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She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man
NOVEL
14

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Looking at each face, Luminaria smiled bashfully and said, "Ahhh, long time no see."
Solomon had kept information about their coming under wraps. From Luminaria's point of view, this was a reunion twenty years coming.
There must've been a lot going through her head.
"Well, if it isn't Artesia and Kagura… and Lastrada, too."


"Whoa…! Miss Mira?! You look so cute. And we're dressed the same, too!"
"Don't worry about her."
"You look pretty cute yourself."

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man

NOVEL 14

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

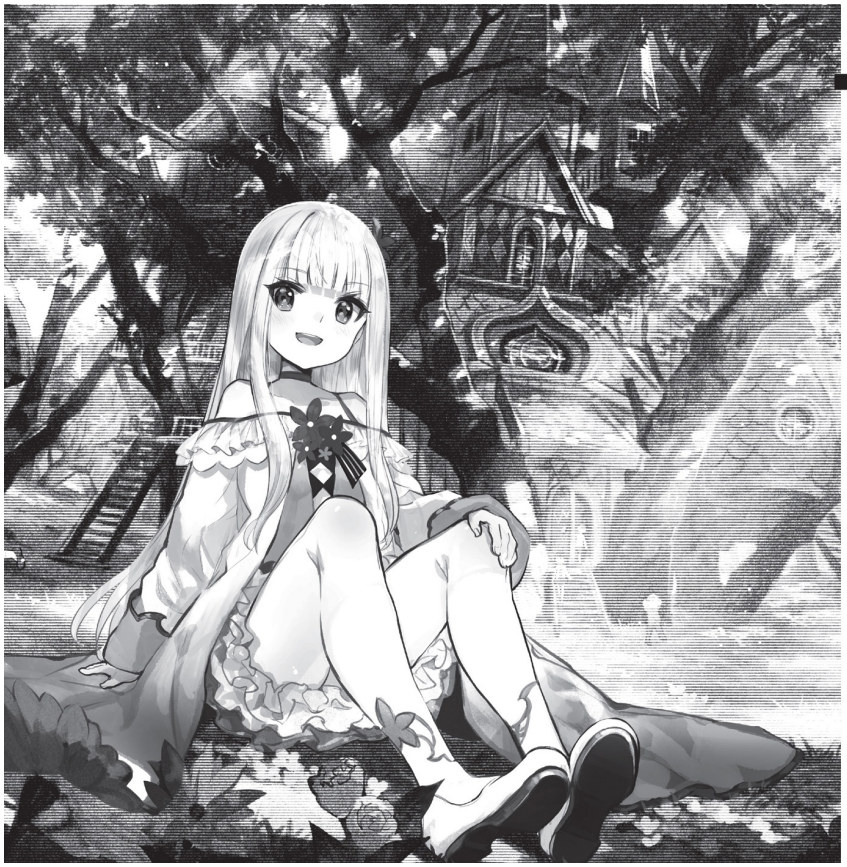


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Chapter 1

THE DAWN SKY OVER HAXTHAUSEN was so clear that it looked crystalline.

Having spent the night at the Baron Hotel, Mira sat up, got out of bed, and went about her morning activities. She woke herself up with a nice bath before enjoying a sumptuous breakfast in her room.

"Hrmm, it's a shame, but I suppose I'll have to go…"

Turning her gaze toward the window and looking up into the clear blue sky, Mira thought back on the events of the previous day. Specifically, the ones that involved teaming up with Lastrada, one of the Nine Wise Men, who'd been masquerading as Fuzzy Dice.

In the end, the two of them managed to bring down the heinous guild known as Gillian Rock. After that, she still had things she needed to do, so she'd parted with Lastrada and made her way back to Haxthausen. But as she passed by the cathedral on her way back to the Baron Hotel, something had happened…

She caught a glimpse of people preparing for another solemn yet lavish ceremony.

The date of Fuzzy Dice's big heist had been the all-important seasonal liturgy, and yet, here they were, already getting ready for the next big ceremony a day later. It certainly didn't seem like there should be another big event only days after the previous one.

That could only mean one thing: They were preparing for Mira to donate Eurus of the Silver Sky. There was no doubt about it—they were getting ready for the donation ceremony.

"Well, it's not like there's anything I can do about it…"

It was a serious pain, but she had to go. Her decision made, Mira decided to get up and check on things at the cathedral.

Sweet potato cakes, huh…? Probably not a bad idea to grab some on the way back.

Going down the main street, Mira spotted the dessert shop that she remembered hearing about from Chief Detective Wolf. What he'd said the day before was that it was on his list of the best in the city, and she was very interested in giving it a try.

They've got something that looks like Mont Blanc-flavored Japanese-style sweet-bean pancakes, too. It's been a while since I've had anything like that. I could go for some…

The chief detective had mentioned that Japanese-style desserts had really begun taking off. There were also Japanese-*inspired* desserts…but from what she'd heard, they still seemed to be fairly Western.

As she strolled down the street, with thoughts of sweets filling her head, she realized something. It'd been two days since Fuzzy Dice's heist, and his fan club had all but disappeared. Just the day before, she'd been to a swap meet for Fuzzy Dice goods, but now there wasn't a fan to be seen. This was likely because there was no need to dress up like fans now that the heist was over. Even so, she couldn't help thinking that the streets really had emptied out.

Knowing the fan information network they had, Mira knew that it was probably already public knowledge that she'd recovered Eurus of

the Silver Sky. However, upon casually asking a nearby guard, she was informed that they'd all caught the first ride out of the city.

Relieved to hear this, Mira continued on, arriving at the cathedral after ten or so minutes—much to her dismay.

"It sure would be nice if I could just hand it to them and be done with it…" she muttered.

From what she could tell, preparations for the ceremony were complete. It looked as if things were ready to get started at any moment. Mira, not ready to admit defeat, began looking around the cathedral to find some way to just hand it over and go home. Surely, there had to be someone who would just take it from her.

As she was doing this, someone called out, "Um, can I help you with something?"

Turning around, she saw a nun clothed in a habit. She happened to be a young girl and had the air of an apprentice.

This was Mira's shot. If she pulled this off, she could talk the girl into taking Eurus of the Silver Sky off her hands. While she was plotting, the nun got a good look at Mira and broke into a big smile.

"Ah! You must be Lady Mira! The Spirit Queen! I heard that you'd be coming! Come right this way!"

Mira was an A-rank adventurer who'd promised to donate a treasure worth five billion ducats to children in orphanages. To an apprentice nun, this had to make her an illustrious figure worthy of the utmost respect. The dazzling smile on the girl's face bordered on hero worship.

"Hrmm… I-I see," Mira said, unable to resist the radiance of the innocent girl's smile. Now she couldn't run away.

Accepting her fate, Mira followed the nun through the staff entrance and into the cathedral.

"Welcome. We're delighted you came."

They made their way to the archbishop's chambers.

While the archbishop was older, he was in good shape and had a dignified air which befitted his title. He wore a serene expression and despite Mira's childish appearance, he was very courteous toward her.

"Thank you for having me. It's an honor to meet you," Mira said, addressing the archbishop as if he were some great paragon of virtue. Seizing the moment, she held out Eurus of the Silver Sky in a last-ditch attempt to get it off her hands.

Her hopes were in vain.

"Thank you for your support. I take it that that's what you will be donating. When it comes time for the ceremony, I'll swear an oath and accept it from you."

With those words, the archbishop gently shut down the idea of a hasty exit.

And with that, Mira's meeting with the archbishop was adjourned. Next, she was taken to a church parlor.

"You must use some pretty good tea leaves," Mira said, taking a seat on a *very* comfortable sofa with a cup of tea. The fresh brew was incredibly fragrant. Even an untrained palate would recognize it as high quality.

The parlor looked very much like a room in a hotel. Perhaps this was how they received patrons who donated large sums. She was certainly being treated like a VIP.

After waiting a bit in the parlor, a senior nun came by to explain how exactly the donation ceremony would go. Mira found it was a relief to get the details on how the ceremony would progress and when she would bequeath the donation. It didn't seem as if she really had to do or say anything special.

The donor (a.k.a. Mira) just had to stand nicely and hand the archbishop the donation once she heard the code word. There was no mention of any of the annoying formal stuff that Mira had been dreading.

Well, if that's all I have to do, then it should be fine.

Now informed, Mira let go of the tension in her shoulders and waited for the ceremony to begin while enjoying the high-quality tea.

After about half an hour, the apprentice nun came to let her know that preparations for the ceremony were complete.

"Hrmm, all right then." Unperturbed, Mira rose and headed toward the chapel where the donation ceremony was being held.

The long hallway wasn't just extravagant—it felt sacred. It was adorned with the kinds of pots and other furnishings that one might find in a nice mansion, and they all featured religious imagery.

Linkslott was part of Grimdart—one of the Three Great Kingdoms—and was profoundly influenced by the god of justice, one of the three pillars of the Divine Trinity. It was not surprising that she

saw the symbols of swords and shields just about everywhere. This religious imagery was most pronounced in the chapel to which Mira had just been shown. She saw a line of massive knight statues against the wall. It was an imposing space filled with an air of grandiosity.

Maybe it's just because the moment is finally here, but the air feels a lot heavier than it did before.

With that on her mind, Mira made her way up to the altar just as instructed, bowing to the archbishop and taking a seat in the chair that'd been set for her. She took another look around the cathedral and smiled bitterly to herself, seeing that far too many people had shown up.

From what she could tell, there were definitely some believers who'd shown up to worship and, seeing that the donation ceremony was getting ready to start, simply decided to stay and watch. She was able to gather as much from how they were dressed. Worship was a part of daily life, and they were dressed in their normal, everyday attire.

But there was one group that was clearly distinct from the rest. Mira had heard about them in advance from the more senior nun. These people were neatly dressed in formal clothing and radiated an exceptionally dignified air. They were the nobility who had volunteered to bear witness to the event.

There seemed to be a fair number of people watching just because they'd heard about Mira's exploits, around which speculation still swirled. But others had a simpler motivation: to get a really good look at Mira.

These gentlemen happened to be single. They might've been thinking they had a chance to snag a catch.

Mira also noticed how many of those in the crowd worked for the church. In fact, more than half of those in the chapel were employees. They each seemed to be assigned some sort of role, and they were all holding some kind of ritualistic tool.

I bet some of them had to come in and work on their day off…

As Mira's mind wandered, the ceremony continued on. Presently, the archbishop was speaking about the current situation at the orphanages and how the children there were faring.

There were not enough funds to completely cover operating expenses, and orphanages only had access to the bare minimum when it came to food and clothing. He also said that there were orphanages that were struggling to keep up with repairing and maintaining living spaces.

Things at the orphanages were grim, even if the archbishop was exaggerating how grave the situation was. Then he lifted his voice…

"However, a ray of *light* shines upon us on this wonderful day!"

Light. That was the code word.

Mira slowly stood up and took her place at the archbishop's side, just as planned.

The archbishop then addressed the chapel, "On this day, the Spirit Queen—the esteemed adventurer Lady Mira—has decided to extend a helping hand, being anguished at the plight of the orphanages."

As he said this, music started playing from somewhere. Feeling like this was quite an overwrought performance, Mira held up Eurus of the Silver Sky and handed it to the archbishop, just like had been planned.

A light breeze blew upon them, and a look of surprise briefly passed over the archbishop's face. It was only there for an instant. He immediately returned to his serene state, and when he bowed with Eurus of the Silver Sky in hand, the choir began to sing along with the music.

The nuns waiting on the periphery began moving about as well. Light emanated from the objects they held, radiating all throughout the chapel. It was quite an elaborate performance.

While this was going on, the archbishop began explaining the nature of Eurus of the Silver Sky and just how valuable it was. "I do hereby swear that the Church of the Trinity, to which Lady Mira has bequeathed this treasure, shall use it to bring happiness to the children," he then proclaimed.

At that moment, not just the worshippers but also the nobility began to murmur. To the Church of the Trinity, this was also an oath to the gods…which made it absolute. The senior nun said it was very rare for the archbishop to swear an oath like this. No wonder those in attendance were so surprised.

And since the money was specifically going to the orphanages, it certainly seemed like he was deeply pleased by Mira's proposal. The oath was an expression of his sincerity.

Once the archbishop's rare oath was followed by a seemingly endless round of applause, the donation ceremony came to an end. Back in the parlor afterward, the archbishop asked Mira how she'd come by the treasure. From the moment he laid his hands on it, he knew it was the genuine item…and he wasn't just referring to the gems but the blessing of the god of trade that imbued it. This was a real sacred treasure, and it was likely to go for no less than ten billion ducats at auction.

"Oh wow, that's even more than I'd heard." While Mira had been astonished when she first heard that it was worth five billion, she was utterly awestruck to hear it was worth twice that. She smiled ruefully to herself at the current state of inflation.

"But I don't plan on putting this up for auction. Rather, I'm thinking of letting it go for a lower price to a reliable business proprietor."

It was said that Eurus of the Silver Sky protected merchants. The legend surrounding it had endured for years, even if it was nothing more than a superstition… At least until the archbishop confirmed that it was very real and very blessed. It would now undoubtedly become a precious treasure to merchants and command an absurd price.

However, the archbishop stated that he wasn't comfortable merely auctioning it away to the highest bidder. He wanted to make sure it stayed out of the wrong hands. He detailed his plans to Mira, hoping to put her at ease. The person he proposed entrusting Eurus of the Silver Sky to was none other than the president of Dinoire

Trading. The archbishop had crossed paths with him several times and decided that he was the kind of person who could be trusted.

And when he did sell him the bargain-priced treasure, he would include a stipulation that Dinoire Trading would indefinitely sell goods to the orphanages for wholesale prices.

Dinoire Trading was famed for its adventuring goods. Being an adventurer was a demanding and rigorous profession, and Dinoire Trading provided all the essentials: gear, food, and even shelter. They also had branches across the continent. For this reason, the archbishop believed that they'd be able to help a great many orphanages.

"Hrmm, I see."

If they sold it for ten billion ducats, they'd be able to cover both the orphans' food and repairs to the orphanages in one fell swoop. But Mira thought that would be a temporary measure. Once the money they got from the auction was used up, things would slowly return to how they had been before. However, if they had the trading company's support for an indefinite amount of time, then things would slowly improve as time went on. With the blessed necklace, the future of Dinoire Trading would remain secure. As would their support for the orphanages…

The archbishop's proposal certainly seemed future-proof. And Mira was no stranger to Dinoire Trading.

"Hrmm, I understand. I fully support your proposal."

The archbishop smiled with relief and said, "Thank you very much." Having decided what would be done with Eurus of the Silver

Sky, he then said, “Take this as well. It’s a token of the Church of the Trinity’s appreciation.” He then held out a small, thin wooden box.

“Hmm, what’s this?”

She’d donated the treasure simply because she’d wanted to. She never considered it something that she ought to be rewarded for…but she wasn’t one to turn down a gift.

The front of the palm-sized box was engraved with the symbol of the Church of the Trinity.

Wow… A box this small and engraved with the seal of the Trinity must be…

The moment she saw it, Mira began getting anxious. Special gifts from the church were normally engraved with the symbol of just *one* of the gods of the Trinity. The wooden box the archbishop was holding was engraved with the seal of *all three*. The symbol of the full Trinity was considered sacrosanct and was very rarely used.

Having had dealings with the Church of the Trinity in the past, Mira knew this well. And so she opened the box gingerly, curious to see what could be inside.

“Wow… Is this…?”

Inside the box was a silver medal that was smaller than her palm. Surprisingly, it was also engraved with the symbol of the full Trinity and looked to be custom made.

Still, she wasn’t quite sure what the medal was for… Was it something to commemorate her donation? She asked the archbishop, who confirmed that it was a commemorative medal.

"It is a token of the Church of the Trinity's appreciation for your substantial contribution, Miss Mira. Please accept it," the archbishop said cheerfully. The medal was something akin to proof that she was a VIP. If she was ever in trouble, she could bring it to any nearby church and they would spare no effort in assisting her. It meant that she had the full backing of the church.

The Church of the Trinity was the largest entity on the continent. If this guaranteed her their support, then the medal would grant her quite a bit of power.

"I wonder if you should really be giving this to someone like me…"

Mira felt rather reluctant to accept the medal, which promised more power than she'd imagined. It was a dangerous object that could be abused in many different ways. Such a thing carried a great responsibility.

And yet, here the archbishop was, just handing it to her.

"It is my belief that you can be trusted with it. And if I didn't properly reward your show of goodwill, then I would need to be punished," the archbishop said, letting out a laugh.

He then lowered his voice and quietly confessed, "And now, this is to be kept secret but…" He whispered that it was the Church of the Trinity's desire to be on good terms with Mira, who had ties to the Spirit King. "And so, please hold onto it. We won't interfere unnecessarily in your affairs just because you have it."

Was that the truth of it, or was the archbishop simply trying to

assuage Mira’s concerns?

She wasn’t quite sure. Regardless, he had made his appreciation known.

“In that case, I’ll take good care of it.”

Nodding in acknowledgment, Mira accepted the gift. The Spirit Queen was not only an ally of the Trinity but an important person to the church.

Chapter 2

MIRA, AMPLY REWARDED, was led out of the church by officials from the Church of the Trinity. She began walking toward her next destination.

"It should be around here…"

Having scouted her target while surveying the city to encircle Fuzzy Dice, Mira looked for landmarks as she made her way down the main street. She was looking for the guardhouse. She was curious about how things had ended in the underground waterway and wanted to ask them about it.

At the moment, she only knew what Christina had reported to her: Those inside the human trafficking base and the owner of the mansion above had been arrested. But how were the children who'd been rescued doing? Their well-being was what concerned Mira the most.

"Ah, there is it."

It was a rather imposing building that was constructed of iron and stone. The flag of Grimdart and the national flag of Linkslott flew above it. Despite being along the vibrant and colorful main street, it had a strikingly austere appearance. It was certainly easy to tell that it served a martial purpose. Being a base for the guards, it had barracks, offices, and even an assistance counter.

Stepping inside, she found a large lobby sprawled before her—complete with several reception counters. She saw several people who'd come in to make inquiries. Eavesdropping, Mira learned that

they were asking the guards to do something about a group of drunks who'd fallen asleep in front of their shops. They must've used the Fuzzy Dice-related excitement as an excuse to go out drinking and singing. Truth be told, Mira had seen those drunks on the way to the guardhouse. She laughed to herself about how they couldn't catch a break that morning while she waited for a counter to open up.

After about five minutes, Mira's turn came.

"Is Captain Desmond here?" Mira asked, getting straight to the point. She figured the quickest way to figure out what'd happened afterward was to ask the person who'd been there himself.

"Um, what is it that you're here about?"

Perhaps she'd gotten to the point a little too quickly. A troubled look now floated across the receptionist's face. Realizing that she might've jumped the gun, Mira began thinking about how she might explain herself.

Then a guard poked his head out from behind the reception desk and said, "Ah, I was wondering if it might be you, Spirit Queen. Thanks for all your help yesterday!"

