fuzzy Dice's cape had been no exception; thus, the cape the phantom thief currently wore was this one's successor.

Even Fuzzy Dice's fans never knew what ended up happening to his very first cape. But now, the host declared, it had resurfaced. The fluorescent splatters perfectly matched the dye-stain photographs taken during that incident, so the cape was without a doubt the genuine article.

"It certainly is. You've got quite an eye," Lastrada praised the host, then pointed to the sign. "And since it says you can go in if you have goods to trade…may we go inside?" he requested, asking whether the cape satisfied the criteria.

"Yes, that's more than enough! Please, come in!" The host now very gladly ushered them inside.

The large shop's interior was swarming with Fuzzy Dice fans. They seemed to be split into several groups, and they were all trading a wide variety of goods. There were tons of different things—crafts, photos people had taken themselves, fan-made books, and items that made one question how they'd even been obtained.

Mira and Lastrada asked the host which of the women among the throngs of fans belonged to Écarlate Carillon.

The host pointed, and they saw a girl sitting beside a window, organizing her belongings carefully. From how happy she looked, she must've gotten her hands on a real haul.

"Thank you, madam!" After saying that, Lastrada immediately wove through the groups of fans, walking toward the seats near the window.

"It was my pleasure to…" the host said reluctantly as Lastrada walked away. She stared at the cape in his hands. Despite having

such an item right before her very eyes, she made no attempt to take it before anyone else did.

Mira commended her selfless restraint, then followed after Lastrada. “You’re the real deal, so you’ve probably got tons of those kinds of treasures!” she told him.

She laughed softly to herself. Depending how they played their cards, she and Lastrada might be able to get information from everyone there. Since he actually *was* the phantom thief, he could probably flood the market with tons of precious Fuzzy Dice goods just like the cape.

“Nah. It wouldn’t be that easy. There needs to be something that authenticates that whatever you have is genuine, just like the host’s photos earlier.”

Even if an item came from the real Fuzzy Dice, they’d still need some evidence to prove it was genuine. Grasping that very clearly, Lastrada seemed glad that he’d kept the cape. At any rate, the garment had been made especially by Artesia, so he couldn’t have thrown it away even if he’d wanted to.

As he and Mira discussed this, they at last reached the seats by the window.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Mira. I happen to know that you’re an Écarlate Carillon member, and I was hoping to ask you for a favor. Would that be okay?” Mira said the moment she sat next to the girl.

“Hm?” The girl stopped organizing her haul, turning to look at Mira. “Um, I’m Meyarl. And you need a favor...? What is it?”

Meyarl indeed appeared to be in a very good mood. The girl’s expression was so bright that Mira had a feeling she’d listen to just about anything they said.

“I can’t ask anyone else to help with this, but I basically need to talk to your guild leader, Cyril. I figured that, as an Écarlate Carillon member, you might have some way of quickly contacting him. That’s why I thought I’d ask you,” Mira explained. “How does that sound? Do you think you could contact him for me?”

But as soon as Mira finished talking, Meyarl shook her head. “We have a specialized way of communicating, and I *could* contact Master Cyril,” she answered, “but, sorry, I *can’t*. How should I put this? He’s got a lot of fans like you.” She spoke apologetically; nonetheless, she was flatly stating that she couldn’t aid them.

“Can you do *anything* to help? Despite how I look, I’m actually an acquaintance of his. If you just let me talk to him, you’ll know that right away,” Mira implored, hoping Meyarl could somehow assist them.

The girl simply answered that they ought to use the guild’s official communication network. Mira told her that time was of the essence and that they wanted to contact Cyril right away to ask a favor of him, but Meyarl’s answer remained the same.

Écarlate Carillon really must’ve been quite popular; people coming up to Meyarl and asking to speak with Cyril was seemingly an everyday occurrence. To make matters worse, it seemed that a good number of those people lied about knowing Cyril to get help contacting him.

For these reasons, Meyarl pretty much shot down any request to help anyone contact Cyril, regardless of what they said.

“Well, look. Have you heard about that whole incident with Chimera Clausen? Just so you know, after that, everyone started calling me the Spirit Queen. You must’ve heard that Cyril fought in that battle too, right? I’m one of the people who fought by his side!” Mira implored Meyarl once again, hoping that the girl might do something now that she knew this.

But Meyarl’s answer remained unchanged. She simply shook her head and said that Cyril had lots of comrades-in-arms. In addition to being a celebrity, he was famous for going around actively helping others, so he’d fought alongside tons of people from all over the place. Thus, Meyarl remained firm: She wouldn’t help them contact him.

Mira was disheartened and ready to admit defeat.

“All right, then. How about this?” Lastrada asked, striding forth while unfurling the cape from before.

“Huh? Um…” The girl tilted her head, puzzled as to why the man had suddenly come forward. But despite initially looking at the cape in bemusement, her expression quickly changed to utterly astonished, just as might be expected of someone at this meetup. “H-huh?! That cape’s color…! And shape…! And those pink stains! Could it really be…?!”

All of Fuzzy Dice’s fans must’ve known about the cape, since Meyarl also seemed to recognize it as the phantom thief’s very first.

The obstinate attitude she’d displayed toward Mira vanished as her cheeks flushed and her eyes filled with yearning. Still, she seemed dubious as to whether it was genuine, saying warily, “But how do I know…?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like. We even had the host examine and authenticate it. That’s why we were even let in here and were able to talk with you,” Lastrada said, seizing the chance to tell her the whole story. He’d brought the cape specifically so that they could gain entrance to the event and approach her, so the fact that they were standing there proved that it was the genuine article.

“The *president* authenticated it?!” Meyarl responded, looking backward in shock. She was indeed looking at none other than the woman who’d appraised the cape, so according to Meyarl, that was the president.

It was still unclear what exactly she was president *of*, but the woman was apparently also interested in the cape’s fate and so was looking their way.

The glance she and Meyarl exchanged was enough to give the girl all the information she needed. The president nodded deeply, testifying that the cape was indeed genuine.

Meyarl seemed to have considerable trust in the president. Her eyes suddenly took on a serious glint, as if—having been verified by the woman—the cape *had* to be authentic.

Lastrada noticed that and didn’t miss his opportunity to strike. “Just help us contact Cyril, and the cape will be yours,” he said, not letting up for even a moment.

All Meyarl had to do was help a few of her guild leader's friends a tiny bit, and she could get her hands on Fuzzy Dice's one-of-a-kind original cape. Surely she'd never come across a deal that easy and simple again.

"Ah…aaah…Master Fuzzy Dice's first cape…"

Lastrada's tempting proposal was utterly beguiling, consisting of the sort of honey-sweet words someone might use to convince themselves that they deserved just one bowl of ice cream after working hard to stick to a diet.

They began to sway even the previously utterly unyielding Meyarl. There was no way she could ever afford to buy the cape, and if she said no, the opportunity would be gone forever. Fuzzy Dice's original cape was right in front of her—most fans would kill for it. For a fan like Meyarl, resisting such temptation must've been excruciating.

Yet Meyarl had nerves of steel and was able to withstand the cape's allure. "No, I…I can't…!" she answered, crying bitterly.

She wasn't about to let self-interest get in the way of her duty. In that respect, she really was a proper hero. Mira hadn't expected anything less of a guild member sharing Cyril's intentions. Still, they had to find a way to convince her. If they didn't, they wouldn't be able to take their time searching the guild house.

That was when Mira suddenly thought to say, "How about Emella, then? Would that work?"

She was making use of the trick of first suggesting something completely unreasonable to make her next suggestion seem more reasonable. Mira didn't need to speak to Cyril himself. She knew Emella, Écarlate Carillon's vice-captain, and her companions very well. They were people that Mira could trust, and she was fairly sure that they trusted her as well.

Thus, she could contact Emella and her companions first; they'd then be able to get her in contact with Cyril. And if there was a way to contact him in an emergency, they'd definitely know about that as well.

"Uh…so…just Miss Emella?"

Mira's strategy was clearly working. Meyarl's desire for the cape, which her nerves of steel should already have staved off, began rearing its head once more. At the exact same moment when the once-unyielding Meyarl's will began to waver, Mira delivered her follow-up attack.

"It doesn't even need to be Emella. I'm well acquainted—or, rather, I should say I'm friendly with—Asval, Flicker, and Zef. So how about it? Any of them would be fine. What do you say?" Meyarl didn't even need to help them contact Cyril or Emella.

Now that Mira had already offered a compromise that large, Lastrada then delivered the final blow. "If you can just help us do that, the cape is yours!" he said, suddenly splaying the garment out on the table.

The moment he did, the glint in Meyarl's eyes became even more intense. "You'd…you'd be fine just talking to Emella, right? And in exchange, I'll get his original cape…" She was compelled to refrain from putting anyone through to her guild leader, Cyril, in these kinds of situations. But there was no such rule in Emella's case. Meyarl thought about it logically and deduced that putting them through to Emella was fine.

"Mm-hmm. That's right. I just need to discuss an urgent matter with my buddy Emella, and then the cape will be yours."

After thinking it over again and again, Meyarl finally answered emphatically, "Sure thing. Leave it to me!"

Since Mira had referred to Emella as a "buddy," Meyarl concluded, it'd be fine.

Chapter 32

THERE WAS A ROOM in the Adventurers' Guild Union that was used specifically for communications. It was equipped with high-end equipment and connected to guilds all over the continent. Adventurers could use the room by paying a fee, although it was expensive.

Mira, Lastrada, and Meyarl were already in that room.

The space had been built for exchanging important information, so everything that went on inside was kept strictly confidential. That was one reason using the chamber was pricey, yet Lastrada had paid the fee on the spot.

"You'd like me to contact Emella, right? All right, then..." Meyarl said, turning around and confirming that one final time as she picked up the communication device's receiver. She'd basically asked to double-check that they were okay with this.

"Yeah, that's right. Just do that, and the cape's yours," Lastrada answered. He nodded vigorously, the original cape in his hand.

Having made that last extra inquiry, Meyarl finally began pressing the keypad.

The device produced a dial tone, then rang two times before someone answered. "Hello. This is Écarlate Carillon headquarters."