"Hrmm…? Oh, you were with us, weren't you?"

It was the rakish guard who'd been among Desmond's affable companions. Remembering his personality, she figured it was the perfect opportunity to ask where the captain was.

"I believe he was in conference room number three. Take a left over there and then the stairs up to the third floor," he politely instructed her.

The woman at the reception desk turned, asking, "Um, are you sure that's okay?"

When Mira thought about it, it'd be like someone going into a police station and just wandering around. The receptionist's reaction was quite understandable. But with everything she'd done the day before, she'd succeeded in earning quite a bit of trust from the guards.

"Yeah, no worries. She's the Spirit Queen, and she worked with us the other day."

And with that, Mira was given permission to go inside.

"Well, it should be conference room number three on the third… Ah, there it is."

On the third floor of the guardhouse, Mira soon came upon a door with *Conference Room No. 3* written across it, just like she'd been told.

From what she'd heard, Desmond was writing up a report related to what'd happened with the phantom thief. And since he might need Mira's testimony when it came to certain things, she'd been asked to go and speak with him.

Standing in front of the door and knocking three times, Mira soon heard a voice reply, "Yes, come on in!"

"Will do, thanks." Opening the door, she saw Desmond beneath the light, surrounded by papers. He stretched briefly, then looked at her.

"What do you nee—huh? Mira?!" he said in surprise upon seeing Mira in the doorway. It seemed her visit was unexpected. "Um… Huh? Ah, well, why don't you take a seat?"

While still confused, he was nevertheless a good host.

"Where'd I put the tea…? No, she'd probably prefer hot cocoa…" he muttered to himself as he headed toward the conference room's kitchenette.

"No need to worry about me. I just came to ask you about the children who were recovered," Mira said, explaining the reason for her visit. She wanted to know what'd happened after they parted in the underground waterway.

"Ah, so that's why you're here. I understand. I'm sure Christina kept you posted, but how about I tell you the rest of the story?!"

Having gotten things ready in the kitchenette, Desmond laid out what he'd prepared on the table in front of the sofa Mira sat on. He grabbed the papers he'd just been working on and sat down on the other side, but before recounting what'd happened after they'd split up, he said, "Though it can wait till later, I'd also like to hear what happened with you."

After following the trail Fuzzy Dice had left in the underground waterway for about ten minutes, they came to a door. But not *just* a door. In front of it lay someone, passed out. Upon getting a good look at the man, they realized that he'd been put to sleep by Fuzzy Dice.

Assuming that he must know something, they stealthily arrested and questioned him. They learned that on the other side of the door lay a base for a human trafficking syndicate. Upon asking him how

many of his associates were inside, they discovered that the children who were to be sold were imprisoned there as well.

Those inside the base were fairly experienced veterans. But so were Desmond and his men. With the help of the mercenaries, they flew into action, ready to rescue the children. They broke down the door and immediately rushed into the base.

Inside, they found six brutes and ten children. The moment they stepped inside, they beheld a girl crying because one of the thugs had snatched away her doll.

"And that's when it happened. It was like a gust of wind. Christina, who'd been standing right next to us, managed to get deep in the base in the blink of an eye."

Desmond recounted that—immediately after Christina stepped in between the man and the girl—the man had collapsed. "At the time, I honestly had no idea what'd happened. At least it threw the rest of the enemies into confusion and helped distract them."

They panicked after seeing the man collapse. Not allowing such an opportunity to slip through their fingers, Desmond and the others all stormed the base. Just as the man they'd questioned had said, the men inside were all very skilled. But outnumbering them, Desmond and the others managed to secure the site.

Once things had calmed down, they took a look at the man who'd first collapsed and noted that he looked extremely peaceful. But after checking him thoroughly, they discovered that both his hands and feet had been cleanly broken.

"I'm sure Christina could've easily cut them all down. But after seeing that man, it became clear she was showing restraint to avoid the children witnessing such a thing." He paused to consider what a good heart she had before smiling dryly and adding, "We weren't quite so considerate."

The enemy put up stiff resistance, and it ended up being a pretty bloody raid.

"We really put on a gory display…but even so, they still called us heroes," Desmond said, smiling happily. There had been no fatalities, but most of the smugglers had sustained serious injuries.

It didn't matter if they were covered in grime or blood by the end—Desmond and the others had taken down the bad guys, and so, in the eyes of the children, they were heroes.

"That's because kids are honest. If they said that, it's because you are undeniably heroes."

All men aspire to be heroes once in their lives. Seeing his smile, Mira couldn't help but smile herself.

But jeez, that's what ended up happening? It's just like I expected. But if I hadn't asked him for the details, I never would've known.

Christina hadn't included the fact that she'd tried to prevent the children from seeing anything traumatizing in her report. All she'd said was that they'd managed to neutralize the kidnappers.

She has an unexpectedly humble side…

She seemed to speak boastfully about whatever she did and how hard she worked, but perhaps there was more to her than that. Mira thought to herself that she should let Alfina know about what a spectacular job Christina had done—then resolved, instead, to take a page out of Christina's book and be considerate of such things herself.

"So how are the children faring?" Mira asked, after taking a sip of hot cocoa.

For the most part, she now understood what'd gone on in the underground waterway. What she wanted to know about was the children.

"You needn't worry about them. They're being properly cared for at a state facility. We plan on taking charge of finding their parents and getting them home."

That was surely what Fuzzy Dice had hoped would happen. Having found them, the state would then ensure they were safely taken care of.

"None of them were ill or injured."

With a deeply relieved look on his face, Desmond began to elaborate on their current situation. After getting some rest, the children calmed down a bit. They had been quite frightened when they were first taken into custody, but their caretaker reported they seemed to be in good spirits in the morning.

They might not have had any physical injuries, but they certainly had psychological ones. Some of the kids occasionally had bouts of

anxiety. There was no doubt that the stress they'd endured had taken a toll.

But Desmond assured her that the children would be fine. "Hurts like these just need time to slowly heal. Meanwhile, we'll need to find their parents as soon as possible."

But from the moment they were rescued until the moment she was recalled, Christina had been by their side, trying to cheer them up. It seemed the children were all talking about how they wanted to become cool warriors like her.

"Wow, I had no idea she did that."

Moved by Christina's kindness, she wished she hadn't recalled Christina quite so quickly. Christina's stock was quickly rising with Mira.

"For now, I'm having guards that aren't busy teach them the basics of how to use a sword."

Since it was to help the children, several had stepped up to volunteer. Desmond chuckled that it'd be nice if they could at least teach them the basics while they sought out their parents.

For about thirty minutes, Mira assisted Desmond in writing his report, which was primarily about Fuzzy Dice's role in the whole thing. Then she learned the details about the men who'd held the children captive and the mansion staff who were near the waterway's entrance. The former seemed to be washed-up mercenaries who'd been contracted to do behind-the-scenes work. They were still being questioned, but it didn't seem like they knew very much about the human trafficking syndicate.

"You know, I just happened to overhear something…" Mira said, before filling in Desmond about the events the day before. She said she'd heard a rumor that an adventurers' guild known as Gillian Rock had been pulling the strings, then let him know that the Adventurers' Guild Union had already taken action against the guild.

"Wow, they did that already…?" Despite sounding rather surprised, Desmond seemed to think it all checked out.

There was also the owner of the mansion, Viscount Denveroll, who had spoken about his involvement with the human trafficking syndicate. He confessed that he'd been taking orders from higher-ups in the organization directing the criminal enterprise, but it would take time to get any more information out of him. There was a lot of annoying red tape because he was a member of the nobility.

Desmond complained about the holdups—this person was *obviously* guilty.

"Thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to see me." Having gotten all the answers that she'd sought, Mira polished off her hot cocoa with a final sip before standing up.

"Not at all. I should be thanking you for helping me finish my report."

Thanks to the additional details from Mira and the information she'd provided about Gillian Rock, all the missing pieces had been filled in. Desmond smiled as he compiled his now-complete report.

Relieved that she could count on them to take care of the children, Mira left the guardhouse after bidding farewell to Desmond and his men. She had been asked to keep everything regarding the

incident confidential because a member of the nobility was involved with a human trafficking syndicate. If word got out that a nobleman was implicated, it would reflect very poorly on the entire nation.

"A syndicate, huh? It's unforgivable to prey on children…"

Organized criminals had been involved with the events in the underground waterway. They were who Lastrada was after. Mira felt shaken after hearing about the children from Desmond.

The day before, she'd been made to dress up as a queen to help. But she now resolved that if there was ever anything else she could do to assist, she'd do so without hesitation.

Chapter 3

AFTER FOLLOWING THE MAIN ROAD for about ten minutes, Mira arrived in front of the guild union. However, her business wasn't with the guild union but with the building next door.

"I'm pretty sure they said they'd be on the second floor."

Located on the right side of the Mages' Guild, the building appeared to be a boarding house. And while the three-story building was slightly larger than an aristocrat's mansion, it had a plain exterior of wood and stone.

Stepping into the entryway, she came into a small hall. In front of her was a staircase and hallways stretching to the left and to the right. Something about it resembled a school.

She didn't see anyone in the sprawling building. Mira knew that it wasn't vacant but that everyone was just inside rooms.

"She said I should go up to the second floor, then at the end of the hallway on the right…"

Mira took the stairs in front of her and went down the hallway. After passing a few rooms, a pleasant smile broke across her face, and she said, "They're hard at work, huh?"

There were children inside the room. Not just *any* children, either. They were young girls and boys who dreamed of becoming adventurers and were training to do just that. She'd heard from Nina and her sisters that this was a place where they could learn about various aspects of adventuring, such as how to wield a sword, identify

medicinal herbs, forage in the wild, understand monsters, and other things.

This building next to the Mages' Guild, which looked like a school, was an adventurer training center.

"This should be the room."

Mira had come to the training center to fulfill the promise she'd made to Nina and her sisters.

She opened a door with *Reference Room* written across the front and walked inside. The room resembled a small library and was furnished with bookshelves, tables, and chairs. Inside were six children using the space to study and do research.

"Now then… I wonder if she's here."

The children, who were aspiring adventurers, seemed to know of Mira, the Spirit Queen. As soon as they noticed her sudden arrival, they all began chattering about whether or not she was an impostor or the real thing.

While this was happening, Mira took a quick look around the room. She'd heard from Nina that her sister was named Rina and studied evocation in this room every day.

But there was no one matching her description. Mira turned to the boy closest to her and asked, "Is there a girl here named Rina?"

"Ah, Um… Y-Yes. There is!" the boy answered, looking rather nervous. Perhaps this was because he was speaking with the famed Spirit Queen, or perhaps it was because he'd been asked a question by a beautiful young girl.

Mira heard something fall to the floor behind her. Turning to see what had fallen, she saw an awestruck girl standing beside a bookshelf. She noticed the source of the sound: a book lying at the girl's feet.

"That's her!" the boy managed to squeak out. It seemed as if Mira had found who she was looking for.

"I see. Thanks," Mira said, thanking the boy with a slight smile. She quickly walked over to the girl as the boy behind her blushed and stiffened up. It seemed yet another innocent boy had fallen hopelessly in love.

Clueless, Mira approached the girl. After making sure she matched the description Nina and her sisters had provided, she sweetly asked, "You're Rina, Nina's little sister, right?"

The girl didn't answer. Rather, she was even more nervous than the boy Mira had spoken to a moment ago. Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly, and her gaze swept from place to place.

Hrmm… I did hear that she looked up to me. It's no wonder she's nervous!

When she thought about it, she *was* rather famous. With that in mind, Mira picked up the book.

"Th-thank you! I am Rina!" the girl said, taking the book from Mira before bowing abruptly.

But when she raised her head, her nervousness was gone, and her eyes were filled with joy.

"Um, excuse me, but I heard about you from my big sister! She told me! That you would be my teacher, Miss Mira…!" Rina said haltingly, trying to put the overwhelming emotions she was feeling into words. She was not terribly coherent…but she was very loud.

"Hrmm, yes, yes, that's right. How about you calm down a bit first?" Once Rina had relaxed a little, Mira apologized. "Sorry to disturb you."

She proceeded to take Rina out of the reference room and, with her new companion, entered a nearby meeting room.

"Um, sorry. I was just so happy…" the shy and fidgety Rina said, looking downward. Mira simply smiled and said that she didn't need to worry before laughing the whole thing off by saying that if she'd made Rina that happy, then it'd been worth becoming an adventurer.

"All right, how about we hurry and get started?"

"Sure, that sounds good!"

Nina and her sisters had asked Mira to instruct Rina, who was an apprentice summoner, on the art of evocation. And when it came to anything regarding summoning, Mira tended to say yes.

Her lesson began with seeing what Rina was currently capable of.

Rina's capabilities were in line with those of someone her age. She was a summoner who had yet to really pick up summoning, and so this was to be expected, especially considering that she was still a child.

This, however, wasn't the case when it came to Mira's test regarding how much she knew about summoning. Mira asked a series of questions, which Rina promptly answered.

"Excellent, you certainly have been studying!" Mira said after about twenty minutes, praising her for a job well done.

"Thank you!" she shot back with a big grin.

Her knowledge of summoning certainly belied her years, especially when it came to the fundamentals. Mira could confidently say that she had everything down pat. She was deeply impressed. Rina was a very promising summoner.

And that really lit a fire under Mira.

"Since you already know this much, we can probably skip the theory. How about we hurry on to the next step?"

Rather than being a simple beginner, Rina already knew everything an intermediate-level summoner needed to know. Mira left the training center with Rina, then summoned Pegasus and told Rina —who was *very* excited to see the evocation—to hop on before taking off.

"This is incredible. It feels amazing!"

"Doesn't it, though?!"

Smiling at the sight of Rina enjoying herself, Mira told Pegasus to land beside the ruins that sat below them. They were about a ten-minute flight from Haxthausen city and seemed to be the lifeless remains of an old fort.

"U-um… Are those what I think they are…?" Rina said, squeezing Mira's hand and pointing to something wandering a bit further off.

"Hrmm, they are. Armor spirits. We can't start until you forge a contract."

Armor spirits were the basic evocation that most summoners started off with. Deciding that Rina no longer needed to do any reading, Mira had brought her to an ancient battlefield to form a contract with an armor spirit.

"Ah, I defeated them!" Rina called out happily, surveying her work. She'd used a blasting stone in accordance with Mira's instruction. The ground had been scorched within a fifteen-foot radius of where the blasting stone had landed, and the black and white armor spirits that had been there had vanished in a single blow.

"Hrmm, well done."

The blasting stone Mira had given her wasn't meant for making contracts but rather for actual combat. It contained power of a much greater magnitude than the ones she'd given to Cleos.

Since Rina had succeeded in defeating the armor spirits, Mira hurriedly grabbed her hand and took her to the spirit-infused armors. She then helped Rina forge a summoning contract with the dark knight and the holy knight.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

Perhaps because it was her first time making a real contract, Rina was so happy that it looked as if she was ready to dance. Mira,

smiling, was happy to indulge her. But only for a moment—from now on, the real training would begin.

The sun had sunk halfway below the horizon when Mira popped the potion bottle into Rina's mouth as she lay flat in the sprawling meadow. Rina gulped down its contents before she slowly got to her feet and forced herself to speak. "Please, let me try one more time…!"

"Hrmm, sure," Mira responded, readying her dark knight.

The two of them had been training hard from the moment Rina got the hang of summoning her new contracts. The purpose of this training was both to practice proper summoning and to train her brand-new dark knight and holy knight. With Mira reviving Rina with a mana potion every time she exhausted her supply, they'd been able to train almost nonstop.

Considering that she was still just a child, it must've been very tough for Rina. But Rina's motivation meshed well with Mira's peerless instruction, and it was clear that she had talent, based on how much she was improving. At first, it'd taken her ten seconds to summon an evocation…but she could now do it in less than three. Furthermore, where her knights were initially being cut down before they could even swing their swords, they had improved to the point where they could now exchange blows with Mira's dark knight two or three times.

"All right, I guess we should stop here for today." Mira sighed, catching Rina in her arms and popping another mana potion into her mouth after she'd passed out from exhausting her supply yet again.

The sun had gone down, and night was quickly descending. It wouldn't be right to keep someone's younger sibling out for any

longer. She informed Rina of this once she opened her eyes, and the girl protested and asked to keep going. But even with her mana restored, she couldn't hide her physical and mental exhaustion. A sliver of daylight was left, but Mira felt that the girl was at her limit.

As an afterthought, she told Rina that resting was also an important part of such training and informed her that they'd move on to the next step once Rina had grown a bit more as a summoner.

"Okay, I understand…"

To Rina, each and every moment of this private lesson from the legendary Spirit Queen had been a dream come true. But all dreams had to come to an end. Despite looking extremely let down, Rina accepted Mira's counsel.

She did, however, have questions. "Um… Just how much do I need to grow before you'll teach me again?"

It seemed to her that she'd never have another such day with Mira. She was a lowly novice summoner—it didn't seem likely that she'd ever have someone she admired as much as Mira for a mentor. With this in mind, she looked at Mira, hoping that they might have a chance to meet again.

"Hrmm, good question… How about when you master summoning instantaneously?" she answered. Mira then looked to the left and added, "Like this."

She instantaneously summoned a dark knight.

Being able to determine where one would summon an evocation and then instantly summoning it was the gateway to higher-level

evocation. For this reason, about half of what they'd done that day had been designed to lay the foundation for that.

But Mira still had more to teach. "Once you've improved enough to do that, then how about doing some intensive training to learn this?" she said as she looked to the right.

Five dark knights and five holy knights appeared beside her in alternating order. It was Mira's specialty: simultaneous evocation.

"Whoa…!"

To someone like Rina, who needed three seconds to summon a single evocation, it was a very distant goal. And yet, her eyes shined while beholding the sight. It was a technique so advanced that she couldn't even fathom how it was done–but Mira had demonstrated that it was possible. For that reason, Rina felt hopeful.

"All right, shall we head back?"

"Sure!" Rina said cheerfully, climbing on Pegasus's back as Mira summoned it. It seemed as if the girl's horizons were expanding endlessly.

While on the way back, her teacher gave an in-depth lecture on the different applications of evocations. She didn't want to waste a single second. Despite being such an excellent student, Rina's head was about ready to burst by the time they made it back to the city.

Chapter 4

"WELCOME BACK! And thanks!"

Mira dropped Rina off where she was staying. Nina came out to greet them and tightly hugged Mira. Rina looked happier than she'd ever seen her.

"It was nothing, really. I was just keeping my word. It was also quite a thrill for me to meet someone with so much potential. Your sister has a promising future ahead of her," Mira replied, enjoying the hug as she gave Nina her honest thoughts on the training session.

Rina brimmed with delight. Her other sisters, Mina and Nana, came out, also reacting enthusiastically to what Mira had just said. They asked if the Spirit Queen thought their little sister had talent.

"Hrmm, yes, she does. She has a great memory and catches on quickly. And, most importantly, she's an extremely hard worker. If she keeps up doing what she's doing, then she'll likely become a top-notch summoner."