Mira had said that she needed to contact Emella urgently, but she hadn't been sure how exactly Meyarl would get in touch with the woman. Now she knew. As she might've expected of Écarlate Carillon, a huge guild with members all over the continent, they had a spot that functioned as a headquarters.

"This is Meyarl, Guild Member 1390, speaking. I urgently need to speak with Vice-Captain Emella. Please put me through to her."

"Understood. We'll have her call you back. Could you provide us with the number of the device you're using?"

“Sure… It’s 083877.”

Having concluded that brief exchange, Meyarl put down the receiver.

What exactly was the deal with that conversation? When Mira asked as much, Meyarl briefly explained. Apparently, all Écarlate Carillon members had simple magical tools for communicating. If the tools vibrated or lit up, that meant the headquarters was contacting them. She’d just spoken to the guild’s dedicated liaison officer, who was in charge of sending messages via those tools. That all meant that Emella’s magical tool would soon go off.

However, in some cases—such as when someone was clearing out a dungeon or when there wasn’t a guild outpost nearby—headquarters would receive a message that a member couldn’t be reached. In that case, they’d tell the person trying to get in touch with them that the member was unavailable. If Emella could be reached, though, she’d receive the message.

“So nothing yet, huh…?”

They waited ten or so minutes. Although they hadn’t heard anything back, Meyarl assured them that “In this case, Emella probably did get the message.”

Otherwise, the guild headquarters would already have messaged them. If Emella couldn’t be reached, they’d have gotten in touch via the magical tool to say that she was unavailable. Assuming nothing urgent came up, more than enough time had passed for headquarters to simply message Meyarl to that effect. Thus, the only possibility Meyarl could think of was that Emella was en route to the guild to respond.

Her presumption was correct. Fifteen minutes later, the communication device rang.

“Hello. This is Meyarl, Guild Member 1390, speaking.”

The familiar sound of Emella’s voice echoed from the device: “This is Vice-Captain Emella. Sorry it took me a minute to get back to you. I hardly ever get emergency transmissions. So what can I do for you?”

“Um, well…someone here says they need to speak to you right away. So…I’ll put them through to you!” Meyarl said decisively, despite still seeming to harbor some guilt over contacting the vice-captain urgently for her own personal gain.

“Huh? To me? Who is it?” Not only was this one of the first emergency transmissions Emella had received, she’d also just learned that Meyarl wasn’t even the one who’d wanted to speak with her. Since she didn’t have the slightest clue who the person actually getting in touch *was*, she sounded completely befuddled.

Meyarl handed Mira the receiver.

Grasping it, Mira spoke next: “Emella, it’s me. Do you recognize my voice?”

“Ah, is that…Mira?! Wow, it’s been a long time!” Emella’s befuddlement was gone in an instant. She now sounded both excited and surprised.

“Mm-hmm. Yes, it’s been a while. How’ve you been…? Actually, I guess there’s no need to ask that, huh?”

It sounded as if someone else was with Emella, but Mira began chatting, ignoring whatever gibberish Flicker was saying as it faded into the background. Emella replied by laughing and saying that a lot had happened.

Now that Mira and Emella had greeted each other and begun to catch up, Meyarl’s job was finished.

“Thank you, Meyarl. Here, just like we promised,” Lastrada said, handing Fuzzy Dice’s first cape to the expectant-looking girl.

“Thank you so much!” she said, taking the cape with a smile so bright that it put the sun to shame.

That cape had personally belonged to Fuzzy Dice, and it was quite likely that no greater treasure existed among the phantom thief’s fans. At least, in terms of rarity, that would certainly be the case. Perhaps for that reason, after finishing her assignment, Meyarl walked so lightly that she looked as if she might take flight.

Then she said “If you ever need anything else, feel free to ask!” and left.

“Still, I was shocked to hear that it was you,” Emella said. Once they’d finished with small talk, she changed the subject. “So what’s up? You said there’s something urgent.”

From Mira’s tone of voice, it didn’t seem like she’d had any qualms about using Écarlate Carillon’s emergency-contact system to reach Emella. Perhaps that was because Mira felt that they were already something akin to friends. More importantly, though, Emella was curious *why* Mira had used the system to contact her.

“Mm… Yes, about that. I need to ask you a favor…”

Emella trusted Mira, and Mira trusted Emella. And so, prefacing what she was about to say with that, Mira began explaining the entire situation.

She spoke of the events with Fuzzy Dice in Haxthausen and the incident in the underground waterway, as well as the fact that she was now working with Fuzzy Dice to track down a human-trafficking ring. Finally, she told Emella point-blank that, to continue investigating, they needed to get into a guild house.

“…So that’s it. We want to be issued invitations. Do you think you could let Cyril know?” Mira asked, hoping that Emella would lend them a hand so they could determine who or what was behind the human-trafficking syndicate.

Emella let out a slight sigh, then chuckled wryly. “As I might very well have suspected, Mira, you’re up to something daring this time too, huh…?”

The last time they’d met, Mira had been hot on Chimera Clausen’s trail, and now the girl was taking on whatever despicable evil was behind the human traffickers.

“In that case, I’d be happy to help! And I can actually issue invitations myself. It’ll just take me a minute to set it up!” Emella continued cheerfully, laughing as usual.

So not only Cyril but Emella was able to issue invitations. Her title of vice-captain evidently held authority in that regard.

“Wow, is that so? Then please do!” Mira said, wasting no time in nudging Emella to provide the documents.

About ten minutes after her call with Emella had ended, Mira and Lastrada checked the reception desk of the Adventurers' Guild Union and found that the paperwork to issue them guild-house invitations was complete. The two showed their adventurer's licenses, took the invitations, and hurried straight to the guild house.

The adventurer's license Lastrada held was for a C-rank adventurer under the name of "John." He was really working the "average adventurer" cover.

Upon returning to the guild house, they first met up with Woofson, who'd been staking the place out.

"Thanks for keeping an eye out, Woofson."

"Nobody went in or came out, woof!" Woofson reported as soon as Mira lifted him up.

He also said that his magic scent detection hadn't picked up on any movements worth mentioning either. In other words, the target was, without a doubt, still inside the building.

"All right. Shall we go?"

"Yeah, let's head inside."

"Time to go in, woof!"

Mira and her companions at last set foot in the guild house. They took in the lobby first. It was built more like the lobby of a small business than a hotel lobby. In the very center was a reception desk, and to the left and right were doors.

"Please come this way and allow me to check your guild licenses."

"Hrmm. Here you are."

Following the receptionist's instructions, Mira and Lastrada presented their invitations.

Of course, since the invitations were real and the pair had just received them, they had no trouble completing the registration necessary to enter the guild house.

Going through the door to the right of the reception desk, they entered what resembled a school hallway. It was simply

furnished, and they saw adventurers scattered along it. Superficially, it almost had a dormitory vibe.

“Trust really is important, huh…?” Mira muttered as they went down the hall, following Woofson’s instructions.

Fuzzy Dice hadn’t been able to take much time searching the guild house before, despite his considerable capabilities. But now he strutted down the hall not caring who saw him. And that was completely thanks to Mira having won Emella’s trust.

Lastrada had only established a shallow if far-reaching network of connections, so he smiled in awe at Mira as she looked around the facility.

“Inside here, woof!”

Following Woofson’s nose to their target, they reached the rental rooms toward the back of the fourth floor. A person could book a room there for a day, week, or even a month, and they were the guild house’s principal facilities. They were primarily used as lodgings. Their target was most likely relaxing inside after having finished their work.

“Not many other rooms have actually been rented out over here, huh?”

“Well, maybe that’s because this area doesn’t get much natural light. If you planned to stay here, you wouldn’t really want one of these rooms, would you?”

On top of getting little light, these rooms were far from the other facilities one might want to use. They didn’t seem very popular. In fact, unlike the rooms near the stairs, several of these were unoccupied.

“You’d have to be up to something shady to go out of your way to rent a room here.”

Perhaps their target had specifically chosen a room where it was unlikely that they’d bump into anyone else precisely because they were involved in human trafficking, Mira hypothesized, using Biometric Scan to search the room.

Inside, she detected five people. One was assuredly the individual who’d been in the room in the underground waterway.

The other four were the issue. Were any of them also traffickers? If so, how many of them? One, two, or perhaps the whole group? Given what she knew at that moment, she couldn't yet say.

Mira had begun to wonder how exactly they would investigate. In contrast, Lastrada said without a moment's hesitation, "Either way, we just need to get inside, and the rest will be easy. From here on out," he continued, "I'll be emulating an antihero, not a champion of justice."

"Antihero...? What're you talking about?" Mira asked, not following.

"An antihero is a hero of darkness who will resort to evil if it means upholding justice."

Lastrada strode forth. Following him, Mira wondered how that was any different from Fuzzy Dice stealing for the sake of justice.

They stopped in front of the room housing their person of interest. Curious as to how things would play out when Lastrada used the antihero approach he'd mentioned, Mira watched as he simply knocked on the door.

The sound of his three slow knocks echoed through the hall. There was no immediate reaction, but using Biometric Scan, Mira detected movement inside the room. It seemed as if the occupants were huddled together discussing something.

A short moment later, Mira detected someone coming closer. Right then, the door slowly opened, and a man's face poked out.

As soon as he saw them, the man shrugged dubiously. "Hm? Who're you guys? What do you want?"

One could say his reaction was actually quite normal, since a couple of strangers had gone out of their way to visit the rather far-flung room.

"Ah, yes. We just wanted to talk with you a bit," Lastrada declared, paying no heed to the man's expression. Staring straight at him, he continued, "Have you ever been involved in human trafficking?"

“Huh…? What’re you talking about?” the man responded, seeming to have no idea.

“You had to think about that for a second. And you looked away. Furthermore, your voice sounded a tad impatient. That means you know what I’m talking about.”

He’d discerned a lot from the man’s reaction. There’d also been a hint of animosity in the man’s annoyed voice.

Having confirmed as much, Lastrada coldly said, “Let us step inside for a moment,” then slipped by the man.

The man didn’t even try to stop Lastrada. Looking at him, Mira realized that his eyes were frozen wide open, and that he’d completely stopped moving. During their brief exchange, Lastrada had used Demonic Arts to petrify him in the blink of an eye.

I see now. This is what he meant, huh…? He’s simply forcing his way right through the front door.

They hadn’t yet confirmed whether those in the room were guilty, yet Lastrada had strong-armed his way inside regardless. With a new understanding of what he’d meant by “antihero,” Mira gently closed the door and locked it.

“Who the hell are you?!” she heard a voice call out from inside the room. Peeking around inside, she saw four men suddenly standing in front of Lastrada. They appeared to be a group of somewhat dull-looking adventurers.

Lastrada didn’t say a single word. He simply looked them over and loosed his spider silk, quickly binding them, no questions asked.

Thrown off by the sudden attack, two of the men shouted.

“What’s this? What’s the big idea?!”

“Damn you… You know we’re members of Gillian Rock?!”

Seeming to pay them no mind, Lastrada simply turned to ask Woofson, “So can you tell which of them was down in the underground waterway?”

“It was him, woof!” Still snug in Mira’s arms, Woofson pointed decisively at one of the men.

“I see. Him, huh? Thanks, detective.”

There were five men in the room, one of whom had been a frequent guest at the human-trafficking syndicate’s base of operations. Grinning smugly, Lastrada walked over to the man they’d finally hunted down.

Mira expected that Lastrada’s “antiheroic” approach to interrogating the man would be fittingly dark, but it actually bordered on cruel and unusual. First, he rattled the man by showing him doses of both a poison and its antidote, which he’d created using Demonic Arts. Then he ratcheted up the pressure, telling the man that his right arm, then his left leg, would be permanently immobilized by said poison.

For the record, Lastrada was actually paralyzing the man’s limbs to make him believe he was being poisoned. That said, losing feeling in different parts of his body must’ve been terrifying. Begging for forgiveness, the man confessed and told them everything he knew.

First of all, the men belonged to a guild called Gillian Rock. It was rotten to the core. Before hearing his confession, Mira and Lastrada had thought this man might be the only one involved in human trafficking. But according to him, the guild had been set up explicitly to assist with such things.

These men were in charge of surveillance and communication, acting as go-betweens for each transaction. They were also tasked with keeping an eye on safehouses where trafficking victims were stored, as well as where they were sold, ensuring that nothing was misappropriated and that no other funny business took place.

“We really don’t know anything...! The guild master gives the orders. All we do is what he tells us to. We’ve got no clue where *he* gets the orders from... So forgive me! Forgive me, please...!” the man begged. Having lost all feeling below his neck, he was terrified and weeping.

Seeing him like that, Mira couldn’t help pitying him a bit. But then she remembered all the children who’d been hurt, and that pity evaporated on the spot.

If they wanted to find out who or what was behind the syndicate, they'd need to speak with the guild master, so Lastrada said shrewdly, "I see. Then I have one last question: Where's the 'guild master,' or whatever you called him?"

The man stammered that, if he told them that, the guild master would have him killed. As soon as he said that, he went silent so quickly that he seemed to have been unplugged.

"Die now or take the gamble that we'll get rid of this guild master ourselves. Which will it be?" Lastrada asked the remaining men.

Trembling, the men all answered at once, "He's in a cave in Lumit Gorge!" They even went out of their way to offer to point it out on a map.

"If only you'd all been so compliant to begin with," Lastrada said icily, taking out a map and unfurling it before the men.

The traffickers said that Gillian Rock had secret hideouts all over the continent, then detailed their locations. The guild master currently lay in one such hideout: the cave in Lumit Gorge. That secret hideout was surprisingly close to Haxthausen. Apparently, the guild master had just come their way to deal with the incident involving Baron Ardoloris.

The five traffickers had apparently gathered here to discuss how they might leave the syndicate. The reasons they wanted to do so were quite simple.

Fuzzy Dice had just busted the Dorres Company, and Viscount Denveroll had been arrested. Moreover, the traffickers' all-important secret base in the underground waterway had been discovered. Veteran Gillian Rock members had been arrested and their "merchandise" freed. Those were huge blows to the syndicate, and there wasn't much chance the men would be forgiven for their roles in the catastrophic failures.

They'd been discussing plans to run off somewhere the very next day.

Mira and Lastrada told the guild house staff about the men's true identities before handing them over and leaving.

“Baron Ardoloris was that perverted baron, right?”

The guild master who had the details Mira and Lastrada were after had apparently come to the area to deal with the incident involving the baron. Mira pranced lightly, thinking about what a stroke of luck it was that the prior incident ended up helping them in their current situation as well.

“Yeah. What’re the odds?” Lastrada said, still playing dumb to an extent.

“By the way, I feel like I remember another pervert being there,” said Mira. “One wearing something over his face…”

“Hmm. Doubt it. If he showed up right when you needed him most, I’d have to guess that he was a champion of justice as well.”

When Mira continued that the man’s outfit had indeed been very pervy, Lastrada simply tried to defend him. From the way his eyes darted, he certainly seemed to be trying to explain away what’d happened.

“Hrmm… I see,” said Mira. “Maybe you’re right.”

Unsurprisingly, Lastrada himself seemed aware of how he must’ve appeared back then. In consideration of how he felt, she resolved not to bring it up again.

The hideout the men had told them about was close, but still a long trip by foot, so they climbed aboard Garuda’s wagon and headed there that way.

“Nice! This thing’s great—like a midair command center!” Lastrada cried excitedly.

Command centers and flying secret bases were staples of shows about sentai superheroes. Perhaps because the wagon reminded him of one of those, albeit on a much smaller scale, Lastrada began getting very excited.

“Right?! Isn’t it, though?!” Mira exclaimed proudly in response, having been a fan of such secret bases since she was younger.

As they drew near the secret hideout, Lastrada suddenly requested that Mira land the wagon near the closest town. Then,

saying something about needing to prepare, he headed into a clothing shop.

Maybe he wanted to buy a disguise or something. Thinking that must be the case, Mira dropped by a nearby café and enjoyed a cheese tart by herself.

“Mmm. It’s the perfect mix of sweet and sour!”

She polished off a second cheese tart. At that point, she saw Lastrada emerge from the clothing store.

“So what’d you buy?” she asked as they met up.

“You’ll find that out later,” he said, dodging the question.

From the look on his face, something was definitely up. He resembled a mischievous schoolboy. When he got like that, he was for sure thinking about something superhero-related.

But what would a superhero want with a clothing boutique? Wondering what he was up to, Mira followed Lastrada toward the hideout.

It was deep in a forest that reached the town’s western limits. There, under a cliff hidden in the dense woods, was the cave they were looking for. They’d found the secret hideout of Gillian Rock, where its current guild master was holed up.

As far as Mira could tell, there was nobody by the cave’s entrance. Even when she used Biometric Scan to investigate further, she didn’t detect anything in front of them. On the surface, the hideout appeared to be nothing more than a natural cavern.

As soon as he stood in front of it, Lastrada cast a spell using demonology.

[Demonic Arts: Dusk Bat]

That technique used a sound wave to produce a semblance of an area’s terrain or topography. Using it over and over again, Lastrada was able to search every corner inside the cave, which allowed him to determine that a narrow, winding passageway opened into a large chamber inside.

“Hrmm. In other words, if we can hold this part down, the Gillian Rock members will be trapped like rats. This’ll be easy. Just

use that white mist of yours, and it'll all be over."

This would be even easier than Mira had expected. If they filled the cave with Fuzzy Dice's trusty white mist while blocking the entrance, they could catch all the criminals in one fell swoop.

But that wasn't what Lastrada had planned.

"No, I don't intend on doing this the easy way," he told Mira, adding, "The antihero never holds back."

He'd fully entered antihero mode. And of course, when he got like that, there was no stopping him.

Knowing as much, Mira signed on. "Jeez. Guess I don't have a choice." In any case, the people in the cave were rogues who'd profited off exploiting innocent children. They didn't deserve to have things done the easy way, she added.

"Yeah, I thought you'd say as much, Commander!"

There was an easy way to settle the matter, but Lastrada was itching to smash the traffickers mercilessly. As Mira nodded, he smiled at her, holding out a bag with something inside.

"Now then, time to transform!"

Chapter 33

MIRA WONDERED WHAT he was talking about, then realized he was referring to a superhero's transformation.

Sure enough, Lastrada blithely began changing into his antihero costume, humming a tune that fit his antiheroic switch-up: "Doo doo doooo, duuun dun duh dun!"

He *almost* looked like he was reenacting a transformation scene.

"Here, Commander. Hurry up!" he urged, looking intently at the bag that Mira was holding.

Looking inside it out of curiosity, she found it stuffed full of women's clothing in dark shades. He'd apparently dropped by the clothing store to pick up an antihero costume for *her* to wear too.

"Ugh, if I must…" Mira sighed.

Although she lamented having to go out of her way to change, she knew that there was no stopping Lastrada when it came to superhero stuff. It was abundantly clear that, even if she objected, she'd still end up wearing the clothes. Chuckling to herself in irritation about how she really had no choice, she changed into the outfit Lastrada had handed to her.

"What on earth am I wearing…?"

Having put on just about everything in the bag, Mira was gobsmacked. She looked like she'd suddenly become some mistress of the night.

The royal-looking black dress she wore was cute, yet it brought out her natural allure. Red ribbons even wrapped all around it. Mira couldn't quite make out their purpose; that said, they looked sturdy enough to tie someone up with.

She also wore black high heels that really leaned into the whole "mistress of the night" vibe. Perhaps to play up the "dark" angle, they were aggressively adorned with skulls.

Finally, the pièce de résistance was a black masquerade mask accented with a rose that further emphasized the outfit's gothic, feminine look.

Checking how her full "transformation" looked with a hand mirror, Mira muttered the first thing that popped into her mind: "I'm not sure how to put this…but I feel less like an antihero and more like some evil sorceress."

It *wasn't* quite an antiheroic look. And while it certainly evoked a "mistress of the night," the outfit honestly reminded her even more of the kind of evil sorceress that a certain group of transforming sentai superheroes might've fought.