Truth be told, out of everyone she'd met, Rina was the quickest and most talented learner she'd come across. Once she told them as much, Nina and her sisters hugged Rina with such joy that one might've thought they were the ones who'd been complimented.

"You're incredible, Rina!"

"Well done! You *have* been working your tail off."

"Isn't that great to hear?"

She'd long aspired to be an adventurer like her big sisters. And yet, she had only the aptitude to become a summoner—a profession

in decline. She felt like a ship without sails. Then the eminently talented Spirit Queen had made her dazzling debut.

Perhaps because she was remembering those difficult days, tears welled in Rina's eyes. "Yeah!" she said, a smile blooming on her face.

But that radiant smile soon dimmed. It was time for them to part.

"Until next time. Don't let that talent go to waste. Make sure you keep working hard."

The moment the words left Mira's lips, Rina's countenance darkened. She quickly looked down and answered, "I will."

There was no way that Mira could stay and be her teacher permanently. She knew as much in her brain, but her heart didn't seem to want to accept it.

But, perceiving how Rina must've felt, Mira thought of something. She'd been able to spend the day personally teaching Rina, and she'd been able to improve a lot. But what would Rina do tomorrow and in the days to come? She could simply practice what they'd covered today to start, but would it be enough for her to master new evocation spells and employ new techniques once she began picking them up?

What the field of summoning currently lacked was the teachings of past summoners. Mira knew the educational materials that one might use to make up for this were limited. Rina had the basics down pat, and yet, when it came to the practical application of summoning and advancing her skills, she had a long way to go. This was because

there weren't many textbooks or academic resources when it came to summoning.

If she had a good teacher, she would definitely be able to reach Cleos's level.

It was a shame. Mira wondered if it was really okay to leave a girl with talent like Rina's unnurtured. Then a brilliant idea came to her—one that would solve the problem. She knew the perfect place for Rina.

"By the way, is your group based in this city?" Mira asked.

A quizzical look passed over Nina's face before she answered, slightly embarrassed. "Everyone's crazy about Fuzzy Dice. We only came to get a look at him."

She said they weren't really based out of anywhere. They were touring the continent, looking for a country where they'd want to settle down.

"Hrmm, I see. In that case, why don't you try going to Alcait next? Their capital has an academy with lots of talented instructors. They'll be able to help Rina develop her abilities."

Mira had suggested it as if it were a terrific idea, but a shadow fell over Nina and her sister's faces.

"You mean Alcait Academy, right? We've considered it before, but…"

When Rina had been worried about learning to become a summoner, they'd considered sending her to the academy. Its Mage Department was the premier school for aspiring mages, and they'd

wondered if there might be some way to have her enrolled. However, this was easier said than done. The more they looked into it, the more they realized it wasn't the kind of place where an adventurer with no accomplishments under her belt could get in. And so, they'd given up.

"Hrmm… I wouldn't worry about that. I think we'll be able to figure something out. So how about it?"

Thanks to Mira's exploits, the School of Evocation at Alcait Academy was now ascendant. Someone like Rina, a girl brimming with talent, shouldn't have any trouble getting in. And if she put in a good word to Cleos, then the man in charge of the program was sure to be able to make room for one or two students. Furthermore, there was an excellent evocation professor there named Hinata. She would most definitely be able to guide Rina along the path.

Mira explained some of her reasoning to them. More than anything, it was a waste to leave someone with as much potential as Rina undeveloped.

Learning this, Nina and her sisters looked genuinely taken aback.

"Huh? You'll…*figure something out*? You're talking about *the* Alcait Academy, right?" Nina looked completely baffled. Mina and Nana, meanwhile, exchanged uncertain glances.

While Mira wasn't quite sure of all the details, it did require a lot of work to enroll in the Royal Alcait Academy. This was especially true of each of the highly esteemed schools of magic which were some of the very best places to learn and attain knowledge in the so-called Nation of Mages.

They were also some of the most competitive schools. And the School of Evocation, which was in the midst of a resurgence, had seen a considerable uptick in students. Unless there was some exceptional circumstance, it wasn't likely one would be able to enroll midsemester.

However, this wouldn't be the case if Mira recommended her.

There wasn't a single person at the academy who could disregard someone who'd been endorsed by the Wise Man of evocation. Cleos would be sure not to ignore such a recommendation.

"Can I go to school?" Rina said, a hopeful look appearing on her face. She must've known about Alcait Academy as well.

"Do you really think she can get in?" Nina and her sisters asked, changing their line of questioning.

"Hrmm. I might have a few connections. If she really wants to study seriously, then I could put in a good word for her," Mira said, smiling confidently. She then added that she was primarily based out of the kingdom of Alcait. If she ever had time, there might be days when she could teach Rina herself.

"I wanna go!" Rina said firmly, turning to her older sisters. More than anything, she wanted the opportunity to learn from the Spirit Queen, whom she admired so much. With tears in her eyes, she added that she wouldn't mind going alone if it would get in the way of their adventuring.

Nina and the rest of Rina's older sisters then hugged her once more.

"We'll go with you!"

"I'm sure everyone else will agree to go, too!"

"We'll definitely talk them into it."

Switching gears after this display of affection, the sisters turned toward Mira and emphatically proclaimed, "We'd like to take you up on your offer."

Promising she would put in a good word with Alcait Academy on behalf of Rina, Mira said goodbye to the girls with a smile, quickly returned to the Baron Hotel, and leaped into her wagon. She wanted to give Rina her endorsement immediately. Nina and her sisters had gone off to have dinner with their adventuring group, during which they planned to propose going to Alcait. With Fuzzy Dice's heist over, they had been in the process of deciding where to go next, and Nina had boasted that the proposal was guaranteed to be accepted.

"I should probably let them know about this ASAP," Mira muttered to herself, opening the closet door in the wagon, looking for the communication device. It sure was convenient in these situations.

She dialed the number for the Tower of Evocation. If she could inform Cleos—the head of the School of Evocation—then he could take care of the rest.

The bell rang, and Mariana picked up. "Greetings, you've reached the Tower of Evocation, this is Mariana speaking."

"Hey, Mariana! It's me!"

Happy to hear Mariana's voice for the first time in several days, Mira began recounting everything that'd happened in Haxthausen.

The exchange was a bit like when a husband called his beloved wife while away on a business trip…and lasted for an hour.

Satisfied with their talk, Mira began to put down the receiver when she remembered the purpose of her call.

She hurriedly rang Cleos and asked him about enrolling Rina. With Mira's personal recommendation, Cleos seemed to have high hopes for the girl. He replied that he'd take care of all the paperwork, sounding so elated that she could hear it in his voice.

Soon, the third morning after the events with Fuzzy Dice dawned. Having completed all her tasks, Mira was heading out of her room when she spotted a sealed envelope someone had slid under her door.

Picking it up and looking it over, she discovered that it was a letter from Lastrada, much like the one she'd received two days prior. In his first letter, he'd thanked her for her help and included a simple summary of what'd happened after their raid. But this letter only had a set of coordinates.

The first letter said that thanks to the intel they'd gotten from the masochistic guild master of Gillian Rock, the Adventurers' Guild Union had managed to arrest all of the guild's members. Furthermore, they uncovered even more crimes that they'd committed. They could now simply leave the rest to the guild union.

Mira looked over the coordinates.

They corresponded to a small lake that was located in a forest northeast of Haxthausen city. It was a fairly mundane place without

anything nearby. But, considering that he'd gone out of his way to relay those coordinates, there was likely something there.

"Jeez, he's always so cryptic."

Realizing what Lastrada wanted, Mira checked out of the Baron Hotel and prepared for the journey. She made her way down the main street with her Guardian Ash pulling her wagon, stopping by noteworthy shops to pick up various supplies.

Her item box was stocked full of handy adventuring tools and plenty of food. But Mira was still on the lookout for food-related supplies.

Despite having enough food to sustain her for a month without needing to restock, Mira bought even more. There was a small difference in what she was purchasing now, though…

This time, rather than stocking up on staples, Mira was stocking up on sweets. She began by getting some pancakes she was particularly fond of, then making rounds to each and every dessert shop in the city—picking up all different sorts of cakes, chocolates, and Bavarian crèmes.

At the twelfth bakery she visited, Mira found a certain baked good that sent her down memory lane.

"Oh yeah, this stuff!"

They were the buns that Christina had been holding when Mira had recalled her with [Evacuation Order] on the day of the heist, when the city had been in the throes of celebration. They looked to be very simple, palm-sized buns filled with cream. Drawn by the eye-

catching words *"Crammed full of famous custard,"* Mira quickly bought one and devoured it on the spot.

Her mind was blown.

"Yesss… This place is incredible."

Two women walked into the shop and made straight for the shelf with the buns. From the looks of it, they were both after the same.

"These are the ones they were handing out, aren't they?"

"Yup, they are."

Now there was no doubt that the buns were the same kind as Christina had been eating. Convinced of this, Mira overheard several more interesting things from the women.

"That sword-wielding girl really was something else."

"Yeah, the one with pigtails, right? She was *incredible*. How many do you think she ate?"

"At least ten."

"Well, they *are* delicious. I don't blame her."

"But she disappeared so quickly… What kind of technique do you think that was?"

"Who knows? Maybe she was some kind of bread fairy…"

"That's ridiculous!"

The two girls went on chatting happily and giggling. Meanwhile, Mira imagined the scene they described. She decided to casually ask

the shopkeeper about whether or not they'd served a friend of hers that day before describing Christina in detail.

"Ah, that girl! She enjoyed eating our buns so much that it made me happy just watching her," the shopkeeper replied, affirming her suspicion.

Christina said she'd only eaten one after being urged to do so. But now the cat was out of the bag.

Mira bought twenty buns, thanked the shopkeeper, and left the bakery. She then chuckled to herself about how she'd found something to tattle on Christina to Alfina about and continued preparations for her journey.

It seemed that Plenty of people were unused to seeing her Guardian Ash, which happened to look like a big, gray bear. In fact, her wagon stuck out so much that it became the center of attention along the main street.

She could hear voices around her saying, "There's the Spirit Queen!" and "The longer you look, the more regal she gets."

Due to the events with Fuzzy Dice and her donation to the church, her name was all over town.

Having procured her fill of sweets, Mira snickered to herself about all the attention she was getting. Then she very deliberately dismissed the guardian ash that was in the harness.

This was a perfect opportunity to show everyone what one could do with evocation. With this in mind and all eyes on her, she summoned Garuda.

A magic circle appeared, followed by a monstrous, richly plumed bird that whirled into the sky. The crowd began to buzz. Then Garuda grabbed ahold of the bar atop the wagon. The crowd's curiosity turned into astonishment as they wondered whether it might fly off.

Garuda flapped its wings and let loose a gentle gust before the wagon slowly began to rise.

The crowd chattered about how incredible this was. If they kept talking about how summoning magic could do such incredible thing, then word would surely spread and hopefully reach other adventurers.

An accomplished summoner could travel through the air, just like her. Judging from the crowd's reaction, she was confident that her efforts to get the word out had been a success. Relaying the coordinates of her destination to Garuda, Mira felt reinvigorated as she left the city of Haxthausen below.

Chapter 5

AFTER FLYING FOR SEVERAL HOURS, she arrived in the middle of a sprawling forest in the northeast of Grimdart. The coordinates he'd jotted down in the letter corresponded to a lake which was absolutely tiny compared to the surrounding woods.

"All right, I'm here. Now what am I supposed to do?"

The lake was probably only a little over three hundred feet from one side the other. Taking a quick look around, Mira didn't notice anything that stood out to her, nor did she see anyone waiting. But considering how he'd specified that exact place, there had to be something there.

Since he'd gone out of his way to call her there, if she stayed put, he'd most likely come to meet up with her. Mira began roaming around the surrounding area to kill some time.

The forest that surrounded the lake was thick and dense. She hadn't been able to tell from the air, but now noted that the trees there were huge, towering over thirty feet tall.

Furthermore, the foliage was so dense that the forest remained quite dim despite the midday sun blazing overhead. The sun had trouble reaching the northeast section, and so it was shrouded in even thicker darkness.

"Wow, you're early. But I guess getting here wasn't tough for a summoner. Sorry to have kept you waiting!" she heard a cheerful voice say as the man she'd been waiting for appeared.

With a gratingly overenthusiastic grin, Lastrada made his grand appearance. And for some unknown reason, he was dressed up like a prince.

"Why're you dressed like that?" Mira said, raising an eyebrow at his attire. It didn't fit at all with his usual aesthetic.

"I was told my other clothes didn't have a positive effect on the children's education…" he muttered dejectedly.

It seemed that Artesia had rendered judgment.

He said that he patrolled the forest in the past, dressed as one of his favorite masked rangers. Soon, the children all wanted to dress up like him. Since this was the kind of thing that could earn him a visit from child protective services, Artesia couldn't turn a blind eye. If he insisted on conducting his patrols, they agreed that he'd at least be dressed in the attire Mira currently found him in. If the children were going to imitate him, it was better if they dressed up as royalty rather than mighty, masked rangers.

This just *wasn't* his style. Mira chuckled to herself.

After catching her up, Lastrada led the way into the dark forest, where he said they could talk more in detail.

"Hrmm, I see. That's a relief."

Sitting atop the driver's box in the wagon that her Guardian Ash was pulling, Mira asked about what'd happened after the situation they'd been in two days prior. Specifically, the one where she'd dressed up as a BDSM queen and questioned Rock, the guild master of Gillian Rock.

As soon as the Adventurers' Guild Union discovered the heinous crimes that Gillian Rock had been committing, they conducted a follow-up investigation into the guild's human trafficking activities. The investigation into the anti-hero and the silver-haired queen who'd uncovered all the information from Rock had been called off—their identities would forever remain a mystery.

Considering that she'd never be able to look her friends in the eye if they ever found out, Mira breathed a sigh of relief.

While they were chatting, she realized they'd entered an area so deep into the forest that not a single sunbeam penetrated it. Looking around her dark surroundings, Mira recalled something about the area near their present location.

We went straight north from where we met, huh? In that case, we must be in…the Black Forest of the Dead.

Places like graveyards and old battlefields were usually crawling with undead monsters. And yet, for some reason, this part of the forest was infested with even more undead than one of those places, leading players to call it the Black Forest of the Dead.

But as far as she could tell, what she was looking at was just a dark and surprisingly peaceful forest. Maybe she was remembering something wrong?

As she pondered this, Lastrada told her to stop. The only light illuminating the pitch-black forest came from their Ethereal Arts. Once the wagon came to a halt, A single ray of light shone down from above. It was a bizarre sight, almost as if a hole had opened up in the

foliage above them. Straining her ears, she could hear a screeching noise that sounded like metal grinding against metal.

"What in the world is going on?"

Looking up at the area that'd opened above their heads, Mira spied a magnificent, sturdy-looking wooden lift.

"All right, hop on," Lastrada said nonchalantly, guiding her toward the lift.

A ray of light and an elevator simultaneously appearing in the middle of a pitch-black forest? Dumbfounded, Mira led the wagon forward. The lift began to slowly rise, bringing them closer and closer to the window of light overhead.

What in the world was up there? Mira began getting more and more excited as she waited in anticipation for whatever was above. The lift didn't stop, and the light seemed to remain far out of reach. Ever so slowly, they'd risen over thirty feet. But from what she could tell, they weren't even halfway there.

"This thing goes up pretty high, huh?" Mira said, thinking out loud.

"Safety first," Lastrada replied.

He said that monsters didn't usually enter the nearby area, but now and then, some might get lost and wander over. Unwilling to take any chances, they'd come up with this solution.

But what kind of solution *was* this?

After a few moments of remaining stumped, the lift finally passed into the dazzling sunlight. Narrowing her eyes, Mira struggled

to adjust as she took in the scene before her and gasped.

"Whoa… This is incredible."

The scene that filled her vision was one crafted by human hands. After going up an outdoor lift deep in the forest, she'd come to a magnificent village.

Mira stopped for a moment to appreciate what she was seeing.

"All right, this way. Come with me," Lastrada said, leading her farther in.

They were still at the entrance. They needed to go to the church where Artesia was.

Mira moved the wagon forward onto the floor of the treetop village, which looked like a grassy lawn. Somehow, it managed to firmly bear the weight of the wagon. She wasn't sure about the construction, but it seemed quite sturdy.

Seeing how impressed Mira was, and in a particularly good mood himself, Lastrada explained how the treetop village had been designed with safety in mind. He elaborated on things like the lawn-like floor, which had been made by using the branches of the trees as a frame over which he wrapped multiple layers of special spider silk. They'd then covered it all with vines and other vegetation. The village also had a well-designed drainage system, so they could even plant fields.

The residents of the village lived in tree houses. From what she could see, all the treetops around her belonged to giant trees that

were well over sixty meters tall. The residents had used those trees as foundations upon which to build their homes.

What surprised her even more was that they'd been designed by Artesia and built by Lastrada. No wonder they all had a handcrafted feel.

"Wow, you certainly did a fine job."

Realizing that Lastrada had a hidden talent for carpentry, Mira began to be more and more impressed. The fact that all the houses were unique, with no two being exactly the same, reinforced the sensation of finding civilization in the middle of the sprawling wilderness. And yet, they somehow appeared to exist in perfect harmony, likely due to the whole place being wreathed in branches and leaves. The sun broke through the foliage as if it were smiling.

Mira looked up into the sky and saw faint white clouds. She realized that the upper part of the village was covered by spider silk wreathed in illusion magic.

The village was not visible from either the ground or the sky. It made perfect sense that no one knew about it.

"By the way, I realized this on the way here, but…shouldn't the Black Forest of the Dead be right around here? It certainly didn't seem to be," Mira asked Lastrada about what she'd noticed as they went through the dark forest.

"You're not wrong," Lastrada replied, with a slight smirk.

They'd chosen this area precisely because no one would come close. Then to ensure the children's safety, Artesia had purified much

of the surrounding area and put up a holy barrier that was perpetually active.

"Perpetually…?"

"Yeah…that's right."

The undead monster-spawning land wouldn't *quickly* revert to how it was pre-purification…but it would eventually return to being a place where undead souls lingered. So Artesia had to keep the barrier she'd placed around the entire place up and running. And while she was busy taking care of the children, she had also been polishing her skills as a cleric.

This must really be a safe place.

Convinced, Mira gazed at the village.

A short time later, her wagon arrived in front of the largest tree in the village. There, toward the center of the village, was a church.

Lastrada told her that the wooden and crudely built structure—the largest of its kind in the village—doubled as both a church and a school. The orphans inside would likely be working hard on their studies. The ones teaching these children were Artesia and other like-minded teachers who'd volunteered to help.

The children's curriculum consisted of basic schooling in botany, biology, etiquette, chivalry, how to fight and dissect monsters, art, and even how to dismantle traps and pick locks. Thanks to having so many teachers, they were able to teach a wide range of subjects. Owing to Artesia's unique charisma, the school was more educational than any of the proper schools in the surrounding area.