When she'd finished getting into her costume, Lastrada dashed over. The moment he saw Mira's full "transformation," he broke into a satisfied grin.

"Wow, it's perfect!"

Putting herself aside, Mira was shocked to see how different Lastrada looked in his full costume. He wore a skull mask and a jet-black cape, as well as a suit, like the kind a certain spider-themed superhero wore.

Looking at *his* outfit, though, she didn't feel he looked much different from the type of antihero he was trying to portray.

"Nope. I really don't feel like I quite look like an antihero," Mira insisted.

Her current appearance really was a far cry from that. Yet when she told Lastrada what she meant, he tilted his head doubtfully before beginning to inspect every inch of her. Perhaps because the costume was exactly the look he'd been going for, he merely oohed and aahed. After a moment, though, a light gleamed in his eyes.

"Ah! Got it, Commander! A tiger! It needs a tiger!" he said after thinking it over. Mira was baffled.

At that point, Lastrada even began suggesting that she evoke Jingulara. Why in the world had he come up with that? Mira did as he suggested, though, summoning the white tiger of frozen fog.

"Sorry to make you tag along."

Jingulara was incredibly tall and over twelve feet long. His coat looked like freshly fallen snow, and he had razor-sharp claws resembling shards of ice.

Taking in the full sight of the tiger nuzzled up beside Mira, Lastrada definitively declared, “Yes, that’s perfect. You definitely look like an antiheroine now!”

“Well, as long as you’re okay with it, I guess it’s fine…” Despite feeling that the new addition simply made her look more queenlike, she decided to drop the subject. She was keenly aware that this could get even worse.

For the record, the reason Mira was dressed that way had to do with Lastrada’s favorite superhero shows. It was a popular cliché that the sorceresses in those shows would become double agents who spied on the enemy, or that the heroes would talk them into switching sides. Thus, Lastrada saw evil sorceresses as analogous to antiheroines.

The very satisfied Lastrada marching in front of her, Mira finally plunged into enemy territory. Still wondering how exactly a female antihero was supposed to look, she made her way toward the cave.

Proceeding into that labyrinthine cave, they came upon men who appeared to be standing guard. The men only had a moment to be shocked by Lastrada’s new appearance before they were instantaneously silenced.

While Lastrada was a little overly focused on transformations and behaving like an antihero, he was undoubtedly a pro when it came to his work. His heroic spirit was absolutely committed to bringing down the human-trafficking syndicate, and he didn’t waver for a moment.

Yet Mira was struggling as she followed the ever-zealous Lastrada. “Jeez, these are… Ngh…! They’re so hard to walk in! How are you supposed to…?!”

She’d never worn high heels, and the cave’s rough floor kept tripping her up, so just walking was a struggle, let alone actual fighting. Wondering just how the women who could strut around

in such shoes trained, Mira gave up on walking, leaping atop Jingulara.

Now that the heels were no longer a problem, Mira noticed that Lastrada had rapidly managed to stride far ahead. She hurried to catch up.

Reaching the larger cavern, she gazed at Gillian Rock's hideout. Lamps hung around the chamber; below sat an encampment full of huts and scaffolding. Despite being inside a cave, the space seemed fairly comfortable.

At the moment, though, it was in an uproar, as though a monster had appeared in it. That was Lastrada's doing, of course. In addition to his appearance, he knew no mercy in his current antihero mode.

Unlike Fuzzy Dice, the "antihero" Lastrada had unrestricted access to his offensive techniques. Besides, all the guild members there were involved in human trafficking, so there wasn't any need to hold back.

Looking at their enemies, Mira saw that some were significantly powerful. Still, they could only hold off Lastrada—who was avidly delivering justice—for so long. The scene unfolding resembled some action sequence straight out of a Hollywood superhero movie.

"Jeez. He started without me."

Why hadn't he waited? Maybe he hadn't even noticed that Mira had fallen behind. Thinking that she was late to the party either way, Mira joined the fray. Hindered by her high heels, however, she simply sicced Jingulara on her foes while staying near the entrance so that no stragglers escaped.

While this was going on, Lastrada's rampage became even more furious.

Perhaps looking to run for it, several men appeared in front of the exit where Mira was waiting.

One asked, "Huh? What's a girl doing here?" as soon as he saw Mira, but he only wondered that for a moment. After getting a good look at her, he shouted, "Wait… She's with that weird guy!"

Apparently, he found her evil-sorceress look pretty similar to Lastrada's antihero look. The men suddenly became much warier.

"Hey, missy, how about letting us through? If you do, we won't hurt you."

Still—perhaps because of her outfit—they figured that she was essentially just a cute girl, so they were quite sure of themselves.

"Hrmm… No dice!" Mira rejected the idea as if they should've expected as much.

"I see. Then you only have yourself to blame!"

The moment the words left one man's lips, the group rushed at Mira with swords in hand, screaming for her to get out of the way. At once, several crashed into a tower shield that suddenly appeared in front of them; they fell backward. Several others were blown away when Mira unleashed [Immortal Arts Heaven: Pulse].

Finally, one man was left. Perhaps frightened at seeing how his comrades had all ended up sprawled on the ground within the blink of an eye, he stopped cold. Utterly baffled, he couldn't figure out what'd happened.

But Mira wasn't about to let the opportunity go to waste. She took a decisive step forward, almost as if letting the man know that it was all over, and delivered a sharp kick.

Just then, however—perhaps due to her inexperience with wearing heels—Mira lost her balance slightly. In turn, her kick just barely missed its target and landed square between the man's legs.

"Ooof!"

She hadn't simply kicked him. As fate would have it, she struck the blow directly with the tip of her heel. The man cried out in such agony that he could barely make another sound before collapsing. He began writhing in pain, letting out ragged breaths and beginning to tremble.

However you looked at it, it was quite clear that he wouldn't be having kids anytime soon, if ever.

"Hey, I'm really sorry about that…"

Her opponent was a villain who'd participated in human trafficking and exploited a great many children, so whatever happened was his just deserts. But Mira knew that kind of pain all too well, so she apologized from the bottom of her heart.

Once she'd calmed the man down, she sprinkled a costly restorative medicine generously onto his nether region. That was her very best spirit medicine and would easily heal him so long as the damage wasn't too great.

"What a barbaric thing to do…"

"Damn… She's like a demon."

As Mira tended to the man, whom she felt she'd taken things a bit too far with, several other men watched from a distance. They'd run off hoping to escape as well, and though far away, they'd witnessed what had happened. That is, they'd seen Mira deliver that truly savage kick.

She could only have done something like that because she was a woman, and didn't understand how much such an attack hurt. The men shuddered, utterly appalled.

From their point of view, they'd seen a warning: Anyone who tried to escape would be involuntarily sterilized. At least, that was how it looked to them.

Seeing the utterly merciless methods the seemingly cute girl employed, the men cringed.

"Hey—she's still doing somethin'!"

"What is that…? It's like she's sprinkling something…"

"It's got to be…some kind of poison. She's makin' the damage permanent—tryin' to be sure he never has kids…!"

The merciless kick Mira had delivered in front of them, coupled with her sadistic-looking getup, cemented the men's impression of her.

They were all busy watching Mira's poor victim in horror, wondering what fate would befall him, and thus never noticed Jingulara creeping up behind them.

The men only had a fraction of a second to cry out before they too were beaten into submission. Luckily for them, though, their future children were spared.

“Well, how’d that go…?” Convinced that she’d done everything she could, Mira gingerly took off the man’s pants. “There… It seems to have worked.”

The spirit medicine had evidently taken effect. It didn’t look like anything was out of the ordinary.

Realizing that everything had suddenly gotten quiet, Mira sighed. “Hrmm. Guess it must be over.”

She no longer heard Lastrada going postal, and Jingulara was standing guard behind her as if he’d completed his assignment. It seemed that the Gillian Rock members in this hideout had been put out of action. That meant Lastrada should already have captured the guild master holed up there.

“All right, then. Where is he?” As Mira looked around for Lastrada and the guild master, Jingulara pointed in another direction. “Oh. Over there, huh?”

Beginning to walk away to meet with Lastrada, Mira suddenly turned back and looked at the man she’d tended to. She thought about how the agony and dread of such an attack had become alien to her in her current body.

I guess I never have to worry about dealing with that excruciating pain again…

That was actually a big perk, but at the same time, she couldn’t help feeling slightly nostalgic. Staring at her lower half, lost in thought, Mira suddenly remembered the strike she’d just delivered and cringed as a shiver ran down her spine.

She came upon Lastrada past the cavern and farther inside the cave, in a spot that appeared to have been set up to live in fairly comfortably. He’d apparently been waiting for Mira to show up, since he was sitting in a chair. He gestured her over.

“So you’ve been all the way in here,” Mira said, as if it hadn’t been easy to find him.

She hopped down from Jingulara and stood beside him. Then, looking farther inside the cave, she noticed a man lying on the ground. She had no doubt that he was Gillian Rock's guild master.

"How'd it go?" she asked. "Did you get any information from him?"

The guild master had been stuck to the ground using spider silk. He looked so helpless that Lastrada could've done just about anything to him. In that case, he'd probably already gotten information out of the guild master. At least, that was what Mira thought, but apparently things hadn't been quite that simple.

"He's a stubborn one. He won't talk, so I'm in a bit of a pickle," Lastrada answered, then explained all the methods he'd tried.

According to him, the man had an extremely high tolerance for pain, and he didn't seem to hold his own life in particularly high regard. Lastrada had tried interrogating him using poison, but the man still refused to speak, and his expression apparently hadn't changed one bit throughout the whole process.

"I've had to interrogate quite a few people in my day, but it's my first time coming across anyone this tough to crack."

Perhaps motivated by pride or loyalty, the guild master—who was unmoved by fear or pain and had an iron will—maintained his silence. His name was Rock. At least that was the only name Mira could find using the Inspect function. Considering how stubborn he was and how hard of a time he'd given Lastrada, he seemed to have lived up to his name.

But Lastrada didn't seem to intend to use any more cruel or brutal interrogation tactics than the ones he had already.

"What would you do, Noir Queen?" Lastrada asked expectantly.

"Noir Qu... Well, it's fine. Hrmm. What should we do?"