"All right! Next, we go this way!"

While Mira stood marveling at all this, Lastrada had gone into the church. Following him, Mira looked around the inside of the building.

Compared to Haxthausen Cathedral, which she'd visited the day before, the church was so rustic and austere that she wondered if it even deserved the name. It was shaped like a chapel but lacked any of the usual majestic feeling that churches had.

And yet, the idol that sat at its center had an arresting aura. There was definitely some sort of history behind it.

Mira looked around as they went through a door toward the back of the chapel and came upon a small hallway and staircase.

"Around this hour, she must be in there," Lastrada muttered, going up the stairs in front of him. They were now in the area which served as the school.

Mira followed, still taking in her surroundings, which gave off the vibe of an old schoolhouse in the countryside.

They went up to the third floor and then to the room at the very end of the hall. Opening a door marked *Angel's Room* and stepping inside, they found a woman holding a baby while making one of her best baby-pleasing funny faces.

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The sound of the angelically smiling baby's giggles echoed through the room as a speechless Mira took in the scene in silence.

She'd never imagined that the first thing she'd see upon finally reuniting with this woman would be the cleric making funny faces.

"…Oh my, welcome back. So is that the girl?"

The woman quickly turned around, giving them a smile resembling that of a divine maiden. A mild look of surprise passed over her face when she glanced at Mira.

"That's right!" Lastrada said as Mira walked over toward the woman.

"Long time no see, Artesia."

The woman who stood before her, garbed in a simple robe and playing with a baby, was none other than Artesia, one of the Wise Men she'd long been searching for.

"I already heard about you from Rada. You really turned into a girl, huh? And now you go by Mira."

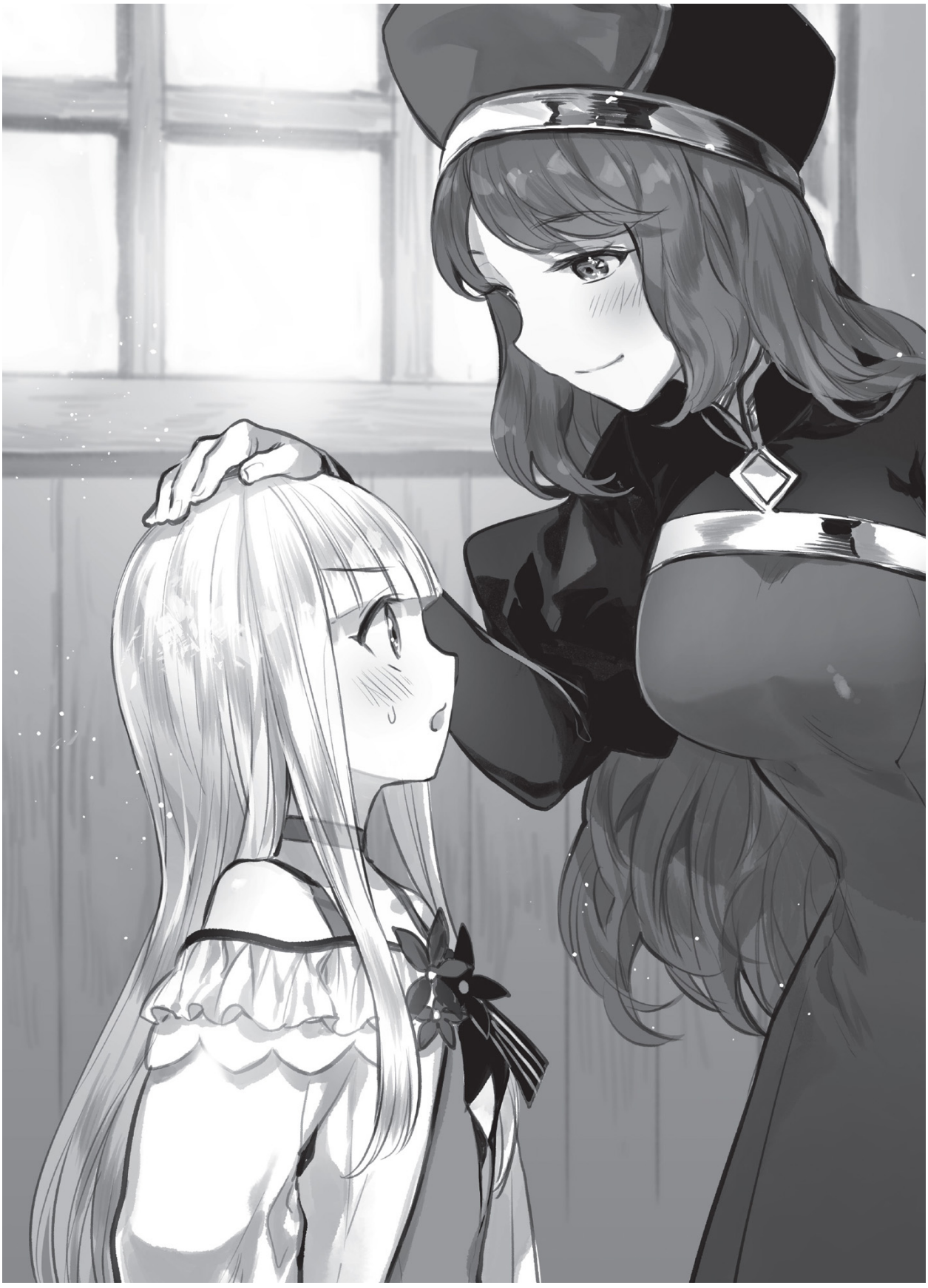
Gazing at Mira with a rather curious expression, Artesia reached out her hand and patted Mira's head, wearing a dreamy expression.

Mira backed away quickly, crying out, "What do you think you're doing?!"

She had unwittingly strayed into the range of Artesia, who had boundless motherly love for all children.

"Listen here and make no mistake—I'm not a child!" Mira declared.

"Yes, of course not," Artesia returned, smiling pleasantly. And yet, her eyes were smiling, too, as they remained fixed on Mira. It bordered on salacious…



She had to have heard about what'd happened from Lastrada. The fact that she was still looking at Mira like that meant that she was still a few cards short of a full deck. From Artesia's perspective, Mira was now just another young girl who couldn't escape her love.

The three of them went on to enjoy a nostalgic reunion, sitting around a small table and relaxing as they exchanged trivial banter.

Chapter 6

"...SO THAT'S THE STORY. I've managed to secure help from Wallenstein, Kagura, and Soul Howl, but we still need all the help we can get to help deter any attacks."

She had said as much to Lastrada, but now she relayed the state of affairs in the Kingdom of Alcait to Artesia. Having given her the run down, Mira shifted her gaze toward Lastrada.

She knew Lastrada and Artesia were currently up against a very large human trafficking syndicate and predicted neither of them would return until they'd taken care of all of that.

"Well, what do you say? Can you come back?"

The two of them were currently in a situation reminiscent of the one with Kagura. When they'd parted two days prior, Lastrada had said that the situation had mostly been taken care of, but it wasn't clear just how much of it had been resolved. Was it enough that they could go back to Alcait? Or was it only stable for the moment, and more work was left to be done?

Mira suggested that she *might* be able to lend them a hand in order to quickly resolve whatever trouble they were dealing with.

However, there was no reason for her to worry.

"There's no need for that. I already told you, didn't I? It's all been taken care of. All that's left is to strike the final blow."

With the heist in Haxthausen—in addition to all his previous Fuzzy Dice-related activities and the demise of Gillian Rock—he'd firmly tied the noose around the neck of the huge syndicate. He no

longer needed to trouble Mira for help and was on the verge of accomplishing his goal.

"You can leave the rest to me. I've got some reliable allies, and we aren't the only ones working to bring down the syndicate."

He wasn't simply confident, but completely convinced.

The human trafficking syndicate operated across the continent. It was a source of great evil, and it was only natural that other champions of justice would also be working to oppose them.

"Hrmm… If you say so, then I believe you. So who exactly are these allies of yours?"

Fuzzy Dice's job as a phantom thief was all just a cover for his work to bring down the syndicate. Whether it was the doing of the church or the special privilege that'd been awarded Captain Desmond, there were several powerful forces at work behind the scenes. Just how much influence did Fuzzy Dice have?

Curious, Mira asked him about it directly.

"Well, ya know…"

"Ya know *what*…?"

"That's a secret of justice," Lastrada replied, putting a finger to his lips.

He'd never been one to reveal a secret he'd sworn to keep, no matter what. Not even if it were his own parents asking. That was part of his code.

Mira said nothing, looking annoyed.

"What about King Judas? He's one of your allies, right?" she asked, throwing out the most obvious potential ally she could think of.

It was simple human nature to want to get someone to spill a secret once they'd been sworn to secrecy.

A troubled look passed very conspicuously over Lastrada's face. King Judas had been conspiring with him, which was why Captain Desmond had been granted special privileges.

He asked her how she'd figured it out, lamenting that he should've done more to keep it a secret. Mira answered that it'd been easy to guess after speaking with Desmond about the whole situation.

"I asked him to be more subtle about it… Oh well."

If Mira had managed to piece together their connection, then it was likely that there were others who'd also figured out that they were working with each other. And that might lead them to attract the attention of the syndicate.

However, Lastrada muttered, that was precisely the point.

When he approached the king for assistance, King Judas's foremost concern was the safety of other potential collaborators. He purposely made himself stand out so that their other allies could fly under the radar. At least that was what Lastrada thought King Judas was most likely doing.

"Well, this is Judas we're talking about. Could be that he's just being careless."

"Yeah, that's true."

Mira smiled to herself. Considering Judas, whom Mira and Lastrada knew before he ascended the throne, that was the more likely scenario.

Meanwhile, Artesia had begun busying herself preparing for tea. She placed some sweet hot chocolate and loads of cake before Mira.

It was clear to see that she was being treated like an honored guest. As she enjoyed tea, sweets, hot cocoa, and cake, they continued discussing Fuzzy Dice in depth. They hadn't been able to discuss things very thoroughly the last time.

"There's really no need to worry. From what I've heard, we'll soon be in a position where their leader will have no choice but to make a move."

There were others who were also fighting against the human trafficking syndicate, despite not being in league with Fuzzy Dice. Lastrada said that thanks to one of these allies' plans, there were problems arising within the organization.

This had a substantial impact, according to his intel-gathering collaborators. If all went well, then the head honcho of the human trafficking syndicate would have no choice but to leave whatever well-defended place in which he was hiding.

"Wow, is that so?"

"Yes, although I'm not sure how much longer that'll take," Lastrada said, then confidently declared that it would be the only time he would go all-out as Fuzzy Dice.

While he couldn’t reveal their identity, that collaborator’s intel was extremely reliable. Lastrada claimed with certainty that the final battle would be coming in the near future.

And with that, they wrapped up their discussion of Fuzzy Dice and his work.

He’d investigated and collected evidence over the years. And now, after discovering the leader of the syndicate, all that was left was to ruthlessly crush them.

Lastrada had already begun making preparations to do just that.

And so, it didn’t seem like Mira’s help would be necessary this time. The only problem left was getting them to go back to Alcait.

Outside of his phantom thief-related business, was there anything else stopping him from returning? Mira asked, “So do you think you can come home after this?”

Lastrada let out a slightly distressed sigh and continued, “Yeah, we’ve been considering that.”

The two of them had discussed returning to Alcait. It would be better for the children’s education if they lived in a safe country rather than being stuck in a remote forest. Alcait was the best choice, as it was independent and had a king they could rely on.

On that, Lastrada and Artesia were both in agreement.

However, there was something preventing them from doing so. And it didn’t have to do with Fuzzy Dice or their crusade against the human trafficking syndicate, but with the children themselves.

"Artesia and I can take care of the operating expenses, and we've talked about asking the commander in chief to prepare an orphanage for us. But the problem is a little closer to home."

They couldn't just leave the orphanage as it was. If they were to return to Alcait, they'd need to bring the children with them. Easier said than done.

There were about one hundred children in the orphanage. It would be no easy feat transporting them from where they were, in the northern part of the continent, to Alcait in the south. And considering they could only move as fast as the children were able to move, it would likely take several months.

The issue wasn't just the children's safety while on the journey but their health as well.

Even with the combined strength of two members of the Nine Wise Men, it was a difficult task. They'd given up on going back.

"Yeah, you're probably right… Bringing that many children on a journey of many months would be reckless."

They'd be taking over a hundred defenseless noncombatants on a long journey. Mira sighed as she considered it. Children aside, it would be a weighty responsibility for those escorting them. If she could just surmount this hurdle, she could successfully bring both of them back to Alcait. She couldn't pass such an opportunity up.

And so, Mira began thinking of how she might do it.

Solomon would undoubtedly be able to arrange a facility. The nation's coffers should be full after the treasure she'd discovered in

the catacombs beneath Nebrapolis. Furthermore, thanks to their war with Chimera Clausen, they'd established diplomatic relations with the Roslein Duchy and were doing business with them, making a tidy profit.

With all this, it shouldn't be too much trouble to establish an orphanage. Lastrada and Artesia had even offered to pay for its operating expenses themselves. It was a small price to pay considering that they'd also be getting back two members of the Nine Wise Men.

The only problem that remained was getting the children to Alcait. She needed to find a way to quickly and safely transport over one hundred children.

Her first thought was to use the continental railway. The children were sure to enjoy traveling by train. The stations, however, were extremely crowded, and she was concerned that they might lose some of the children.

Then Mira came up with an even better idea.

"Maybe that'll work," she muttered, grinning. Standing up, she said, "Let me go ask!" before running out of the room.

"Ask who…?"

"Good question."

Heads tilted inquisitively, Artesia and Lastrada jumped up to follow her out of the room.

Having temporarily put their conversation on hold, Mira headed to her wagon, which was still in front of the church. She jumped

inside, quickly opened the closet, and grabbed ahold of the communication device inside.

Artesia and Lastrada, arriving a little later, spotted the wagon with its door still open and peered inside.

"Ugh, come on now. Everyone can see your panties," Artesia said, gently reprimanding Mira upon seeing her bent over with the upper half of her body jammed into the closet. She pulled Mira out of the closet.

"Huh?! Hands off!" Mira said in surprise. But seeing the look on Artesia's face, she held her tongue.

Artesia was in full lecture mode, something that Mira had seen countless times before.

"A young lady has to be careful about things like that. And if you can't, then you must at least wear a skort or something."

She began her lecture. It went on for about ten minutes, thanks to Mira pouring oil on the fire by retorting that she *did* have something to conceal her panties, to which Artesia then replied that there was no use owning things if one didn't use them.

"Girls have to be cognizant of such things. You're cute, and there are bad people out there who might target you. They've figured out how to invent cameras, so someone could try taking inappropriate pictures."

"Hrmm… I'll be more careful," Mira said, agreeing with Artesia as her lecture came to a close. Then, quickly doing as Artesia suggested,

she pulled out a pair of boy shorts and began putting her legs through them.

Having appeased Artesia, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"All right, let's try this again…"

Under Artesia's gaze, she couldn't do things the way she normally did. Abandoning her usual pose, Mira pulled the communication device out of the closet and placed it on the heater.

She then quickly dialed the number and rang Solomon.

"Wow, a communication device."

"Oh my, you managed to get your hands on some pretty nice stuff, huh?"

The communication device that Mira so often used was quite an expensive commodity. Lastrada and Artesia both looked quite surprised to see her take it out of the closet and plop it down.

He'll probably be pretty surprised, too.

Feeling a bit proud upon seeing their expressions, Mira picked up the receiver and dialed.

After a moment, the call went through, and Solomon's voice began echoing throughout the inside of the wagon.

"This is Solomon speaking."

"Oh ho, it's me!"

As Mira said this, Artesia leaned in close to the receiver and said, "Long time no see, Solomon. It's Artesia."

"Huh? W-wow! So she found you! That's fantastic. Yes, it's been a long time," he cried out happily after a moment, still a bit shocked.

As she had expected, Solomon was very excited to suddenly hear from Artesia. But his surprise wouldn't end there.

"Commander in Chief! Long time no see! It's me! Subaru Hoshizaki has entered the chat!" Lastrada announced.

Solomon's response was, "Huh?!" Exactly what Mira had anticipated. "Is Red there with you as well?! Wow, what happened? This really is incredible!"

Red was another of Lastrada's nicknames.

Solomon had just learned that Mira's mission to investigate someone fitting Artesia's description had been successful. Not only that—she'd found Lastrada as well. This was better than anything he could have imagined. No wonder he was shocked.

"He was the phantom thief this whole time," Mira answered, now in a good mood, thanks to his reaction.

Lastrada shot a sharp look at Mira. "Hey, I wanted to tell him…!" Revealing one's true identity was one of the great joys of being a masked hero.

Mira, who had dropped the spoiler, blanched as she saw Lastrada's resentful expression. It was enough to make even his anti-hero persona tremble.

"Uh… Oh, you did? Sorry about that…" she apologized, feeling overwhelmed by Lastrada's discontent.

"I see. So that's why you became a phantom thief," Solomon said approvingly after hearing Lastrada explain why he'd become Fuzzy Dice.

Unsurprisingly, he also seemed to know something about the powerful criminal syndicate lurking in the underworld. As a result, he was interested in learning about how Lastrada had managed to almost root them out—but he didn't ask about his plans. The only thing he had to say was, "Be careful."

"Okay, so I've managed to meet up with them…but there's a bit of an issue with the whole orphanage thing…"

Fuzzy Dice was fading into the past. Now, it was time to talk about the future. The syndicate may have been powerful, but they were up against Lastrada and his allies. Judging by how confident he seemed, that problem was as good as handled.

The only remaining issue to discuss was the orphanage. Mira explained what would need to happen for Artesia and Lastrada to return to the Kingdom of Alcait.

"Not a problem. I've already had the manor behind the academy readied so that it might serve as an orphanage," Solomon quickly replied, addressing the most important condition for Artesia's return. After hearing about the rumors she'd conveyed a few days ago, he'd predicted this might happen and had begun preparing for just such an event.

All they had to do now was decide who'd be in charge and file all the paperwork with the church. The manor had been used as a temporary school building before the academy was established,

making it easy to convert into an orphanage. He'd even secured a budget for it.

"Oh my, thank you, Solomon. I'm very happy to hear it."

"You sure don't waste any time, Commander in Chief!"

Lastrada and Artesia smiled at having the most important condition for their return fulfilled without even needing to negotiate.

Judging from the look of relief on both of their faces, the two of them must've really been hoping to go home.

Chapter 7

THANKS TO SOLOMON, the orphans had a place to go.

Mira confidently declared that they'd be back soon, then ended the transmission. She then picked up the receiver once more, pulled out a notebook, and dialed a number that she'd written down.

"Hello, Alioth speaking," she heard a voice say from over the receiver.

Alioth was an officer with the Isuzu Alliance. They'd registered each other's numbers so that she might be able to contact Kagura in case of an emergency.