Lastrada had apparently chosen her antihero name. Smiling tolerantly at this, Mira walked deliberately over to Rock to begin by getting a sense of the situation. No good ideas came to her, though, and she wasn't very familiar with interrogation methods.

“He does look pretty tough.”

Although Rock was stuck to the ground, staring up toward the cave ceiling with a surly look, she could tell that he was fairly strong. She could see several wounds on his body that looked like Lastrada had inflicted them during his interrogation, but they weren’t the guild master’s only wounds. The scars that covered his body served as evidence that he was used to being hurt.

It certainly seemed that, whatever they tried, they wouldn’t be able to break him. She could tell from one look that Rock was full of an unbreakable will.

Mira drew closer to the guild master. At that point, he closed his eyes and stated matter-of-factly, “You’re wasting your time.”

It didn’t matter what tortures they put him through; he still didn’t intend to answer. His entire body attested to that. Despite having been captured, his attitude gave them the feeling that he wasn’t the least bit worried, and his voice was totally unperturbed. Besides, the scars covering him more than backed up what he’d said.

Mira wondered if she could do anything against a foe like Rock.

If only Kagura were there—things would certainly already be settled. But she wasn’t. Mira did have a way to contact her, but she couldn’t do so immediately, and it would take yet more time if Kagura even decided to come.

At any rate, I should try doing whatever I can at the moment. I can call Kagura as a last resort.

It didn’t feel great always relying on Kagura either. With that in mind, Mira drew even closer to Rock, searching for a weak spot or something she could use. She still wasn’t used to wearing heels, so she had to approach him slowly, one step at a time.

Rock kept his eyes firmly shut and didn’t move a muscle. He had several painful-looking cuts, yet they appeared not to bother him one bit. His expression wasn’t fearful or anxious; it was completely apathetic. She couldn’t read any emotion on his face at all.

Hrmm… I don't know whether I can do anything.

He was a foe that even Lastrada, who'd interrogated criminals before, had no idea what to do with. Unable to come up with anything herself, Mira tried asking the Spirit King and Martel, hoping that they'd have some wisdom on the subject.

"*What a shame. If I could just go there in person, I could give him a fruit that'd make him tell the truth,"* Martel said, much to Mira's surprise.

Apparently, the progenitor spirit had some incredible fruit that rivalled Kagura's confession technique. But she couldn't use it unless she was present, and it wasn't really feasible for Mira to go all the way back to the Ancient Underground City just to get her.

"Oh, yeah… How about using Salamander's power to roast him from inside? There's surely no way he's toughened his organs to withstand that!" The Spirit King's suggestion definitely constituted cruel and unusual punishment.

Needless to say, Mira answered that she wasn't going to go quite that far. The Spirit King replied that any number of things were possible, depending how one chose to use spirits, before laughing that it was just a joke.

"In any case, if you're looking to break someone who's already endured this much, you may need to think a bit outside the box. For example, maybe try moving him emotionally with one of Leticia's songs."

Physical torture wasn't the only form. Mira could go at it from a mental angle by stirring Rock's emotions, which would also actually feel positive rather than negative. That, at least, was the Spirit King's suggestion.

"I see. Yeah, that may just work!"

Having observed Rock's attitude and body, it was abundantly clear to Mira that the guild master could endure whatever torments they inflicted upon him. But what if they tried the polar opposite? Perhaps Leticia's singing, which made one feel like they were ascending to heaven, could open up his heart. After he succumbed to its comfort, he might well want more of it. If he did,

they could offer to let her continue singing in exchange for information.

That was definitely a better strategy against an enemy who wouldn't submit to torment or pain. Considering it a great idea, Mira immediately walked back to Lastrada to discuss it.

"Well, he *is* the kind of guy who won't break however hard we squeeze him, huh? Okay, that sounds good. I expected nothing less of you, Noir Queen! Sure, go ahead and try it!" Lastrada agreed. He didn't think it was a bad idea either.

"All right. Now it's my turn. I hope you're ready." Mira strode toward Rock once more. She'd begun to figure out how exactly to walk in heels, so her steps were substantially lighter. As she drew nearer to him, the sound of her heels clacking echoed through the cave.

Just then, Rock's eyes—which he'd kept shut to signal his utter refusal to cooperate—suddenly opened wide. His gaze shot straight toward Mira's feet and, rather than stopping there, slowly began moving up her legs.

"What...the hell?!" Rock said, having thoroughly looked Mira up and down. There seemed to be some emotion in his voice and expression other than mere surprise.

"Hm? What? What'd I do?"

Why had Rock suddenly reacted, although she hadn't yet begun with her plan? His prior demeanor had vanished in an instant; sure enough, he was clearly showing emotion.

Surprised, Lastrada quickly hurried over to get a look at how the guild master had changed. Right then, though, the stony, apathetic look returned to Rock's face. It seemed like it'd be difficult to determine what exactly had caused his sudden reaction.

But though Mira couldn't figure out why, his iron will had definitely cracked, if only for a moment.

"Let me take another look."

Lastrada approached the man, hoping to gather some hint as to any weakness he might have. Mira, meanwhile, put the

Leticia plan on hold, moving aside to avoid getting in Lastrada's way.

"Uh-oh…!"

Just then, perhaps overestimating her ability to walk in heels after getting somewhat used to them, Mira stumbled and lost her balance. She moved her leg immediately to regain it.

"Hnngh!"

Moving reflexively, Mira had ended up stomping on Rock. Moreover, she'd done so in such a way that all her weight was on that heel. Despite how little she weighed, the pain must've been excruciating. Rock let out a shriek.

"Oops! Sorry about that!" Mira said apologetically, scrambling to take her foot off him.

But as soon as she did, a shiver ran down her spine, and she turned around. Rock was staring right at her. While his expression was still blank, his eyes had a somewhat keen look.

"Why'd he yell just now?" Lastrada asked.

Regardless of what Lastrada did to him, Rock had maintained the same expression without so much as making a peep. But within this short span of time, he'd suddenly changed wildly. Lastrada studied him carefully, hoping to gather what his reaction meant.

"He's kind of giving me the creeps," Mira said.

The man was staring at her ardently. Somewhat weirded out, she slowly shrank back. But his gaze was firmly fixed on her. Wherever she went, his eyes followed.

"Is that…?"

Watching Rock very closely, Lastrada realized something upon noticing one very particular change in the guild master's body.

"Noir Queen, do you have a second?" he asked. "There's something I want you to try…"

He whispered the plan into Mira's ear so that she could attempt it.

Upon hearing it, however, she grimaced, and a bewildered look passed over her face. “Wait. Hold on. You want me to do *what*?!”

“He may just spill the beans really easily if it works. And from what I can tell, the chances of that are pretty high.”

While it was difficult to ask Mira to attempt the plan, he’d picked up on definite proof that led him to think it would work, Lastrada boasted. And the truth was that his eyes had been thoroughly trained to serve justice, so they’d long been able to see through many a villain.

“Well, fine. Why not?”

If Lastrada was willing to go this far out on a limb, there was definitely a chance it’d work. Firmly believing that, Mira agreed and approached Rock once more.

Chapter 34

HAVING ACCEPTED LASTRADA'S PLAN, Mira walked over to Rock once again. She halted imposingly beside him, glaring daggers.

"All right. Tell me your name," she commanded forcefully, as if giving him an order.

Rock looked up, staring at Mira, and closed his mouth. In fact, he clamped it shut so defiantly he seemed to be trying to show that he definitely wouldn't talk. That reaction was obviously atypical. When Lastrada was interrogating him, he hadn't reacted in any way at all. Now he was quite obviously showing emotion.

Something was definitely different. Far from being expressionless, Rock's eyes almost indicated that he was anticipating something. Seeing that, Mira decided to go about the plan just as Lastrada had described it to her.

"If you answer honestly…"

Mira quickly lifted her foot and, despite hesitating for a moment, plunged her heel as hard as she could into Rock's shoulder.



As soon as she did…

“Hngh! Oooh!”

The stony expression Rock had maintained up until then vanished. Trembling with delight, he screamed as if loosing all the emotions he’d kept contained.

But it wasn’t over yet.

“You know what you’ve got to do if you want your reward, right?” Mira whispered, digging her heel in.

Sure enough, a look of pure ecstasy washed across Rock’s face. “You may call me Rock Griekkin, my queen!” he confessed readily.

This can’t be real. I was hoping Lastrada was joking…

He’d guessed that Rock was most likely a masochist, basing this plan to have Mira act like some BDSM queen on that presumption.

Of course, she hadn’t expected it to work. She might’ve been known as the Spirit Queen, but she certainly wasn’t *that* sort of queen. Mira, who’d objected to the plan, now had a bemused look at how easy it had been to get Rock to answer.

Rock, on the other hand, looked at her like a loyal puppy, as if wondering what she’d say next. The look in his eyes was no longer just hot, it was burning. As Lastrada had guessed, he was a hardcore masochist. That said, no one had ever known that he was into that kind of thing because no one had ever seen him react in such a way.

That actually made sense, though, as he wasn’t interested in being dominated by just any BDSM queen, but by one who was a young woman. However, there was no way he’d find a youthful dominatrix, let alone have her offer her services. That could be considered a truly uncommon desire.

Right at that moment, though, his ideal queen stood in front of his very eyes.

After they’d decided Mira would wear her antihero outfit, she’d ended up looking more like a mistress of the night than an

antiheroine or evil sorceress. So the moment Rock met her, he was shocked at how close she was to his ideal queen and completely fell for her.

To think I got him to answer on my first shot… Mira reflected.

Rock had provided his real name as if he hadn't even considered giving a pseudonym. Who'd have thought it'd go so well? The guild master was a masochist through and through. Surprised, Mira stood squarely on his shoulders. She looked away from Rock, who was leering at her, and glanced over at Lastrada.

Not wasting a moment, Lastrada wrote down what to interrogate Rock about and handed the note to Mira. Then he went back to where he'd been and took his seat, as if letting Mira know that he was leaving the rest to her.

The note began, *Keep questioning him like you're the queen of his dreams.*

In short, Mira needed to continue playing her dominatrix role to get information out of Rock.

I wonder if this approach is also technically the opposite of trying to inflict pain on him…?

The idea was to get Rock, who was completely accustomed to pain, to talk by getting him to succumb to comfort instead. They'd planned to use Leticia's captivating voice to do that, but the situation had taken an unforeseen turn. That said, this would mostly likely cause their target to succumb to the same comfort and pleasure.

Mira wasn't quite sure how all that worked, but—convincing herself that, if Rock was willing to talk, she'd give it a try—she reluctantly continued the interrogation.

"All right. Next, I want to ask you about…" Mira recited after checking what was written on the note.

Meanwhile, Rock had a thoroughly eager expression, one that said he didn't plan to hide anything. His slightly defiant look was completely gone. His face seemed to say that he'd reveal absolutely anything so long as she pressured him into it.

His reaction stunned Mira. But, figuring that it was fine so long as he told her everything she wanted to know, she raised her heel and plunged it again into Rock's body, listening as he gleefully answered.

After she'd carried that out several times, Rock's reactions weakened, becoming less pronounced, and he hesitated to answer more often. Apparently, what she was doing was no longer enough. In other words, he was adjusting to it. But Mira wasn't used to stepping on or dominating people, so she was at a loss for what to do next.

Pondering this, she suddenly noticed Rock doing something strange: He kept glancing back and forth between Mira and another spot as if bothered by something. What in the world was he so agitated about? Was he trying to signal one of his comrades nearby?

Curious, Mira turned to see exactly where he was looking. It appeared to be some kind of storage area piled with paperwork, tools, and food.

Why exactly was Rock so concerned? Was something over there? Not spotting anything that particularly stood out to her, Mira looked back at Rock, who was gradually looking at the storage area with more and more agitation.

His eyes just about screamed, "Please notice it."

"Hm…?" said Mira.

He was blatantly directing her there, so Mira looked toward the storage area one more time, furrowing her brow. She noted every item she saw there one by one.

"Oh. That's a…!"

Lying casually in the space was a whip with a dozen or so leather tassels, also known as a cat-o'-nine-tails. It was a special type of whip especially favored for things like torture. Getting stomped on with heels was losing its edge for Rock, so perhaps it was the perfect time to try out a new tool.

Mira stepped nimbly over the guild master and headed to the storage area to grab the whip. She swung it lightly and turned

to look at Rock, whose face was bursting with glee. Apparently, her guess had been accurate.

Hrmm… I don't actually have *to do what he wants me to. But if it's the most efficient way of getting the information we need, I guess I don't have much leeway.*

The plan was to get information out of Rock by making him happy, so if doing this would get him to reveal things easily, then it was a small price to pay. Trying to convince herself of that, Mira swung the whip.

It let out a sharp, stinging crack as it lashed. At the same time, Rock's euphoric voice rang out, and he began disclosing the information they were after one piece at a time.

So thanks to Mira's efforts, they learned the extent of Gillian Rock's involvement with human trafficking, how many members the guild had, and so on.

That said, if it had been seen by anyone who didn't understand the situation…or even someone who did understand it…the whole scene would just have looked like stereotypical BDSM. Still, it had been for the sake of the children and bringing down the human traffickers, so Mira had given it her all.

Her efforts in interrogating the guild master as a dominatrix had succeeded, and Lastrada got all the information he'd been after.

Rock really was a hopeless pervert, though. To get all that information, she'd had to lash him over a hundred times. She plopped down, exhausted. Having had to do something that really wasn't up her alley, she also felt somewhat dejected.

Rock, on the other hand, seemed to be firing on all cylinders. "What else will you do, my queen? Please, do anything you'd like! I, your loyal dog, will tell you whatever you want so long as you reward me!"

Clear whip marks covered his body. Just the way they oozed blood looked painful enough that Mira found herself grimacing unintentionally.

Rock, however, bore them like badges of honor. Insisting that few queens could leave whip marks like that, he asked to be lashed more and more. Forget selling out his comrades—in the state he was in, he'd have sold out his own family.

"You did gre… Or I guess I should say thanks for all your hard work, Noir Queen," Lastrada told Mira rather cheerfully, still in character, as he walked over. He looked down at Rock—who was still lost in ecstasy—and blanketed him in white mist, promptly knocking him out.

"You…you owe me for making me do all that!" Mira snapped, glaring at Lastrada. Even if this was for the children, she complained, playing a dominatrix had stressed her out.

"As you say, my queen," he replied, bowing gracefully.

"Don't you forget it."

She swore in her heart that she'd someday get even with Lastrada by making him do some equally unreasonable task.

Chapter 35

"THEY SURE STORED TONS of stuff in here. Wow—I bet Solomon would love this sword!"

They'd made their way farther inside the cave Gillian Rock had used as a hideout, finding the entrance to a hidden room at a dead end. According to the information they'd gotten from Rock, this was a secret warehouse full of all kinds of treasure, as well as important paperwork and documents.

"This is a counterfeit trade permit...and here's a ledger with all their transactions. Wow—and this is a report from a supplier! This is great. We hit the jackpot!"

Gillian Rock was heavily involved with human trafficking, so there were piles of documents relating to those activities. To Lastrada, those were likely what was most important, and he began gleefully grabbing whatever papers he could get his hands on. While he gathered anything that could lead him to who or what was behind the human-trafficking syndicate, Mira focused on the treasure.

"Whoa. This must be Grandoll's magic sword! And this is the Whistle of the Underworld. And, wow, the famed sword Wild Snow *and* a meteor spear! This is a literal treasure trove!"

For Mira, a summoner who used Immortal Arts, weapons and such were superfluous. That said, she'd been a fan of cool weapons long before becoming a summoner. Such things were simply beloved by all men.

"Hrmm. Not bad, not bad at all!"

Among all weapons, Japanese swords tended to be especially popular. Accordingly, Mira found herself enjoying playing around with the famed Wild Snow. Strapping it to her waist, she had a great time whipping it from its sheath and trying techniques she'd seen in her favorite anime and manga.

"Great. This'll do it," Lastrada said, finishing up his work as Mira goofed off.

He must've gotten what he was after. He seemed confident that, given all the information he'd gathered there and what they'd learned previously, he could discover whatever malevolent force was behind the human-trafficking syndicate.

"So what do you plan to do with the rest of all this?" Mira asked.

They'd gotten the all-important documents, so it only made sense to figure out what to do with the remaining treasure next. Mira's expression brightened, her eyes practically begging Lastrada to let her keep it all.

Noticing that, Lastrada replied, "Well, we're antiheroes, so of course we'll be taking all of it."

"Hrmm. I see!" Overjoyed at how fantastic being an antihero was, Mira began grabbing all the treasure she could.

That wasn't all Lastrada had to say when it came to claiming the treasure, though. He added, "Normally, well, I'd take it all and put it toward the orphanages' operating expenses or give it to charity. But since you helped so much this time, you can take whatever you like, Commander."

Mira's hands immediately froze. She glared at Lastrada, wondering why he'd had to say that right when she was having the time of her life plundering loot.

The money *would've* gone toward children, but he was bequeathing it all to Mira for her services just this once. What he was implying was very clear, and such a thing was sure to hit home for anyone with a conscience.

"All right... How about I just take this sacred sword as a souvenir for Solomon? It'll help me butter him up so he'll keep lending me a hand when I need it. But I think that's enough for me. So, hrmm... Hey, take the rest back with you to go toward the orphanages!" Mira replied, somewhat disheartened, but having convinced herself that she could relinquish all the loot, since it would go to the children.

Despite giving up the rest of the treasure, Mira wanted just a little something in return for her efforts and took the sacred sword. That was because she currently believed it would be the

most useful in the future. If she could win Solomon's favor by giving him such a rare sacred sword, it'd be sure to help her down the road when she needed to ask him for bigger favors.

"I see. I'll make sure it all goes to good use helping orphanages, Commander," Lastrada replied happily with a knowing smile. He'd been sure that Mira would say as much and began collecting the remaining treasure.

Having looted the secret room entirely, Mira asked, "So what're we going to do with these guys?"

Rock still lay on the ground, and his fellow guild members remained strewn around the cave, beaten senseless. Gillian Rock's members were all involved with human trafficking, so Lastrada and Mira couldn't just leave them there.

That said, transporting that many men would be no easy task. Mira could summon a bunch of dark knights to help her move them to the closest nearby town, but as the look on her face indicated, that would be a tall order.

"Ah, don't worry about that. We just need to report this situation and location to the Guild Union, and they'll come take care of it. What's more, members of an adventurer guild were complicit in the crime this time. Considering that, the Guild Union will probably come en masse to mop up and take care of everything."

As he said all that, Lastrada pumped the cave with so much white mist that none of the men would probably wake up for a few days.

"Yeah. Considering what these guys did, and the fact that they're from a guild registered with the Guild Union, you're probably right."

That was the situation, after all, so the Guild Union would likely clean up the whole mess thoroughly. They wouldn't just stop with that particular hideout either; they'd deal with all of Gillian Rock's outposts.

Just as Mira was agreeing with Lastrada, he suddenly made a suggestion: "Oh, yeah. I think you should report this, Commander. You'd probably score a lot of brownie points with the guild."

Apparently, the Guild Union offered substantial benefits to those who furthered their cause, regardless of rank. Mira could expose the crimes of Gillian Rock, a guild heavily involved in human trafficking, as well as how she'd neutralized their guild master. Finally, Lastrada added, she'd bring further prestige to the Spirit Queen's name.

Her reputation as an A-rank adventurer would spread more widely, and everyone would look up to her. If that happened, people would recognize summoning's merits more widely as well. There were plenty of upsides.

"I don't think so," Mira replied.

Guild Union recognition of her efforts would certainly have advantages, yet she flatly turned down the suggestion. She was worried about what would happen if Rock talked about how he'd been interrogated.

And if she reported it to the Guild Union herself, they'd undoubtedly tie the Spirit Queen to the onetime BDSM queen.

She wanted what had happened in the cave—her wielding a whip while dressed as a dominatrix and whatnot—to remain there. She let Lastrada know that this was her biggest concern.