"It's been a while. It's me, Mira," Mira said.

"Oh wow, Miss Mira. It certainly has been a long time," a cheerful voice responded.

Whenever they spoke for the first time in a while, they ended up chatting about other things. This time, Mira was curious as to what was going on in Sentopoli and Roslein, so the conversation ended up veering off track.

"I see. I'm glad to hear everything's going well."

Alioth said a few small issues remained, but everything had more or less been taken care of. They were now working with Roslein, so the situation was getting better.

"On that note, is there anything else that you need?"

Relieved to hear that everything was going well, Mira finally remembered the reason she'd called and said, "Oh yeah, that's right. I

wanted to ask Ka—*Uzume* for help with something."

She inquired if he could put her in contact with her and was asked to hold on for a moment.

There were still some familiars being kept at the base, so Kagura would be able to use a substitution technique to immediately return there if necessary. It was a very convenient technique. With that in mind, Mira asked that they call Uzume for her.

"Hey there, Gramps. What do you need help with?" she heard Kagura's voice say over the receiver after a moment, sounding like she normally did.

"Oh ho, well, I might need—"

"Is that Kagura?! It's been a while! It's me, Artesia. I'm happy to hear that you sound well."

Mira had wanted to cut right to the chase and let her know what they needed, but Artesia had other plans.

Then Lastrada added, "It's been a while, Kagura!"

"Huh? What?! Artesia?! And…uh, from the vibe of the other voice, I'm guessing that's Subaru Hoshizaki."

"Bingo!"

Artesia was holding back a chuckle at the overly enthusiastic Lastrada.

Mira decided to quickly explain how it was that she'd reunited with them before getting back to what she needed from Kagura: She wanted to borrow the Isuzu Alliance's spirit airship to transport the orphans.

That was the best plan she could come up with. Traveling by land only gave them so many options, but the only things she could currently fly on were the wagon she'd arrived in, Pegasus, Hippogriff, or other spirits like them. And while it was much faster than going by land, she'd only be able to transport around eight people at once. It would be a two-or three-day trip one way, so it'd likely take over a month to transport all the orphans.

It wouldn't be easy to spend that long doing the exact same thing over and over, either. And honestly, having succeeded in finding Lastrada and Artesia, all Mira wanted was to take a little break.

She could probably transport more by using Eizenfald as well, but that would be sure to cause an international incident and would undoubtedly be more trouble than it was worth.

Then Kagura's spirit airship popped into her head.

It was a state-of-the-art flying ship that only a select few countries, let alone the Kingdom of Alcait, possessed. If they used one of those, they could transport all the children at once.

"Yeah, no worries. If it's for kids and Artesia, then I can let you use it," Kagura said, not sounding particularly concerned about lending her the airship.

She was doing it for the children and Artesia…but she was likely doing it for the sake of the Kingdom of Alcait as well.

Having secured permission to borrow the airship, they set about talking logistics over the communications device. There was more to the whole airship business than there seemed at first glance.

"All right, talk to you later. But first, could you point me somewhere that's easy to find?"

"Hrmm. Sure thing."

Having concluded their meeting, Mira ended the transmission. While preparing the spirit airship for launch, they'd be sending Tweetsuke over to them. Wanting to secure a place where they could take off and land, Mira personally scouted the surrounding area, then sent the approximate coordinates to Kagura.

And with that, they were done. Tweetsuke was set to arrive nearby within two to three hours. They'd planned that Mira would wait atop Pegasus in the air to receive the familiar when they got close.

"Thanks, Mira. I'll hurry and let everyone know."

The children would have the opportunity to grow up in a bigger and better environment. Artesia must've been quite happy about this as she dashed toward the church in high spirits.

"All right, Chief. I'll be heading back, too. I've got training with the senior class today, and if I keep them waiting much longer, they won't be happy with me. We've prepared that house with the red roof for you, so feel free to use it as a command center," Lastrada said, pointing to a house a few doors down from the church. As he left, he said, "We'll get dinner together later!"

He did seem to genuinely enjoy taking care of the children, though not to the same extent as Artesia.

"Hrmm… Guess I'll wait for Tweetsuke first."

She figured she might as well take it easy while she still could.

Parting with the seemingly very busy duo, Mira put the notepad with the contact number of the Isuzu Alliance into her pocket and made for the house that Lastrada had mentioned.

With her Guardian Ash pulling the wagon, they arrived at the house. As she got closer, she realized that what she thought was a roof was a carpet of beautiful red flowers. Taking another look, she noticed that all the nearby houses had colorful roofs. The array of vivid tree houses in the village made her feel as if she was looking at a scene out of a fairy tale.

"This place isn't half bad."

The green of the leaves and the color of the flowers harmonized well, creating a vivid scene that gave off a wondrous sense of peace and tranquility. Dismissing her guardian ash, Mira examined the flowers as she entered the house.

She was soon greeted with the warm scent of wood filling her nostrils. Surrounded by the beauty of nature, she pulled out her skill encyclopedia and leisurely waited for Tweetsuke to arrive.

Shortly before the time when she was to meet up with the familiar, she took off on Pegasus and surveyed the surrounding area.

"There really aren't any settlements nearby, huh?"

The treetop village sat in the middle of the forest. Besides being well hidden, no one had stumbled across it due to the lack of any real roads. If one were to come looking for the village based on rumor alone, they would likely just get lost.

Mira thought once again that it'd been the right move to set her eyes on Fuzzy Dice.

"On that note, I wonder who the big boss of the syndicate is?"

Lastrada had said that he'd figured out a way of bringing down the huge human trafficking syndicate, and if someone who always made sure justice was served said that, then she probably didn't need to worry about it. However, there were other syndicates lurking in the shadows. Remembering one such organization she'd faced—Chimera Clausen—Mira wondered when another such organization would emerge.

Then there were the idiosyncratic Nine Wise Men. It wasn't certain that they'd all work alongside each other. What happened twice was sure to happen a third time, so Mira was a bit anxious about her search for the remaining Wise Men.

Tweetsuke arrived right about on schedule. Once they'd met up in the air, they proceeded to look around for a place where the spirit airship could land.

"I think over there will work."

Kagura had already seen the area, and a large lake located slightly north of the village seemed to be a good candidate. Approaching the area and taking a closer look, Mira saw that it was about six hundred fifty feet long and was very deep.

The spirit airship could be brought down on land, but it was also a *ship* and could land on water as well. Deep in the forest and

surrounded by trees, the lake had an open view of the sky above and was an ideal place to land.

Having finished checking it out, Mira put Tweetsuke—who'd shrunk itself down—onto her head and went back to the village. Due to how well-camouflaged the village was, she'd lost sight of where it was. But disaster was averted thanks to Lastrada, who'd grown worried and gone out to find them.

They returned to a room in the church where Artesia was waiting. Kagura swapped places with Tweetsuke, and with her arrival, four of the Nine Wise Men were now gathered in the same room. For Mira, it was her first time seeing them in only a couple of months. But how many years must it have been for Kagura, Artesia, and Lastrada?

Before diving into discussing their plans for transporting the orphans, they had a lot of catching up to do. Reunited, they chatted about the Isuzu Alliance, Fuzzy Dice, the orphanage, and Mira's search for the Nine Wise Men. Once they finished talking about what had happened and their current situations, they finally began to come up with a plan to transport the children.

They had already discussed most of this over the communication device, so there wasn't too much left to talk about. About all that remained was at what time and date the spirit airship would arrive and how they'd get everyone to the lake where the airship would land and take off from.

"That lake, huh? We'll have to cut straight through the forest."

"I don't think any monsters will emerge nearby…but just to be safe, we should go in four groups."

There was no direct route from the village to the lake. They'd have to take over a hundred children through the untamed forest. With everyone agreeing that this was rather dangerous, Mira stepped forward to say she'd take care of it.

"I'll ask the Korpokkur sisters to clear a path for us to the lake."

The Korpokkur sisters were masters at traversing the forest. With their assistance, anyone could traverse any forest as if they were walking down a paved road, no matter how dangerous it was.

Everyone immediately agreed to Mira's plan, so she and Lastrada would take the lead on the big day.

And with that, their meeting came to an end.

Kagura went back to help get the spirit airship ready, swapping with Tweetsuke once more. The small bird returned to stand by. Since it was just about time for dinner, Mira and her companions made their way to the cafeteria inside the church.

"Hey, Big Sis, are you an adventurer? Are you strong?"

"Who's stronger? You or big bro?"

The bustling cafeteria was filled with children from all over the village, and after giving a quick introduction, Mira soon found herself surrounded by young boys and girls pelting her with questions.

"Me, of course," Mira answered, puffing her chest out immaturely, much to the children's delight.

There were others who were interested in Mira. The teachers were seemingly quite interested in her abilities, considering she was an A-rank adventurer with a well-known nickname, despite looking

like a young girl. However, they weren't interested in this because of any macho desire to fight tough opponents. Rather, their interest was academic, and they were curious if a mage like her might make a good teacher.

And just like that, the convivial dinner was over in the blink of an eye.

Mira relocated to the bathhouse beside the church. Lastrada had tasked her with looking after about twenty children from the junior class.

"It's justice time! Justice Dive!"

"Hey now, be careful!" Mira said.

She had a good idea of who and what it was he was copying, but Mira nevertheless issued a warning to the boy who'd leaped into the bathtub. A lone girl approached her from behind.

"Your hair sure is pretty, Big Sis."

"Come on, don't pull it!"

Mira grabbed the naughty boys and girls and made them sit down to wash their hair. She did this with one after another. After that was done, she had them soak in the tub and massage her shoulders.

The children all sang nursery rhymes as they massaged her shoulders. While there weren't nearly as many of them, they were quite a bit more rambunctious during bathtime than they were during dinnertime.

"Jeez, don't start playing games until you've got your clothes on."

Things didn’t get any easier for Mira. After they got out of the bath, many of the children began running around while still naked.

She chased them around, grabbed hold of them, toweled them off, and then made them put on their clothes. Mira didn’t even notice how much she resembled the children as she ran around in nothing but her panties.

When night came, Mira put the children to bed and then had some drinks with Lastrada.

“I see… So that’s when you heard what we’d be doing.”

They’d already discussed several topics but were now in the middle of talking about what’d happened in Haxthausen. Because they’d been on opposite sides, their conversation was more like a Q&A session. Just as she expected, Lastrada confirmed that he’d overheard the discussion between Mira and the chief detective. He’d disguised himself as an ordinary person passing by and had listened in on their strategy meeting.

“But the trouble was that he’d accounted for me doing that.”

The plans that the chief detective had come up with for Mira were all diversions, and the true plan was known only to the chief detective himself.

Lastrada had managed to make a dashing escape, but having had his disguise seen through, he lamented with a sigh and a bitter smile that the chief detective’s plans were getting so ingenious they were becoming a problem.

"On that note, you said you'd accomplish your goal with your next move. So once that's all done, will your phantom thieving days be over?"

Lastrada's whole reason for becoming Phantom Thief Fuzzy Dice was to bring down the huge human trafficking syndicate. And with this past job, he'd gotten intel on the group's boss, and they'd next be able to finish them off.

"No… Strictly speaking, they're already over," Lastrada said, answering Mira's query.

The phantom thief was known for sending a calling card to his targets and then dashingly executing his heists. The previous incident had been the last time he needed to do this.

He planned to take care of his final target without sending a calling card. The leader of the syndicate was such a big shot that if they clamped down security, then he'd lose any chance of getting to him.

"So that's the kind of person you're up against? Who are they?" Mira asked, curious to know.

It certainly sounded as if they were someone powerful enough to give Lastrada a run for his money. The answer she got surprised her.

"It's the duke of Grimdart."

"Whoa…"

Grimdart was one of the three major nations on the continent, and so, the duke of such a kingdom wielded enough power to easily

remove even the king of a small country.

Even for Lastrada—or rather, Phantom Thief Fuzzy Dice—going up against such a powerful foe would be no easy task.

Mira once again offered Lastrada her assistance.

He turned down her offer yet again, this time with a fearless smile. This time, he wouldn't be going about things directly but rather be acting behind the scenes. It would be even easier this time around.

Most importantly, he'd be calling in assistance from all of his collaborators on his final job. And given how long it'd all been in the works, he seemed to be pretty confident about how things would turn out.

"I'm pretty sure it'll be big news across the continent. I hope you'll look forward to hearing about it," he proclaimed, his face aglow with righteousness.

Chapter 8

IT WAS THE MORNING AFTER her first night in the treetop village. Waking up in the flower-roofed house, Mira went about her morning routine before hopping into her wagon. She wasn't trying to go anywhere; she just wanted to use her communication device.

She thrust the top half of her body into the closet (as she was wont to do) and dialed in the number to call Solomon.

"Solomon speaking."

"Oh, it's me. I wanted to let you know about what we talked about yesterday…" Getting straight to the point, she informed Solomon that they'd gotten Kagura to send over her spirit airship.

"I see. I heard there were a lot of orphans, so I was a bit worried about how you'd get them all here. That's a relief. Got it, we'll get preparations underway on our end as well. Give me a call once you figure out the time and day when you'll be arriving."

"Hrmm, sure thing."

With that, the brief conversation between the two concluded.

Returning the communication device and hopping out of the wagon, Mira wondered what she ought to do with her day.

She was waiting for the spirit airship to arrive so she could transport the orphans to the Kingdom of Alcait. With Artesia and Lastrada back, Mira's current assignment would be finished.

All that was left to do was wait. She really didn't have much to do.

Well, I could just take it easy here, in this beautiful spot surrounded by nature.

Until now, she'd been busy working to find the rest of the Wise Men. There was nothing wrong with just killing time for the moment. And so, having decided to take it easy, Mira headed toward the church.

She found the cafeteria was already filled with children. Artesia considered eating together customary, so they all had breakfast together.

There were still about ten minutes left until breakfast was served, and yet, the atmosphere was already lively. The room became even noisier with Mira's arrival.

"Ah, it's Mira!" one of the children announced, to which all the children came rushing over. They then began begging her with requests like, "Tell us some adventuring stories!" and "Who've you fought recently?"

Most likely because she was an A-rank adventurer, the children's eyes were brimming with wonder and admiration.

"U-um. I saw you on Links News. Can I have your signature?" one of the children said, holding out a pen and a piece of paper. He seemed to know that Mira was the famed Spirit Queen.

The reason that the children living in a secluded village in the middle of the forest knew about stuff like this was due to the Links News. It was a magazine that had the latest news from all across the continent and was often read by students in the senior class. This

would explain why, unlike the very affectionate junior class, she felt like the seniors treated her with a bit more reverence.

"Boy, you sure are bright-eyed and bushy-tailed," Mira answered with a cheerful smile as she acquiesced to their requests.

Recently, she'd gone to the Ancient Underground City and fought the Machina Guardian. She swiftly signed autographs as she told them about all of this, all the while feeling like a Hollywood star.

And so, before she knew it, the high-spirited breakfast came to an end. Mira found herself at a lectern, standing before a classroom of twenty or so bright-eyed junior students.

This was precisely what Artesia and the other teachers had agreed on.

Having decided to relocate to the Kingdom of Alcait, the adults working at the orphanage were busy preparing. The senior class had been recruited to help with this as well, so there was no longer anyone available to look after the junior class. The teachers had first discussed taking turns, but seeing as Mira was currently unoccupied and implying that she could help out, they'd all agreed that it was a splendid idea. While Mira was wondering how exactly she might best take care of them, someone suggested that she teach them about the basics of being a mage, and about spirits.

"Now, while we may refer to them collectively as spells, there are nine different types of spells that people use…"

Therefore, Mira was now in the middle of teaching the class about subjects that she both specialized in and was very knowledgeable about.

"Spirits are like truly wonderful friends whom you can summon at a moment's notice…"

Summoning Wasranvel and Anrutine to give the children an opportunity to touch a spirit, Mira was a tad jealous to see how popular the two were, thanks to their unique abilities. Nevertheless, she looked at the children playing happily with a smile.

"They're all wonderful, aren't they? Ah, I want to join in as well."

"Just seeing children in such high spirits makes you feel happy, doesn't it?"

The voices belonged to Martel and the Spirit King, whose respective maternal and paternal sides were now manifesting themselves.

Having heard what they'd said, Wasranvel and Anrutine turned around and brought the children back near Mira. Then they began trying out different kinds of spirit magic alongside Mira. Both entertained and educated the children by demonstrating various mysterious phenomena relating to sound and water.

There was something special about seeing their smiling faces from up close. Martel and the Spirit King were overjoyed to watch them through Mira's eyes. The sight of the children smiling and the sound of their laughter would warm anyone's heart.

One of the teachers popped their head in to check on how things were going and was thoroughly convinced that they'd made the right decision to leave the children with Mira. They soon went back to work.

However, that was when the vibe in the classroom began to take an odd turn.

"And so, with summoning, you can summon your trusted friends who wield special offensive, defensive, or support capabilities. Summoning really is the best, isn't it?!"

Having let the children thoroughly enjoy themselves, Mira now launched into her usual sales pitch.

What was supposed to be a lesson on the basics of being a mage turned into a special lesson on summoning. When it came to teaching them about spirits, she only taught them about sacred beasts and spirit beasts with which one could make a contract.

"Listen up. The simplest and most surefire way to win a battle is to outnumber your opponent…"

She was now giving a practical and realistic lecture on evocation. And because she summoned evocations that'd be popular with kids—First Pupil and Woofson, Pegasus and Wise Popot, Guardian Ash and the Korpokkur, not to mention the Valkyrie sisters.

The students reacted overwhelmingly positively to the stunningly beautiful warrior sisters and sacred beasts. First Pupil and the flying Wise Popot looked like something one might see in the pages of a fairy tale. Another teacher came by to check on things, impressed but not surprised to see what the Spirit Queen was capable of, and went on their way with a satisfied look on their face.

But not all was as it seemed.

"Surrounding yourself like this is the optimal way to attack when you've got the numerical advantage…"

Using the Guardian Ash to represent her enemies and the Valkyrie sisters as her allies, she lectured about how a summoner goes about doing battle. It looked like it was just a bunch of friends standing in a circle, but it was a deadly formation for slaying foes, and she was demonstrating just how effective it was to launch attacks from an opponent's blind spots.

The advantage of evocation was that one could easily swell their ranks, making battle formations very important. Using her experience in actual battles, Mira explained the many benefits of summoning.

"If that's all you do, your opponent may see through your plans…"

She then went on to explain just how much of an advantage it was to have superior numbers and how to make the best use of a numerical advantage. Figuring it was the best chance to implant a good impression of summoning in their heads before they picked up any preconceived notions, Mira's preaching was more enthusiastic than usual.

Next, she taught them how it was important to have someone who'd charge in from the front once you'd flanked an enemy. Rather than using an evocation that was skilled at defense, one should simply use the strongest evocation they had available to distract the enemy and create an opening more easily. Despite them being a bit too young for it, she then went on to explain tactics and warfare.

The children were all listening intently. While the jury was out on whether or not they could understand any of this, they happily announced how they'd "won" after pouncing on her Guardian Ash from behind.

After several days of looking after (giving private summoning lessons to) the children, Mira got a message from Kagura. The next day, around noon, the spirit airship would be landing at the agreed-upon location.

Having received word of this, Mira, Artesia, and Lastrada gathered in one of the rooms in the church and had their final planning session regarding transporting the children to the lake.

It wasn't particularly difficult. All they really had to decide was how they'd position the adults around the children. And owing to having become quite popular with them over the past several days, Mira would be in charge of the younger class.

Preparations for transporting the children were now all complete.

"This'll be our last day here, huh? We've come quite a way from just being an impromptu base, huh?" Lastrada muttered quietly, with a bittersweet smile, as he stood in a room that'd been emptied of everything but tables and chairs.

Despite being remote, it was a place far removed from civilization where they'd dwelled for a long time. It was easy to understand why he was feeling sentimental.

Artesia simply said, "Yeah," and smiled gently.

Everyone was feverishly busy the next morning.

It would be their first time traveling as a group and their first time moving. The children were extremely excited.

For the teachers who were reminiscing while staring at the ungainly church, it must've hit a bit differently. Rather than feeling anxious about leaving the place where they'd long lived and grown accustomed to, they were more excited about starting a new life.

After dividing the high-spirited children into several groups and using the lift to bring them down to the surface of the forest, it was finally time for Mira's junior class.

"Be careful where you step… No, not over there, over here. Jeez…"

Grabbing the naughtiest boy in her arms, Mira stepped onto the lift.

Some children were minding their manners while others were pacing around. Others still were sticking close to her and wouldn't leave her side. Mira didn't have an easy time dealing with how rambunctious the kids were outdoors, but she somehow managed to get them all together. Her comrades were particularly useful in this situation.

Despite reaching the ground, the junior class still hadn't calmed down. And so, Mira told the children that if they all behaved themselves, then she'd let all of them ride.

She was referring to Pegasus, Hippogriff, Garm, and her Guardian Ash. The effect was immediate.

The boys made a mad dash for Hippogriff and Garm, which was no surprise, as they looked epic and cool. Aside from Pegasus, the Guardian-Ash-pulled wagon seemed to be most popular among the girls. Pegasus's popularity was self-evident, but the wagon seemed to have become a makeshift playhouse.

"All right, it's time to take off toward a new tomorrow!" Lastrada ordered.

Everyone began moving out. They were headed for the lake just north of their current location. Mira and Lastrada took the lead, as the junior and senior classes followed. The teachers flanked them on either side, keeping an eye on their surroundings. Artesia followed in the rear, on watch to make sure that none of the children strayed off.

The group smoothly made their way through the thick, dense forest. Normally, it would be a slow and annoying trek, but with the inexplicable powers of the Korpokkur sisters, the way began opening before them.

Children and teachers alike cried out in amazement as they watched the truly wondrous way in which the trees moved aside to clear a path. It'd been just about an hour since they set off when they received reports from Uneko and Etenoa of the Korpokkur sisters.

"Nothing unusual to report."

"Like, check this out, Sis. It's delicious."

Uneko was cute and small and looked very much like one of the tiny Korpokkur people. Etenoa, for some reason, had grown up to be a

valley girl. Despite being twins, the two looked radically different, and yet, they were two peas in a pod. Even their breathing was synced.

The two had already cleared a path to the lake. Now they were observing the surrounding area, each in their own way—Uneko was scanning for auras while Etenoa was keeping watch after climbing up into a tree.

While doing this, Etenoa had found some fruit and collected it for the children.

During break time, Artesia cut up the fruit and handed it out. It was all met with rave reviews, which very much pleased Etenoa.

After marching for about another hour, they finally arrived at their destination: the lake. Seeing the scene sprawling before them, the children lost themselves in excitement. Not that this was a surprise. It was a huge lake with a gigantic spirit airship sitting in the middle of it. Some of the children must have never even seen a ship. Even a few of the teachers started at it in wide-eyed amazement, as it was much larger than they'd imagined.

Mira smugly congratulated herself on coming up with the idea of borrowing the marvelous spirit airship owned by the Isuzu Alliance.

"Welcome aboard the ark of hopes and dreams! Today, I personally invite you to the sky above!" Kagura said as she descended from the airship to stand before them. She must've been getting assistance from spirits, as an impressive display of water and light danced behind her.

Mira grinned slightly as she wondered what in the world Kagura was talking about. The children, however, ate it all up. Some of them

were likely still apprehensive about going on a journey through the sky. But seeing as they were *children*, they were enthralled by the spectacle the spirits were putting on. Thanks to the special summoning classes they'd had, the junior students were particularly taken by the spirits. Utterly enthralled, they watched the display, wondering which spirit was responsible for doing what.

"Well, I'll be. That was quite the impressive performance."

"I told them they'd be performing for children, so they went all out," Kagura said while laughing.

The light and water show had been suggested by the spirits themselves. "All right, now enjoy your journey through the clouds!" she said before returning to the deck as it swayed softly in the air. This was part of the spirit's performance as well.

The children began clamoring to go. The moment they did, a gangway was lowered. Down came the crew, who were all garbed in colorful uniforms.

"All right, now watch your step and come on board one at a time," said the crew from the Isuzu Alliance, smiling as they ushered the children onboard.

The spirit airship was primarily used for transporting VIPs and shipping goods. It was not used to carry passengers, and this was the first time it'd ever been used to transport a group of children.

"Next! Step right up!"

Perhaps for this reason, Mira realized that the crew were all acting as if they were attendants at a theme park. She smiled to

herself, thinking that Kagura had surely put them up to this.

Chapter 9

ONCE ALL THE CHILDREN HAD gotten aboard and were accounted for, the spirit airship began to move.

The children all gathered on the observation deck of the airship, their spirits buoyed as the sky rose to meet them through the viewing windows.

Not long thereafter, the spirit airship reached an altitude of thirty-two hundred feet.

Having come from a sylvan village utterly surrounded by trees, the clear and unobstructed view from the observation deck looked as if it were a different world. The children took in the sight of the sky which stretched far and wide into the horizon.

Then something unexpected happened.

While Mira was gazing out at the view before her alongside the children, a spirit rushed over.

"Lady Uzume, everyone, there's an emergency. Please hurry to the stern of the ship," the spirit whispered, careful to not have the children hear.

From the way the spirit had said it, it seemed as if some huge problem had come up.

"Gotcha. We'll head over ASAP," Kagura replied, stealthily heading toward the stern.

"Hrmm, I'll go to."

"Same here. I told Artesia to look after the children."

Mira and her companions hurried to the stern alongside Kagura.

As they did, one of the boys noticed them and turned around saying, “Where are big bro and big sis going?”

“Oh, them? I think they’ve been waiting to use the restroom.”

“Ah, okay. I already went to the bathroom before, so I’m fine.”

“That was smart of you,” Artesia said as she gently patted the smiling boy’s head.

“It looks like some pesky foes have decided to make an appearance.”

“Why are they chasing us? I can sense a ton of hostility coming from them.”

“Yeah… That must be why.”

Seeing the emergency with their own eyes, the three smiled bitterly. Even cruising at an altitude of thirty-two hundred feet in an airship, something was following them.

It was none other than a cursed legion. They weren’t monsters, nor were they fiends. What they were was a collection of evil spirits—an extremely dangerous group that spread curses. It would be an absolute catastrophe if they managed to catch up to the airship. To make matters worse, brute force didn’t have any effect on evil spirits like a cursed legion.

“Unfortunately, I don’t have enough [Repel Spirit] to do anything about them.”

“Even with my techniques, I couldn’t exorcise all of them before they caught up with us…”

There were spells and items that were effective against evil spirits, but Mira and Kagura groaned that they didn't have enough to take on such an unprecedentedly large group. The Spirit King and Martel also appeared to be gobsmacked, as it was their first time seeing such a vast multitude of evil spirits.

The swarm was being kept at bay by the spirits, but it was only a matter of time until they broke through.

"But where could such a huge host even come from…?" Kagura asked as she produced all the talismans she had, looking puzzled.

It was common knowledge that a cursed legion generally never left the spot from which they'd emerged. Something very unusual was going on, given the size of the host and the fact that they were pursuing the airship.

"Ah, yeah… It's probably because of us," Lastrada said, as if confessing.

He said the cursed legion were evil spirits from the Black Forest of the Dead.

"The area where our village was situated was protected by a holy barrier that Artesia had set up after purifying the area. But just as we thought all along, a place like that will eventually revert, even if purified. I guess we now know what happened when the place reverted."

In short, the evil spirits had burst forth after the barrier lost containment. Now those spirits, which had been long been confined beneath the surface of the lake, had congregated and become a

cursed legion. They had so much built-up malice and resentment that they were coming after Artesia and her companions.

At least that was Lastrada's opinion.

"Oh dear. In that case, then I'll have to take care of them."

Mira and the others heard a voice from behind them say this as they wondered what to do. Turning around, they found Artesia.

"So you're the ones I felt coming after the children, hmm?" she murmured.

The maternal kindness was all but gone from her eyes. In its place flickered a baleful light that reminded one of an angry mother bear. Artesia walked slowly toward the stern of the airship as Mira and her companions quietly huddled in the corner not to provoke her.

"In my left hand, behold love. And in my right, behold mercy. May the lost and wretched souls that I see feel my embrace."

[Holy Arts: Luminous Current]

A light that seemed to blaze ten times brighter than the sun lit up the area behind the ship. Mira and the others squinted at first, then smiled grimly as they fully opened their eyes.

Even if Mira, Kagura, and Lastrada had put their powers together, it would likely have taken them several hours to completely exorcise the cursed legion. Artesia had completely eradicated the dangerous host of evil spirits with a single blow.

"Never should have targeted the children…"

"If they hadn't done so, then Artesia never would've left the children's side."

Once again reaffirming what Artesia was capable of, Mira and Kagura looked out over the now cloudless stern, smiling at the reminder of just how dreadful she could be.

With the business with the cursed legion concluded, the spirit airship sailed smoothly through the sky. Unsure of who was navigating, Mira noticed that the airship wasn't on a straight course for the Kingdom of Alcait.

Looking down at the changing scenery from above, the children excitedly asked about everything they were seeing. As this was happening, the airship slowed, and the children then all collectively raised their voices.

In front of the observation deck, they beheld the greatest waterfall on the continent.

"It is incredible, isn't it?" Mira murmured while surrounded by the junior class as she looked out onto one of the foremost sightseeing spots on the continent.

The trip was supposed to be a simple flight to the Kingdom of Alcait, but it had become a sightseeing tour that included visits to several famous sites. They had wanted to show the children, who'd been secluded in a village deep in the forest, a glimpse of the wider world. Kagura had come up with this itinerary after hearing some suggestions from her comrades.

"And some of the sights seem to be ones we wanted to see as well."

The spirit airship had only ever been used when they urgently needed to transport people or goods, but this time was different. The

members of the Isuzu Alliance were now using this as an excuse to thoroughly enjoy themselves as well.

"And so, we'll be arriving tomorrow afternoon."

"Gotcha. All right then. We'll get ready and await your arrival."

Having used the communication device to let Solomon know when they'd be arriving, Mira headed to one of the rooms on the spirit airship. There she found Artesia, Lastrada, and Kagura already assembled.

It was late at night, and the children were exhausted after the excitement of the sightseeing tour and quickly fell asleep. Leaving the children in the care of the teachers and spirits, Mira and her companions reminisced and chatted fondly about old memories. The four talked long into the night about what they'd been up to and what they'd do from there on out. There was certainly a lot they wanted to discuss.

After a short rest, Mira awoke early and basked in the morning sun on the deck while she enjoyed a summer fruit au lait—a fruit-filled delicacy that'd been freshly harvested from the Forest of Four Seasons. It also had just the right amount of acidity for someone just waking up.

Still a touch groggy, Mira was greeted by a visitor as she gazed at the scenery.

"Miss Mira, could I have a moment of your time?!"

Turning around, she saw that it was one of the spirits working alongside the Isuzu Alliance. And there wasn't just one. There was a

whole crowd.

"Wh-what is it?" Mira answered a tad nervously, having been confronted by the intense-looking spirits.

A spirit stepped forward who represented the group and asked, "Would you be willing to allow us to speak with the Spirit King?"

As she'd observed the other day with Anrutine, the Spirit King occupied a special place among spirits. The spirits imploring her all wore radiant and hopeful expressions.

What did the Spirit King think of this request? She took the opportunity to ask if he'd heard everything, and the Spirit King answered, "Hmm, what is it?"

He wasn't always watching things from Mira's perspective, and he hadn't been paying attention. But at least the connection they shared was such that if she asked him a question, she'd quickly get an answer.

Mira explained the situation to him, to which he happily replied, "I apologize for them pestering you, Lady Mira."

The conversation between the spirits and the Spirit King continued until breakfast. They adored the Spirit King as one might their father, and he treated the spirits as if they were his children. The relationship between them was both broader and deeper than that of any human equivalent but had a warmth like the one that existed between parents and their children.

Perhaps unable to hold herself back, Martel jumped into the conversation. Soon, there was a noticeable change in the tone. To the

spirits, progenitor spirits were something akin to big sisters or big brothers. And there was a spirit who'd fallen in love with a human, so dating talk made its way into the family chat.

Casually listening as the spirits talked about their daily lives and their thoughts on love, Mira looked up at the sky and thought about how they'd have nice weather that day as well.

Having finished breakfast, they would now spend the day stopping by sightseeing spots while making their way to the Kingdom of Alcait. Mira spoke about the morning's events, and Kagura smiled as if it all made sense to her.

"I see. So that's why they all volunteered, huh?"

Upon hearing that she'd be taking off in the spirit airship to ferry Mira and the children back to Alcait, all the spirits at Isuzu Headquarters had requested to go along as well. She thought they'd just loved children, but after hearing what Mira had said, another potential explanation became clear. Everything now made more sense.

Despite their stoic nature, the spirits were someone's children, too.

Seeing how content the spirits now looked, compared to the day before, Kagura chuckled quietly to herself.

Despite making detours, the spirit airship continued on smoothly. Around noon, they finally made their way into the realm of the Kingdom of Alcait. The plan was to take some time to sightsee while making their way to the capital of Lunatic Lake.

Shortly after going over a small mountain range, their destination came into view from the windows of the observation deck. Nine towers stood tall against the sky—the Silver Linked Towers, which were used as headquarters by the most powerful mages in existence, the Nine Wise Men. The Silver Linked Towers held a very special place in the hearts of mages.

Like with all the sightseeing spots they'd seen before, the children excitedly talked about whether or not they were familiar with what they were seeing and how impressive it was or wasn't. The members of the airship's crew who were mages were so happy to see the towers that they forgot the children were even there.

Once the children were delivered to their final destination, the crew of the spirit airship would be given some shore leave. The mages were making plans to take a proper tour of the Sacred City Silverhorn.

"It really brings you back, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does."

"It hasn't changed at all, huh?"

How many years had it been? Lastrada, Artesia, and Kagura looked out the window and reminisced, their voices thick with emotion.

"You aren't wrong," Mira said, laughing softly as she looked at their relieved faces. She prayed that one day they'd all be back there once again, just as they once had been.

With their sightseeing tour about to end, the group finally arrived at Lunatic Lake.

Per Solomon's instructions, they brought the airship down at the edge of Alcait Academy's courtyard. They saw staff awaiting them. As soon as they touched down, the workers deftly moored the spirit airship while getting the gangway lowered into position.

The sprawling courtyard was also a brand-new sight for the children. Happily alighting from the airship, they voiced their astonishment at the size of the school building.

"Welcome to the Kingdom of Alcait," said Suleiman, who was there to show them around in Solomon's stead.

"Thank you for having us. I look forward to settling in."

"Yeah, thanks!"

Hearing Lastrada and Artesia's answers, Suleiman deferentially replied, "I am delighted beyond words to receive you like this," before bowing.

He seemed truly overjoyed to be welcoming back two of the Nine Wise Men.

Come to think of it, they're the first ones to formally return.

It was refreshing to see Suleiman displaying joy since he was usually so calm and composed. Thinking that she'd done well this time, Mira smiled to herself.

With the introductions concluded, they all followed Suleiman as he led them to the new orphanage. The Isuzu Alliance, their mission now finished, all went off into the city. The mages among them left to rent carriages so they might get to Silverhorn.

Meanwhile, Mira's wagon was taken to the castle's technology department. The engineers responsible for crafting the vehicle said that it was time for a maintenance check and had been anxiously waiting for her to arrive. They undoubtedly wanted to get a look at the data it had collected, too. They planned on being finished with it by the end of the day.

Since the new orphanage was situated right behind Alcait Academy, the sights they took in as they made their way across the campus ground must've been extraordinary. The children gasped, just as they had while sightseeing on the airship. The teachers' eyes shined brightly as they took in the sheer size of the academy and how well-furnished its facilities were. They even began formulating plans on how to ask to use those facilities, seeing as they'd be neighbors and all.

Since it was unusual to get a visit from such a large group, several students poked their heads out to see what was going on.

"Hrmm, that right over there is…"

The window she'd seen was about thirty feet in the distance. Among the faces she saw looking at them was one Mira recognized. It was the evocation professor, Hinata. It was likely that the students looking out the same window were all evocation students.

Since evocation was just beginning to take off, the students there weren't all the same age, despite all being first-year students. Sure enough, the faces she saw peeking out confirmed that.

Hmm… I feel like I know her from somewhere…

Among the students in the window, Mira noticed a young girl with blonde hair and pigtails. Mira remembered someone who had a bit of a perky look and gave off a very strong *princess* vibe. However, unable to put her finger on where she recognized her from, she decided it wasn't that important for now.

But this was not the case for the girl.

Recognizing Mira, Hinata began waving happily at her. Mira waved back. Seeing this, the pigtailed girl seemed to realize that they were acquaintances, for she began saying something to Hinata. Then the children in the classroom all fixed their attention on Mira.

Judging from the incredibly confident look on Hinata's face, she had likely said something about Mira. Like how she was Danblf's pupil or about her involvement at the Spell Symposium.

Looks of surprise and envy began appearing on the students' faces. But this wasn't the case with the pigtailed girl. She just stood there dumbfounded, as if in shock.

After walking a short while with all eyes on her, they finished cutting across the campus and finally arrived at the new orphanage.

"This looks like a pretty nice place."

The building had been used as a temporary schoolhouse before Alcait Academy had been completed and was far more impressive than she'd expected. The sturdy stone structure had three floors and was about twice as big as any other mansions there—more like a hotel than an orphanage.

"It's incredible…" one of the professors murmured. All the facilities they'd used in the forest had been made on the fly with whatever was available, but now they were in an exceptional building that'd been built by expert craftsmen. It was a dramatic change, as was evident from the hopeful looks that blossomed on their faces.

"I'm going in first!" said a voice, belonging to one of the senior boys.