"No, no, listen... It'd be like, you're usually the Spirit Queen... but your true identity is *Noir Queen*. An antiheroine who abides no evil! Sounds awesome, doesn't it?!"

For an incorrigible superhero nerd like Lastrada, being unmasked was what made being a hero in secret so fun. He couldn't wrap his head around why Mira would object to that.

"I'm not sure how many people would visualize that episode and consider me a hero..." It was certainly the type of imagery one would find in a particular kind of store. Regretting what she'd done, Mira sighed.

When Lastrada asked what in the world was wrong with how she'd proceeded, Mira replied that all of it had been wrong, ripping off her costume and changing quickly into her original clothes.

This outfit is full of Lily's and the other maids' fanaticism...well, devotion...so why does it seem so much more comfortable...?

The magical-girl-style outfit seemed like a giant improvement over the “mistress of the night” one. Considering it bizarre that she felt that way, Mira began to think that she was just more used to this outfit. But there was one more possible reason, and it made a shiver run down her spine: Perhaps Lily and the other maids were growing on her.

“I let the Guild Union chief know about the whole situation. I told him some mysterious heroes destroyed the hideout of a guild conspiring with a criminal syndicate,” Lastrada told her.

He was climbing into the wagon. It had been parked up high on the edge of the forest with a full view of the town where he’d bought the dominatrix outfit.

He was now dressed as an adventurer with consistently fine equipment. Lastrada had two “adventurer” identities: He was both John, an ordinary C-class adventurer, and Subaru, a very capable A-rank adventurer.

“So what was the reaction?” Mira asked.

“Well…he didn’t have much of one,” Lastrada answered, looking slightly discontented.

After discussing it a bit, he and Mira had decided to go with a story in which two mysterious heroes had shown up and delivered just punishment to Gillian Rock.

Mira had insisted on keeping those heroes’ true identities a secret, rejecting Lastrada’s idea of giving the Spirit Queen all the credit. Lastrada had decided to leave the identity of the antihero he’d played a mystery too. Because of that, though, the report he’d filed seemed rather fishy.

“Oh, wow. Looks like they decided to move.”

Despite how dubious that report had seemed, it *was* filed by an A-rank adventurer. There was no way the Guild Union could just ignore it. Looking at the town from far away, they saw what appeared to be the entire guild heading out in droves. Chances were that they were all going to investigate Gillian Rock’s secret hideout.

It seemed like they could leave the rest to the Guild Union.

“All right. Then I guess that’s case closed. So what now? Could you use any other help?” Mira asked, wondering whether there was anything else Lastrada—or, by extension, the children—needed.

Lastrada shook his head. “Nope,” he answered. “Thank you, but everything should be fine now, Commander. I got more than enough intel. All that’s left is to check it all, then determine who or what was behind everything.”

Judging by how confident he sounded, he’d gained very substantial information from Gillian Rock. It was now just a matter of time, he boasted.

“What about you, Commander? I could just take you straight to Artesia, but you’ve got some big award ceremony in Haxthausen, right?”

Since all that was left was to analyze the documents they’d looted, they could both have headed for Artesia’s location immediately. But, sure enough, Fuzzy Dice had eyes and ears everywhere. Although the donation ceremony hadn’t yet been finalized, Lastrada had already caught wind of it.

“Ugh…well, yeah, true. I ended up saying I’d donate that necklace you threw me…” Heaving a sigh, Mira muttered that the event would be held *despite* her wanting to forget about it.

“Rightly so!” Lastrada said. He let out a brisk laugh and smiled, almost as if saying that he’d imagined that Mira would do as much. Perhaps he *had* known how valuable a treasure Eurus of the Silver Sky was.

Just before leaving, he told her, “In that case, let’s go afterward. I’ll contact you once things have settled down!”

Lastrada wasn’t heading to town either, but back toward Gillian Rock’s hideout. He seemed to want to see how the guild members reacted to the scene the two antiheroes had left for them. Smiling like a schoolboy, he dashed away.

“All right. I guess I should head back for now.”

The ceremony aside, Mira had another obligation to fulfill in Haxthausen. She’d made an important promise to Nina and her

sisters to help teach their youngest sibling about summoning.

For the sake of all future summoners—as well as a distraught young girl—the wagon flew off toward Haxthausen with Mira aboard it.

Chapter 36

THE DAY BEFORE the showdown with Fuzzy Dice, Mira and the others were still getting ready.

Mira headed off the main street and down a side street. After following that for a while, she came across a tranquil residential area. The stone apartments and evenly spaced lampposts gave it a relaxing atmosphere; the children playing around the spot made the scene even more picturesque.

Since it was far removed from the main street's hustle and bustle, the space felt distinctly homey and serene. Still, Mira occasionally glimpsed what looked like adventurers. From their actions, she guessed that they were looking for Anrutine.

A few of them have pretty sharp instincts, huh?

Anrutine was indeed hiding nearby. Sensing as much thanks to the Spirit King's blessing, Mira made her way toward the water spirit, careful not to attract any attention.

As she went farther, she felt that something was off. She hadn't been able to tell from far away, but the closer she got to Anrutine, the more the spirit's presence seemed to come from below.

Soon, there was no longer any doubt about that. Reaching a small vacant lot surrounded by nothing but homes, Mira looked down at her feet. Somehow, Anrutine was underground.

That certainly is a good place to hide and not get spotted. But just how am I supposed to get down there?

Mira couldn't remember seeing anything that looked like an entrance to an underground location on her way there. How would she access Anrutine's hiding spot?

As she pondered that, the water spirit moved below. She apparently sensed Mira standing right above her, and it seemed that she was trying to reach the summoner. There were no exits nearby, however.

As Mira wondered what to do, water began to overflow from a drain in the ground. It gathered into a three-dimensional shape, eventually forming a human figure. The very next moment, it turned into the Anrutine that Mira knew.

“Wow! I should’ve expected as much of a water spirit, huh?”

Anrutine had turned herself into water, then gone through the gaps in the drain; Mira marveled at the fantastic aqueous sight. Anrutine quickly looked around, then ran over to Mira.

“I haven’t seen you in a long time, Mira,” the water spirit began. Quickly dispensing with greetings, she urged, “Now, let’s hurry and make a contract, as you agreed!”

She seemed to be in quite a rush, but Mira couldn’t really blame her. After all, numerous adventurers were currently gunning to create a contract with her.

“Mm, yeah. It’s been a while,” Mira replied.

Gesturing for Anrutine to sit tight, she summoned Wasranvel. The summoning circle he appeared from was extremely inconspicuous and difficult to make out, very much in keeping with his abilities.

When Wasranvel saw Anrutine, he said with a relieved smile, “I’m glad you found her without incident.”

“Well, yes, it’s true that I did. Still, it hasn’t exactly been smooth sailing,” Mira prefaced, preparing to suggest that they use optical camouflage to hide from any adventurers’ prying eyes.

“At any rate, why don’t we conceal our physical forms?” Wasranvel said, as if he understood the entire situation. Then he camouflaged them before Mira even had a chance to ask.

“...You catch on pretty quick.”

It wasn’t as if they were sneaking around enemy territory—they were simply in a peaceful residential area. Yet, before Mira had a chance to say anything, Wasranvel perceived the need to conceal them. Why had that occurred to him? Since there wasn’t really any need to ask, Mira smiled wryly to herself.

“The Spirit King and Martel have been discussing this situation eagerly.”

“Yeah, that figures.”

Mira had thought that they were being rather quiet, but that was actually because they’d begun delivering a play-by-play of the whole situation over the Spirit King Network.

Chuckling slightly at how much the pair were enjoying themselves, Mira noted that the time she’d save in not having to explain everything to Wasranvel *was* actually a plus. On the battlefield, a single moment could make or break a conflict; if everyone knew the situation going in, that would make it easier to act.

“Now then, shall we make that contract?”

Mira and her companions could no longer be seen with the naked eye, thanks to Wasranvel’s power. That said, they were dealing with adventurers, and Mira wasn’t sure just what detection methods they might have access to. If one of the search parties contained a sage, they’d notice something was up when they used Biometric Scan.

In any case, it would be best for Mira to get the contract with Anrutine done quickly. She swiftly moved to a corner of the vacant lot and hastily put her hand against the water spirit’s proffered forehead.

“Are you ready?”

This contract was special. It would be Mira’s second contract with a spirit from a specific element, something she’d thought was impossible. What made it viable was the Spirit King’s power, so his cooperation was a must.

“Mm. I’m ready. We can begin anytime now.”

The Spirit King’s powerful voice had reverberated through Mira’s mind, as if he was stating that the time had come. He’d reacted at a speed only possible for someone who’d been actively watching the whole scene.

[Evocation Support: Contract Forging]

Mira’s palms glowed faintly, and the crest of the Spirit King’s blessing emanated from her entire body. That had never

happened previously; it was clear that this contract was exceptional.

Mira felt almost as if she had another body, but she was also more aware of herself than ever. It was an indescribable, extremely uncanny sensation.

At that point, the bond between Mira and Anrutine was fully realized. The crest of the Spirit King's blessing enabled Mira to feel that bond nestle close to her before it melted into her entire body.

"Oh ho... Success!"

Despite her surprise at experiencing such a thing for the first time, Mira sensed that her body had attuned to her connection with Anrutine without issue. Bringing to mind a water spirit now conjured images of both Anrutine and Undine, in contrast to before, when she'd only ever had a single choice with no other options.

She'd successfully forged a contract with Anrutine without affecting her previous contract with Undine, just as the Spirit King said she could. Giddy over the fact that she was probably the first summoner ever to succeed in making contracts with two spirits of the same element, Mira celebrated by jumping for joy.

"Uh-oh. Mira, watch your volume!" Wasranvel said hurriedly, immediately silencing her.

Sure enough, an adventurer poked their head out right away on the rooftop facing the vacant lot, looking toward them to see what'd happened.

They'd heard Mira's voice.

The adventurer intently scanning the vacant lot couldn't actually *see* Mira. But they began eyeing the spot carefully, with no small amount of suspicion, as if they sensed something there.