He dashed forward the moment Suleiman told them that they'd be living there from that day forward. As he ran, a dazzling smile on his face, the other children figured they might as well do the same. They all rushed into the building, laughing happily. They simply weren't able to stay put.

"Aaah, hey! Jeez, I'm sorry they're so impatient," one of the female teachers said, apologizing to Suleiman and then chasing after the children. Several more teachers followed after her.

Mira felt a tug on the bottom of her skirt and beheld the shining faces of the junior class looking up at her when she turned. The junior class hadn't all followed suit and dashed off. Perhaps Mira's attentive lessons over the past couple of days caused them to follow Mira's instructions instead of getting swept up by the other children's fervor.

But it looked like they were fast approaching their limit. They were fidgeting restlessly while looking intently at the school building.

"Yeah, I get it. Hey, go inside. But don't run. It's dangerous."

Having been given permission, the students all enthusiastically exclaimed, "Okay!" and made their way into the schoolhouse as

quickly as they could walk.

Chapter 10

"ALL RIGHT THEN. Shall I take you on a tour?"

Suleiman began showing them around the different facilities on the estate grounds.

The estate was quite large and measured about six hundred fifty feet wide and five hundred feet long. Aside from the schoolhouse, there were other facilities present. The first of these was the stables. It was wide enough that five horses would have no trouble walking in abreast and was also furnished.

The children could probably learn a lot if the school were to bring in a horse and have them look after it. Artesia and the other teachers agreed to that as they checked out the facilities while discussing their future plans.

In addition to other facilities, such as a training ground, a warehouse, and a workshop, a small, custom cottage for practicing spells had also been provided. This was very much in keeping with the Kingdom of Alcait's status as the Nation of Mages. It had been equipped with special protective walls that could prevent up to intermediate-level spells from breaching them.

The last place on their tour was the bathhouse that'd been set up beside the schoolhouse.

"Whoa, this is what I'm talking about!"

Solomon was very particular when it came to baths and had certainly not neglected to include them. The building had only recently been completed and had a child-friendly design without any sharp

edges. The children would be fine, even if a little horseplay happened. And it was large enough that they could all go in at once. Not only that—it was also equipped with a specially made boiler which had been engineered using technomancy. Since it used magic stones as fuel, it was fairly cost-efficient.

"In that case, I'll probably be coming here for a while," Mira said. She handed Artesia a small mountain of magic stones as a housewarming gift.

Now that they'd checked out the outdoor facilities, it was time to finally venture into the main building.

"Oh my, it's lovely."

"This place is great!"

Heading inside from the entryway, they found themselves in the chapel. Suleiman said that they'd received some help here from the Church of the Trinity.

By indoctrinating the children into the teachings of the Church of the Trinity, the children would eventually become faithful believers. Mira smiled bitterly to herself about the duplicitous way in which adults thought.

They'd entered the chapel first, but after emerging into the hall, they found themselves in the school. It had been set up so that it could be used as a proper orphanage. There were several visible improvements to the schoolhouse. Having been the one in charge of revamping it, Suleiman explained all the improvements that'd been made. He took them to look at the lunchroom, which had been

converted into a kitchen and a cafeteria, and the children's playrooms, which had been remodeled into classrooms.

As one might expect, Lastrada and Artesia were positively delighted with the fantastic space. It had been constructed with careful consideration of their needs.

With his mood seemingly buoyed by the pair's reaction, Suleiman went up the stairs while saying, "Next, we'll be heading up to the third floor, which is all bedrooms. It should be sufficient for a hundred people to rest comfortably."

Mira and the others followed after him as if they were taking a tour of some newly built house.

Arriving on the third floor, they ran into the teachers and students, who'd gone up before them. It seemed as if the children were fighting about something, but it didn't take long for the reason to dawn on Mira.

"They're probably trying to decide where they'll sleep."

Mira's assumption was right on the money. After asking the faculty to explain what was going on, they elaborated that a fierce struggle had broken out among the children over who'd get to sleep by the window or who got which bunk.

"Come to think of it, this happened before, didn't it?"

"It did."

The two smiled knowingly. It seemed that the same kind of bitter struggle had broken out in the treetop village as well. Taking a

look to see just how different the beds were, the three understood why the children were fighting. There was no helping it.

The rooms were classrooms that had been remodeled into bedrooms, and each was split into four smaller rooms. Upon entering, the area immediately ahead was a hallway that led to the four rooms, each of which had a window. They were arranged so that there was one bunk bed on each side of the window and one bunk bed on each side of the room closest to the hallway. It was no surprise that the side facing the window would be more popular.

"Oh my… I apologize for our lack of forethought," Suleiman said, as he gazed at the bedrooms with a look of shock on his face after Mira explained what was going on. He must've not been very familiar with how children interact.

Suleiman promised the children that he'd relay the matter so that they could settle it in a way that satisfied everybody. Having promised this, the children stopped fighting quite as much. The crisis was averted.

A few days later, Suleiman suggested a way to make the beds facing the hallway more appealing. The children no longer had a problem. One of his greatest strengths was that once he took on a job, he made sure to see it through until he achieved optimal results.

"That concludes my introduction, shall we head to the castle?" Suleiman said, switching gears once they'd finished looking at the third floor.

They'd finished their general tour of the grounds. It was now time for some very important business.

It was time for their audience with Solomon—for their reunion.

Mira and her companions let the faculty know that they'd be saying hello to Solomon and left the new orphanage to make their way to the castle. Climbing into the carriage that awaited them outside, they felt it sway for a little less than ten minutes. Alighting from the coach, they saw Alcait Castle standing tall before them.

"Ah, it hasn't changed one bit."

"It sure hasn't. I wonder how many years it's been… It sure brings me back."

While there were some new buildings in the surrounding area, the exterior of Alcait Castle was unchanged.

A look of relief washed over Lastrada and Artesia's faces as they looked up, almost as if they'd returned home to where they'd grown up.

However, upon going inside the castle, they became aware of a big change.

"Aaah! Miss Mira, welcome back!"

"Would you like a bite to eat? Or perhaps a bath?"

Perhaps alerted to Mira's return, Lily and Tabitha arrived with impeccably maid-like timing, finding Mira at such incredible speed that she'd barely had a moment to register them.

"You're in front of guests, you two," Suleiman said, casually warning them. They turned around in surprise. Oblivious to Lastrada and Artesia, they hadn't noticed Suleiman either.

"We beg your pardon," they said, bowing.

Neither of them seemed to realize that Artesia or Lastrada were members of the Nine Wise Men since it was their first time encountering the pair. Upon being informed by Suleiman that Mira had things to do, a world-ending expression of grief fell across their faces.

He continued that it wouldn't take very long, and smiles blossomed on the two women's faces as their hope was restored.

"All right, we'll be waiting, Miss Mira."

"We made some delectable custard cakes for you!"

Bidding them farewell, Mira smiled to herself about how there wasn't a chance that she'd escape. The words *custard cakes* soothed her anxiety, though.

"Quite a bit has changed, huh?"

"It's totally different from back then."

The exterior might have been the same, but the inside had changed quite a bit. The eccentric maids were a new addition. Observing this with their own eyes, Artesia and Lastrada smiled cheerfully.

Kagura had been a step ahead of them, and they found her waiting in Solomon's office when they arrived. They were seemingly discussing things related to the current progress that'd been made.

"Welcome back. It's good to see you again," Solomon said, warmly welcoming them as a friend rather than as a monarch.

"I could say the same. It's certainly a relief to be back."

"It's all thanks to Mira and you, Commander in Chief. Thanks again!"

Looking at Solomon's face, Artesia and Lastrada plopped down on the sofa as if they could finally relax.

"Now we can finally take a breather."

Artesia had been at the mysterious orphanage that Mira had sought. And she'd even managed to track down Lastrada, who'd been incognito as Phantom Thief Fuzzy Dice. With this, she'd finished investigating every rumor and lead they had that might lead to the remaining Nine Wise Men.

Kagura still needed to go soon, but she'd finish things up sometime before winter. Soul Howl planned on returning before the year was out as well.

This meant that she could confidently say she'd achieved the original goal that Solomon had given her, which had been to have half of the Nine Wise Men back by the end of the year. They could now finally catch their breath.

"You really came to the rescue. Thanks," Solomon said, giving Mira credit for making it all happen.

Then, after their joyous reunion, they each delivered simple reports and began discussing various matters, such as Fuzzy Dice and how the orphanage was to be run.

On the Fuzzy Dice front, Lastrada planned to finish off the human trafficking syndicate once things at the orphanage had settled down. He'd already laid the groundwork to do so, and so there was no need to worry.

Meanwhile, Artesia wished to manage the orphanage, and so It was decided that she'd remain in charge of all aspects of its operation. They would receive some funding for running the orphanage from the church and the nobility. And per her own suggestion, any remaining funds that were necessary would come out of Artesia's own pocket.

All that was left to discuss was when to announce that Artesia and Lastrada had returned. The two asked that it wait until things at the orphanage had settled down.

There was another reason to wait…

In four months, they'd be holding their National Foundation Day. The day was eagerly anticipated by the populace and would be the perfect occasion to announce the return of the Wise Men.

With a smirk, Solomon suggested that it'd be even more perfect if Kagura and Soul Howl could wrap up their business by then as well. If they announced that four of them had all returned at once, it would really be big news. Not only that, they could hold a festival commemorating the return of the Wise Men and attract a good number of tourists.

"That's still four months away, so there's a chance that you might find even more of them," Solomon said, gazing at Mira expectantly.

Mira had managed to locate five of the Nine Wise Men. All that was left were Meilin of the Immortal Arts and Flonne of the Ethereal Arts. Depending on how hard Mira worked, she *might* manage to find all of them within the next four months, which would allow them to celebrate National Foundation Day in the best way imaginable.

But right now, they had precisely zero leads when it came to the location of the other two Wise Men. Garrett, the vice commander of the mobile armored division, had helped out someone resembling Meilin, but that was the last they'd heard of her.

"It all depends on whether or not we get more information," Mira said, glancing away from him after thinking to herself for a moment.

Not confirming that she'd be able to finish in time, Kagura vaguely answered, "I'll see what I can do." She was dealing with a particularly tricky issue—she'd be finished when she was finished.

Solomon must've understood this, as he didn't push it any further. He only said, "Should you run into any trouble, you know where to find me."

For the four months leading up to the National Foundation Day, Artesia would be the director of the orphanage, and Lastrada would spend his time assisting her.

"So we'll wait until the time is right to unveil our true identities. I love that kind of thing!" Lastrada said, signing onto the idea of the big National Day reveal. He was so excited that he was already thinking about how exactly he'd make his entrance.

Artesia didn't seem to have much to say about it. All that really mattered to her was that she had her children.

After wrapping up business, they naturally moved on to chatting with each other. The group reminisced about what they'd been up to

since finding themselves in the world, so as to bring each other up to speed.

As they were doing so, one other person came to join the group.

"Hey, I heard that Mira's back."

She must have gotten that from the maids' information network. Luminaria flashed a smirk as she spoke. Judging by her expression, she must've meant to tease Mira, but she stopped dead in her tracks upon seeing everyone in the office. She had only gotten word that Mira had returned to the castle. The other three were a new development…

The intel had come from the maids, who were obsessed with Mira alone. It was no surprise that they'd neglected to mention the other guests. She was surprised to see anyone other than Mira—but the sudden reunion was positively shocking.

"Well, if it isn't Artesia and Kagura…and Lastrada, too."

All were old friends of hers.

Solomon had kept information about their arrival under wraps. From Luminaria's point of view, this was a reunion twenty years coming.

There must've been a lot going through her head.

Looking at each face, Luminaria smiled bashfully and said, "Ahhh, long time no see."

Chapter 11

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON. Everyone had decided that it was time to eat. Artesia said she'd be eating at the orphanage, to no one's surprise.

Solomon stood up and remarked, "All right, then perhaps I will, too." He figured he might as well visit the orphanage and get a look at the children.

Luminaria agreed and suggested that they might as well all go. And so, it was decided that they'd all go to the orphanage.

Hopping into a carriage and making their way there, Mira and her companions returned to the orphanage alongside Solomon, who'd changed into more subdued attire.

It seemed they were just in the process of getting ready for dinner. The teachers who could cook were showing off their chops in the kitchen, but without their head chef, Artesia, it looked as if they had their hands full.

"All right then. Would you mind waiting a bit?" Artesia said, heading to the kitchen.

From behind her, Solomon piped up, "I'll help."

He was the only one to say this. There seemed to be no one else among Mira's companions who had enough confidence in their cooking skills to volunteer. The rest simply answered, "Sure thing," and watched the two of them walk off.

The kitchen was connected to the cafeteria and was big enough to easily seat a hundred people. The children had already arrived, and

they all came running over the moment the group stepped inside.

Lastrada was particularly popular with the boys in the senior class…

But this time, however, he was only drawing half the crowds he usually did. He had a challenger in the form of Luminaria.

She was acclaimed as the most powerful sorceress, and so beautiful that half of the boys were instantly taken with her. In addition to being right around the age when boys hit puberty, the fact that they'd lived in a secluded village probably figured into their reaction. Regardless of what she might be like on the inside, her striking beauty seemed to enrapture them.

Kagura, meanwhile, was hanging out with the girls in the senior class. They were on the same wavelength, excitedly giggling while engaging in girl talk. Some girls now seemed to be interested in Solomon.

One could hear them saying, "He's so dreamy," and "He's really cute," as they peeked in the kitchen.

Mira was unsurprisingly surrounded by students from the junior class, to whom she was reading a book.

"And so, Luminaria appeared none too bothered after nearly managing to blow up her own friends…"

The book was a children's book of stories about the Nine Wise Men. Since they'd come to the Kingdom of Alcait, one of the teachers had bought the entire series.

Continuing to read while substituting the truth from time to time, Mira also made sure to throw in details that glamorized evocation whenever she found an opportunity to do so. This seemed to pay off, as the popularity of summoning among the junior class had skyrocketed within the past couple of days.

"Old man Danblf is amazing!"

"His dark knights sure are strong!"

Hearing the children's innocent voices saying such things, Mira happily added, "Right?! You aren't wrong there!"

After they'd finished with dinner, it was time to jump in the bath. First up was the junior class. It'd been decided that it was necessary to have a chaperone accompany them. While the staff usually took turns chaperoning them, today, Mira was nominated again for the job. More specifically, nominated *by* the junior class.

Mira had realized the last time that getting twenty children into the bath was by no means an easy feat. "Jeez, guess I don't have a choice."

And despite saying this, she demonstrated just how nurturing she was by adding, "Have you all got clothes to change into? Great, then let's go."

How could she possibly say no to the children who loved her so much? Mira sauntered over to the bathhouse with the children, who were so openly affectionate toward her.

Once again, bathtime was a very lively affair. Unlike the day before, this time, the children mostly listened to Mira, and it ended up

being easy.

"Aaah, this is the life."

Having finished her task, Mira sank relaxedly into the tub. The nearby children all crowded around her and, imitating Mira, said, "Aaah, this is the life."

Getting out of the bath, they discovered that dinner had been cleaned up. Now it was the senior classes' turn to jump into the bath. Leaving the rest to the teachers, Mira and her companions gathered in the director's room.

"All right, seeing as we're all here, how about we have a toast?"

Mira, Solomon, Luminaria, Kagura, Artesia, and Lastrada were all gathered together. Solomon must've been overjoyed. He uncorked a bottle, saying, "I've been saving this for a special occasion. To our reunion today and to those in the future…"

The room filled with the sound of his voice and the clear clinking of glasses. Solomon looked at everyone in the room, and a rare expression danced across his face: a smile of profound joy.

There were as many tales to tell as there were years that they'd been apart. And so, even though they were simply chatting, they did so into the deep hours of the night.

Given how long they talked, they covered an equally exhaustive range of topics. They shared stories of getting their hands on rare items, funny anecdotes, tales of adventure, how they were all currently doing and the situation in each country, and shady rumors.

Never running out of things to talk about, they occasionally laughed and sometimes exchanged news. Before they knew it, the next day had dawned. Taking the hint from a big yawn that Mira had let out, the group decided to call it a night.

"Thanks for everything, Kagura. Make sure to relay my thanks to all your friends as well."

"Yeah, you really saved the day. Thanks!"

Having been thanked by Artesia and Lastrada once more, Kagura bashfully replied, "No worries." Then, with a smile, she added, "All right then. Good night!" before switching places with one of her shikigami familiars and returning.

Artesia and the others extended their thanks to Solomon. He replied that he was only doing what a friend should before adding that he planned on discussing matters relating to the return of the Nine Wise Men when things calmed down.

"Okay, sounds good."

"Since we're back, it'll all be fine."

Hearing Artesia and Lastrada say this, Solomon nodded contentedly. Then he let Mira know there was something he wanted to give her, telling her to pop in the next day, and returned to the castle.

What could it be that he wanted to give her? Perhaps it was more funding? Hoping as much, Mira said good night to Artesia and the others and went to bed.

"Big Sis. It's morning. Mooorniiing."

Still half asleep, Mira heard the children calling out to her. As if being invited by these voices, Mira roused herself.

"Nmmm… Morning, huh…?"

Opening her eyes, Mira saw the smiling faces of the children, who'd been up and full of energy from first light. Slowly sitting up in bed, the children called out, "Big sis is awake!" They happily jumped up and down and managed to knock Mira back over again.

After sitting up and getting pushed down again several times, Mira said, "Come on now. Lemme go to the bathroom," while gently tossing the children off of her bed.

Suleiman had picked out all the furnishings, and the bed in the guest room was quite nice. As a testament to its elasticity, it bore the full weight of the children as they bounced up and down. They must've quite enjoyed being tossed by Mira, as they kept begging to be thrown one more time. After doing so, Mira went to the bathroom and took some time to unwind.

"They sure are energetic for this early in the morning…"

It might've been the most boisterous morning for Mira on record. Smiling as she considered that, Mira finished up her business and spent the rest of the time until breakfast reading the book from before to the children. Their energy levels declined rapidly.

"This might be a problem…"

Once they were done eating breakfast together, it was time for the children to go about their studies. But it was also time to say goodbye.

She'd succeeded in getting the children safely to the Kingdom of Alcait. Her mission complete, Mira planned to see Solomon just like she'd agreed the night before and then return to the Tower of Evocation, where Mariana was waiting for her.

Mira's time looking after the junior students was over.

Upon telling the children to take care, the junior class all erupted in tears. They threw a fit, and clung to Mira while whining, "No, don't go."

"I'll come back to visit. Come on…"

Hearing their heartfelt and candid words, Mira hugged them, then patted them on their heads to calm them down. Despite only being with them a short time, they seemed to have taken a strong liking to her—enough to mourn her departure. She couldn't break free of them by force, so she just stayed put, smiling bitterly to herself as she wondered what she would do.

"Hey, everyone. Your Big Sis Mira has a lot of work to do. She really has to go. But don't worry because she'll be coming back to visit. How about you all give her a nice send-off? How does that sound?" Artesia suggested, witnessing Mira's plight. She'd been waiting for the right moment to speak.