Meanwhile, Mira and her companions hid in a corner and held their breath. If they got caught there, it'd be trouble. The adventurers would discover the spirit they'd been searching for secretly meeting the Spirit Queen. Worse, they'd find out that Mira had already made a contract with her. If those female adventurers learned that, what would they do?

Shuddering at that thought, Mira asked Wasranvel to conceal her fully. That almost overpowered ability let her evade any form of detection. Owing to how powerful it was, however, it could only be used for a limited time.

After that, thanks to Wasranvel's full concealment, nobody could detect Mira and her companions any longer. Perhaps because of that, the adventurer soon made their way elsewhere.

"Phew... Sorry about that. I was just so excited..." Mira apologized in a whisper.

She used Biometric Scan to survey the area. She didn't detect any adventurers, so they deactivated Wasranvel's full concealment, and Mira asked him to go back to using solely optical camouflage.

Meanwhile, over the Spirit King Network, she heard, *"Ah, Spirit King! And Mistress Martel!"*

Anrutine beamed, appearing overcome with emotion at having heard Martel's and the Spirit King's voices. Wasranvel wore a somewhat cheerful grin himself. Anrutine was finally part of the team and no longer on the outside looking in.

Not only the Spirit King and Martel but Sanctia and Wasranvel—who stood right in front of Mira—all began chatting via the Spirit King Network; they must've been pretty happy. It bore mention that Mira couldn't actually *hear* what they were discussing.

Though the spirits' communication system was simply known as the "Spirit King Network," it actually comprised two separate channels. The first was a special one that Martel and the Spirit King used to check in with Mira. The other was used exclusively by spirits to communicate with each other.

The Spirit King had set that channel up so that he could keep up-to-date on spirits' doings; therefore, Mira wasn't connected to it. That was actually for the best. If she'd been looped in, she'd have had to deal with the spirits' chatter all day. That said, if something did come up that required her attention, the spirits could have the Spirit King or Martel send word to her.

As all this was explained to Anrutine, Mira heard nothing but silence. Having just gotten her hands on a new summon, she

couldn’t contain herself.

“Well, mission accomplished. Now, can’t I learn a bit more about your powers?” she pressed impatiently.

She didn’t know what the spirits were talking about on their private channel. Besides, at any rate, the important thing now was Anrutine’s powers—and how they could help her moving forward.

“Ah, yes. Of course. That should come first.”

Faced with Mira’s mad grin, and remembering when Sanctia and Wasranvel had forged their contracts, Anrutine turned toward Mira and began to explain her abilities. They turned out to be quite different from Undine’s, which were offense-focused.

For one thing, Anrutine specialized in enabling one to go underwater, as she had when she’d brought Mira into a lake on the day they met. Her abilities let her bring anyone and anything within an area of effect extending deep underwater without worrying about water pressure. According to Anrutine, even diving six miles underwater wouldn’t be an issue. Six miles underwater would be like a completely new world, so that ability was noteworthy despite not being particularly flashy, much like Wasranvel’s.

Additionally, while Anrutine didn’t seem very skilled in combat, she knew quite a few defensive techniques, which she began relaying to Mira. One of them, Aqua Coat, was particularly powerful. It worked by spreading a thin layer of highly compressed water over a person, so it was a fairly simply technique. That said, it was incredibly effective.

According to Wasranvel—who knew Anrutine fairly well—Aqua Coat not only blocked physical and magic attacks, it also excelled at defending against heat and fire attacks. What made the technique special was how concentrated the water it used was. And it used such a huge amount of compressed water that it had even weathered a breath attack from a fire dragon.

As Wasranvel said that, a wry smile formed on Anrutine’s lips. Whatever had gone on in the past between her, Wasranvel, and a dragon was known only to them.

When it came to offense, Anrutine primarily attacked by crushing her enemies using a ball of highly compressed water.

“Hrmm. I think I get the gist of it! Incredible. This is very exciting!”

Anrutine’s abilities mostly seemed to be based around manipulating water pressure. Perhaps thanks to just how diverse spirits’ abilities were, Mira had never heard of any of the techniques; she was overjoyed that she’d now even made a contract with a spirit who possessed them.

“I could even search shipwrecks and underwater ruins. My adventuring horizons have expanded further still!”

Just as Mira’s statement implied, countless tales and rumors surrounded the ocean, including those involving wrecked ships, ruins, and so on. Still, there were few methods of investigating such things. To do so, you needed a spirit with abilities like Anrutine’s or help from someone who could use similar techniques. That said, very few were able to do so. Thus, plenty of unknown adventures could be just waiting for Mira undersea.

Beginning to think feverishly about the new realm of adventuring that was now open to her, Mira told Anrutine, “I look forward to our time together,” then clasped the water spirit’s hand powerfully. “Sorry I led you all the way here. Want to go back? Shall I have Mr. Wasranvel take you outside the city?”

Mira had accomplished her goal. All that was left now was to get Anrutine back to where she’d been before while hiding her from the adventurers searching for her. Wasranvel could surely help with that by taking Anrutine outside the city while using his abilities to conceal her. At least, that was Mira’s idea.

“No, here is fine,” Anrutine answered. Looking down at her feet, she continued nonchalantly, “Before this, I hid in a big underground waterway below the city. It seemed to run underneath the entire area.”

“Oh ho. An underground waterway, huh? I see.”

Now that Mira thought about it, when she’d arrived, Anrutine had been underground. The water spirit had made her way out by passing through a small drain, so that drain must’ve connected to

the subterranean waterway. A water spirit certainly wouldn't have trouble simply following that waterway and making their way outside the city unnoticed.

At that point, Mira suddenly began wondering about the location. "By the way, was that waterway separate from the sewer?"

By "sewer," she meant the spot that various kinds of wastewater emptied into. It would be better just to have Wasranvel escort Anrutine back than to have her go through a place like that.

Once Mira asked this, Anrutine quickly replied that that wasn't the case. "It wasn't particularly dirty," she responded without a moment's hesitation. Then she briefly described the underground waterway.

When Anrutine found that waterway, she'd been curious about the extent to which she could use it as an escape route, so she'd apparently investigated the entire thing. By all accounts, so long as a water spirit was touching a water source, they could detect the area surrounding it. However, that ability wasn't limitless. Its range depended on the individual spirit and their specific strengths and weaknesses. Still, Anrutine had been able to "see" just about the entire city.

Did such an ability really exist? Mira was taken aback by the skill, which Anrutine hadn't even bothered to outline earlier. According to her, she hadn't felt she needed to mention it, since most water spirits could do the same thing.

Through that ability, Anrutine had learned that there was something special about the underground waterway. Namely, that it took in water flowing down from a large river located upstream. Furthermore, rain and runoff emptied and mixed into the waterway at several points. It wasn't the kind of space that flowed with sewage; it was so clean that it was hard to believe it ran under a city.

The waterway was also quite enclosed and was seemingly rather intricately constructed. According to Anrutine, several different channels coursed within it, and the entire network was

dim and moss-covered. From what she could tell, there weren't any entrances or exits. If there were, they had to be fairly well hidden. Northeast of where they stood, however, was a spot where no moss grew; a secret passageway might be located near there.

"Come to think of it, it's strange. Why would anyone build such an intricate, sprawling waterway?"

At first glance, it hadn't seemed to be an aqueduct. And if it was intended for runoff, it hadn't been necessary to make it so intricate. On top of that, judging by how much of the waterway was covered in moss, people only used a small section of it. Finally, although it wasn't a sewer system, the waterway was so large that its branches flowed beneath the entire city.

"Hrmm… Yes, you're right. What's the point of such a place?"

Who had constructed the underground waterway, and for what purpose? Mira tilted her head curiously at Anrutine's query, but no answer came to mind.

"All right, Mira. Thank you. Summon me anytime you need to."

"No—thank you. And sure thing. I look forward to it."

After she and Mira bid each other farewell, Anrutine slipped back through the drain into the underground waterway to return to her prior abode. She'd said cheerfully that, although she'd been in an insane rush to reach this spot, she would take her time and sightsee on her way back.

Noteworthily, it was the Spirit King and Martel who requested that Anrutine do that. It seemed that those two were themselves eager to do some sightseeing via the water spirit.

"Well done today, Mr. Wasranvel. Oh, right—tomorrow, we'll go up against the phantom thief. There's a chance I may need your help then," Mira said before preparing to dismiss the spirit.

Wasranvel must've heard as much from the Spirit King already. "You can count on me," he replied enthusiastically.

Since Mira would be facing the phantom thief, she'd need more than just combat finesse. Under those circumstances, unique skills like Wasranvel's mastery of silence were sure to

shine. At least, that was what Wasranvel seemed to think. He wasn't the only one, though; Mira also felt that he might very well become her ace in the hole.

"All right, then I'll be seeing you."

"Yes indeed."

Having let him know that she'd summon him the next day, Mira dismissed Wasranvel.

As the hour when she'd promised to meet up with the chief detective quickly approached, she began walking toward their rendezvous spot.

Afterword

WELL NOW, we've reached the afterword. I'm pleased to say that that was Volume 13!

This time, we've got a night view on the cover. As usual, fuzichoco's illustrations are superb. Speaking of which, fuzichoco's second art book, *Sai Gen Kyo*, is now on sale! You'll find tons of incredible illustrations inside besides just the covers of *She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man*. Pick up a copy so you can enjoy them yourself!

Also, the sixth volume of the *She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man* manga, which dicca*suemitsu has been kind enough to oversee, is now on sale as well. If you can, please support it too!

And as some of you may have glimpsed upon picking this book up...or perhaps even noticed just from the jacket advertisement...*She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man* is finally, *finally* getting an anime!

That's right, it'll be adapted into an anime. An *anime*! As in, it'll become a show you see broadcast on TV and stuff! It's like the world I created will be made into the same kind of anime I've been a fan of since I was little!

Wow. Achieving something so momentous feels almost like a dream. I'm really looking forward to seeing Mira move on-screen and actually hearing her speak.

We'll announce further details later. In any case, it's all thanks to every one of you who've come this far with us and supported us along the way. Thank you so much. We appreciate your support now and in the years to come.

Heh heh heh...an anime adaptation...teh heh heh heh.



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