The moment she did, the chants for Mira not to go were silenced. Then one of the children said, "Will you really come back?"

That question was repeated by the rest of the children in an attempt to stave off their sadness with the hope that they'd see her

again. Surely, there was no one who could say no to such pure and innocent voices.

"Hrmm, I'll come back. How about I bring back a bunch of souvenirs for you next time? If I do, you'll all behave yourselves, right?" Mira promised the children, who seemed so overcome with emotion that they had tears in their eyes. She hugged them one more time.

Turning around while on the road that led from the school to the castle, Mira waved back at the students, who were still waving at her. At the same moment, she glimpsed both Artesia and Lastrada. Two of the nine had finally returned to the Kingdom of Alcait.

They're growing up just fine. Kids really are great.

Dealing with them could be tiresome, but it strangely also made her feel full of energy.

Satisfied by having completed her mission, Mira reflected on this apparent contradiction as she kept going a bit farther before turning to wave once more. She kept doing so until the children were completely out of sight.

Arriving at Solomon's office, she discovered that she was the only one who'd come this morning. On his desk, she laid out all the souvenirs she'd gotten for him during her travels. She hadn't had a chance to give them to him the day before.

"Wow, this is incredible. They're even selling stuff like this, huh?"

Despite having gone all the way to Haxthausen, the main souvenirs she'd brought back were desserts that were slightly different than the ones in Alcait. But, as she'd expected, Solomon's eye was drawn to the gas mask, camouflage cloak, and night-vision goggles that she'd purchased from Dinoire Trading.

"And since they're made for adventurers, they're all pretty high quality."

Mira took out the set she'd purchased for herself and put it on, instantly transforming into a member of the special forces.

To a military nerd like Solomon, it must've looked especially cool. He donned his gear and ran over to a large mirror. He smiled, proclaiming, "Siiick!"

The two then took some time to enjoy the gear and its capabilities.

"Okay, there are more souvenirs, like I mentioned to you before. Have you got a place to store them?" Mira asked once they both calmed down, still garbed like a member of the special forces. The way she asked seemed to indicate that it was time for the main event.

"I certainly do," Solomon answered. He'd mobilized a whole host of servants to sort out a space the day after he'd spoken with her about said souvenirs.

Leaving the office, the pair headed to the big underground vault beneath the castle. Due to the prior arrangements he'd made, a huge space stood completely empty.

"Hrmm…a space this wide should work just fine."

Mira began unloading things from her item box into the space before her.

"To start, take these," she said, handing him a metallic plate and an old, worn diary. She'd gotten them from defeating the Machina Guardian that lay at the very bottom level of the Ancient Underground City. One had been held by a mechanical doll that'd come out of the Machina Guardian, while the other was discovered among its broken wreckage.

"Ah, this is what you mentioned, huh? I see… It *is* odd, isn't it?"

The jet-black metallic plate was covered in mysterious shapes that they were unable to make heads or tails of. Then there was the diary, which was largely indecipherable. However, the presence of the word "Japan" made it incredibly intriguing. Chances were important information lay within its pages.

They might be able to unravel some of the secrets of the world they were now in.

"We should probably send this over to the Hinomoto Committee. They've got people that specialize in this kind of stuff," Solomon continued, carefully putting the metallic plate and the diary into his item box.

He then looked expectantly at Mira. They weren't the only souvenirs that Mira had brought back from the Machina Guardian.

Sensing how high his hopes were, Mira took what it was he was waiting for out of her item box.

"Look and be amazed."

One after another, giant chunks of metal piled up in front of her. They were none other than the precious remains of the Machina Guardian. It wasn't like iron or mithril but rather a mysterious and unknown metal. In order to make the best use of the pieces, they would need to determine the metal's specific properties. It was unlikely that they'd be able to craft anything anytime soon.

This was the metal that the Machina Guardian had been made of. If they could find a way to use it, it would most definitely be a boon to the Kingdom of Alcait.

"Seeing it all like this, it really is incredible," Solomon said in astonishment As he looked upon the mountain of metal that'd taken half an hour to simply unload from her item box.

On the surface, it looked like nothing but broken debris. But amidst the broken chunks of it lay machinery constructed using unknown technology. Were an expert to look at it, they would no doubt determine that it was all extremely valuable.

"This looks like it'll be worth examining," Solomon said, adding that it'd be a waste to simply use it like they would any other metal. Happy to have received such a magnificent *souvenir*, his eyes shined brightly.

"I went out of my way to bring it back, so put it to good use," Mira said haughtily, as if expecting he'd be impressed.

Solomon simply answered, "I certainly will," before adding that it was probably a good idea to contact the Hinomoto Committee about it as well. But then he smirked, saying that he'd be keeping his hands on all of it.

Chapter 12

AFTER RECEIVING THE PRECIOUS SOUVENIR from Mira, Solomon promised that he'd let the Hinomoto Committee know that they could come to pick up the other rare materials from the Machina Guardian she'd gotten whenever they wanted.

They both returned to Solomon's office, where there were always high-quality desserts and black tea readily available.

"By the way, what is it that you said you wanted to give to me yesterday?" Mira remembered after first grabbing a slice of cake.

"Oh, that? I'm sure you'll put it to good use," Solomon said confidently. He then put a box on the table about the size of his fist.

"What is it?"

At first glance, it looked to be nothing more than an ordinary box. Yet Solomon said it was a truly revolutionary invention.

"It's a prototype storage item that was developed by the Hinomoto Committee only a few days ago," Solomon prefaced before continuing to explain. It was revolutionary and boasted hidden capabilities that would be incredibly useful for Mira.

It was known as the deluxe item box.

With the item box that Mira and the others were currently using, if something was *unclassified* as an item, it was unable to be stored. However, they could work around that By using the Ethereal Arts technique [Itemize], so this wasn't that big of an issue. Most things could usually *be classified* as items.

So what was so groundbreaking about this? The answer was that this new item box could now store things that had previously been unable to be stored as items. Solomon said that the box that sat on the table was capable of storing only one thing: vehicles.

"It can only hold vehicles up to two tons and with a length, width, and height of up to sixteen feet. With this, you'll be able to carry your wagon around with you."

And the box itself was classified as an item… In other words: By storing the wagon in the box, then the box in her item box, her item box became something like a parking garage. And they were also working on developing boxes compatible with storing all sorts of other things. Solomon said that they'd eventually figure out how to expand how much they could hold, such that people could transport things that'd previously been impossible to carry around.

"That really is convenient!"

Having to always find parking for her wagon wherever she went, Mira was very impressed with its utility.

"Go ahead and use it. But let me know what you think next time. I'll let the Hinomoto Committee know your thoughts."

From the way Solomon said it, it didn't sound as if he were simply giving her a present. She'd also be testing it out. That didn't change the fact that it did seem to be quite useful.

Mira assured him that she'd do as much. The two then relaxed by chatting while enjoying some of the desserts that Mira had brought back.

"All right, that's all for now. Go and get a little rest."

"Hrmm. That is very much the plan!"

This had been a decisive moment in the mission Mira had undertaken to find the Nine Wise Men. Even if she didn't count herself, if Soul Howl and Kagura were to return like planned, there'd be five of the mighty Wise Men in the Kingdom of Alcait.

As opposed to before, with only Luminaria around, their fighting strength had gone up fivefold. They'd certainly have enough power to deter any potential war from breaking out. Even if the Limited Non-Aggression Pact expired, nothing was likely to happen right away.

Depending on how things panned out, Meilin might very well return. But Flonne was completely impossible to predict, and they didn't have even the slightest clue as to where she might be.

Considering all of this, Mira now had some room to breathe. It was as if the crises they'd been facing had been averted. She still planned on finding the remaining Nine Wise Men, but it was no longer quite as urgent as it had been.

Feeling relieved for the first time since she arrived, Mira had a positively radiant smile on her face as she stuffed herself with the desserts she'd brought back.

"So what do you plan to do after this?" Solomon asked casually, as if simply curious.

After thinking this over for a moment, Mira cheerfully answered, "I think I'll go back to my tower and take my time thinking it over."

"I see. So you'll be in your tower… Yeah, that's probably a good idea. You've gotta spend some time with your *family* after all," Solomon said with a chuckle, insinuating that Mariana was waiting for her.

"What are you going on about?!" Mira asked, without disagreeing with him.

Their chat stayed on the topic of Mariana before straying to Cleos for a bit, then moved on to the academy.

Several days ago, Solomon and Luminaria had gone to the academy to visit and observe.

Due to the fact that Luminaria had been keeping a watchful eye on them ever since the incident where Caerus attacked Mira, the School of Sorcery had been toiling earnestly and diligently, as if they'd finally come to their senses. And while she'd heard from Cleos that there was an issue with rivalries within the School of Evocation, it seemed as if things were starting to calm down. Similar hostilities between other schools of magic were becoming less frequent as well.

"And then, as I was wondering what the sound could possibly be, I opened the door and right there…"

Changing topics once more, their conversation had now switched to the laboratory beneath the castle. Solomon was referring to the time when he'd gone with Luminaria to check on the odd sounds that could be heard there every night. But in the middle of the story, they heard someone knocking on the door.

Cutting the story off, Solomon answered the door and discovered that the knocking had come from Suleiman. Solomon was

due to meet with a very important guest who had just arrived.

"Jeez, is it already that time? All right, then how about we continue this next time?"

He'd been about to get to the good part of the story—and yet, Solomon simply smiled and stood up, as if the timing had been just right.

Mira protested, "Oh, come on. Are you really gonna leave me hanging?"

"Well, in that case… Why don't you just ask Lily?" Solomon answered with a rather amused look on his face as he opened the door of the office. Sure enough, standing right there was not just Suleiman but Lily as well.

"All right, see ya next time. We'll catch up."

Solomon and Suleiman both headed toward the conference room. And thus, the only ones left were Mira and Lily.

If there really was an important guest, then wouldn't the head maid have to go as well? Mira nervously asked her, to which Lily bluntly replied, "I came here to welcome you back, Miss Mira."

Mira let herself be reluctantly dragged away to the maid's lair. There was no use resisting.

"I never would've expected something like this…"

Lily brought her to one of the rooms within the maid's domain. There, surrounded by several maids, Mira stood in a swimsuit.

From the sound of things, it seemed they wanted her to try on some new clothes. At least that was what Mira had expected—but

then they unveiled something a little different. She never would've guessed that it wasn't any kind of magical girl clothes. Rather, it was a swimsuit…and not just any swimsuit. A bikini.

"Ahhh, you look like a goddess that drifted down onto a beach!" Lily called out, swooning, as another of the maids worked a camera with practiced ease.

The bikini was blue and white. It complimented Mira's natural charm while accentuating her magnificent aura, such that even the ocean or sky themselves would struggle to match it.

Why was this all happening now? Because it was summer, of course.

There was a pool on the castle grounds. And while it was primarily used for training, during the summer months, it was open to the public for recreation. Many people used it as a place to cool off. This was true of the maids as well. There were even those who worked while wearing swimsuits under their clothes.

But what had given rise to the current situation was the innerwear conference that'd been held alongside their meetings on what to make next for Mira. The maids were divided into different factions that were advocating either boy shorts, bloomers, stockings, underskorts, or briefs. And while they all outlined their proposals in detail, they'd been unable to come to an agreement.



But with the coming of the new season, a new bloc had emerged: swimsuits. Rather than wear underwear, why not wear a swimsuit?

When initially suggested by a maid who was always going to the pool, the proposal was dismissed as blasphemy. But on second thought, making a swimming suit their next project didn't seem like a bad idea. Perhaps it was due to the summer heat boiling their brains, but talks continued, and their latest work was crafted.

"Aren't there days where you just want to leap into the ocean, a river, a waterfall, or a pool to beat the heat? Whenever you do, you can wear this!" Tabitha—second in command behind Lily—said. She then took out several additional bikinis.

It seemed as if they'd also subtly taken into consideration that the swimsuit would be used as a substitute for underwear, and so they'd made sure she could wear a different set every day.

Naturally, Mira had to try on all of these as well. In the end, they made her try on and be photographed in all of the various innerwear prototypes they'd come up with. These photos were to be used at their next conference as reference material.

"What about the autumn line? I guess I'll end up having to do this again…"

Fall came right after summer. After having to try on swimsuits, she'd have to try on fall clothes. Lily said they'd already begun production on these.

Despite sighing about how such a thing was inevitable, Mira felt fortunate. The reception she got from the overzealous maids could be

a bit of a nuisance, but the desserts they served were made with her taste buds specifically in mind. That more than made up for the trouble.

"Cake from the maids' refectory really is the best."

Having thoroughly enjoyed her fill of post-lunch desserts, despite having to be dressed up like a mannequin, Mira was seen off by the maids. She managed to get three pairs of swimsuits. And seeing as it was currently summer, it was highly likely that she'd be wearing them soon. In fact, the timing was probably just right. Or at least that was what she thought before shifting her attention to other things.

She hadn't managed to get an answer from Lily about the story Solomon was telling before they parted. Aside from Lily, she'd also asked Tabitha and the other maids. All of them dodged her questions.

What exactly was the truth they were hiding? It was likely that the maids were somehow involved.

Mira decided to let sleeping dogs lie and opted to just forget about it.

The next place she visited was the workshop on the west side of the castle, where her wagon had been brought for maintenance.

Dag, the shop's foreman, came forward when she peeked inside. Having given it a maintenance check, they'd determined that there was absolutely nothing wrong with the wagon.

The upper beam, which bore the most force, was exactly as it was when they installed it. No looseness was detected. Every other

part of the wagon seemed to be in sound shape as well.

With the fluids changed and a fresh cleaning, maintenance had been concluded.

After answering several questions having to do with her experience using the wagon, Mira was impressed to hear about the equipment that'd been added to her wagon during maintenance.

Going to check on her wagon in the garage, she saw that something had been installed near the ceiling in the corner. It was none other than an air conditioning system that'd been created by one of the castle's technomancy engineers. It was an additional component that would ensure her journeys in the wagon were more pleasant.

It was a prototype, so they wanted her feedback on her next visit.

With maintenance all done, she got the wagon back. Thanking Dag and saying farewell, Mira hurriedly pulled out a box while she stood in front of the wagon… The very vehicle-storage box that she'd gotten from Solomon.

"Whoa, this thing is amazing!"

Using it as instructed, the huge wagon fit perfectly into the box, no matter how odd it seemed. It was easy to take it out as well. When she opened the lid and put it on the ground, the wagon simply came out in the direction it'd been opened.

After putting it in and taking it out several more times, Mira was pleased with how useful the device was. From now on during her

travels, she could simply find a place to stay without having to worry about parking. And most importantly, that would save money.

She'd gotten her hands on something pretty nice. And seeing as they'd worked so hard to make it portable, Mira stored the wagon in her item box and cheerfully left the royal castle.

With the castle behind her and work finished for the day, Mira made straight for the busiest shopping street in Lunatic Lake. She had some time to spare, so she'd decided to finally go take in the sites of Lunatic Lake, like she'd long hoped to do.

After all, the only new place she'd seen was the academy. The city was sure to always be changing. She could check things out while also taking a nice stroll.

"Hrmm. This place is bustling."

Feeling as if she were a parent looking at a grown child, Mira took a look around the city.

The city that stood before her was much more densely packed than it had been thirty years ago; a fact Mira celebrated as if the accomplishment had been her own. Then she mentally commended the hard work Solomon had put in to protect the city.

"Ah, that's right."

Going down the main street, Mira remembered something as she stood before the Adventurers' Guild Union buildings that neighbored each other. It had to do with something that'd happened while she was in the Ancient Underground City in Grandrings. She'd gotten word from the Adventurers' Guild Union here that she'd

received some presents from fans and been instructed to pick them up at the reception desk of the guild union here in Lunatic Lake.

Reflecting on how she'd become famous, Mira pranced into the Mages' Guild.

The guild's facilities in Lunatic Lake had been set up to resemble libraries. They were lined with shelves packed with books that looked like they'd be of great use to adventurers, and it seemed as if one could read as much as they'd like within the building.

Furthermore, they weren't for the exclusive use of adventurers, either. Here and there, she caught sight of children who aspired to one day become adventurers themselves. Aside from the children who were eagerly reading books, she spotted a child with a woman who worked at the guild. She was something like a tutor and was helping the child with their studies.

It was what one would expect of a country that housed the Alcait Academy, the foremost institution on the continent when it came to training mages. Appreciating the vibe of the guild and how passionately the children were studying, Mira headed to the reception counter.

"I heard I had some things sent to me from a fan," she announced proudly the moment she arrived at the counter, presenting her adventurers' ID.

Getting presents from fans made it almost impossible not to feel full of herself.

"Sure. Please wait here for a moment," the woman at the counter answered with a kind smile while passing the ID through

some kind of device with practiced ease. After checking something, she walked off.

Mira was beside herself with excitement.

"Thank you for waiting. These were sent to you," the woman said when she returned, placing a small box that'd been wrapped up like a gift and a sealed envelope together on the counter. It seemed that the box and the envelope had been sent by different people. "I'll need your signature to confirm that you've received them," she said, presenting two documents.

"Hrmm, sure thing."

It seemed rather odd that she needed to sign to pick up presents. Mira asked about that as she signed her name. She smiled at the answer she got, which was very simple and yet threw her for a bit of a loop: One of the previous guild staff had taken some of the gifts for themselves.

Hrmm… That could definitely be an issue with famous people like Cyril, Jack Grave, or Eleonora.

People as famous as them probably got tons of presents from fans. Smiling cheerfully, Mira walked off, her gifts in hand, as she thought to herself how much trouble it'd be to sign for so many things.

"This is rather odd, isn't it?" Mira said.

She sat in a corner of the Mages' Guild, surprised by the flavor of what was inside the box. It appeared to be nothing more than a

sweet-smelling piece of paper about the size of her thumb. But upon putting it on top of her tongue, it melted like butter.

The present she'd gotten was candy. Not only that—it was fancy candy.

Impressed, Mira put two or three more on her tongue while picking up the letter that she'd also received.

Just what kind of fan had sent this?

If it ended up being a love letter…that could get awkward. It certainly wasn't easy being famous. Mira checked who'd sent the letter and found it was someone she was very pleased to hear from.

"Well, I'll be. If it isn't from Tact!"

The letter was from the young boy she'd met when she'd gone to the Ancient Temple on her first search for Soul Howl. It was thanks to Tact that she'd been able to meet the members of Écarlate Carillon.

In the letter, Tact wrote about how he was currently studying hard to become a cleric while also training his body every day. The members of Écarlate Carillon were overseeing his studies and training. There was still a lot he didn't understand, which made his studies difficult, and the physical training was no walk in the park. And yet, he managed to enjoy doing both every day. Though his writing was still a bit clumsy, he'd nevertheless written a good many sentences that conveyed just how content he was.

However, he'd written the most about his parents.

"Hrmm, I'm glad to hear it."

Tact's parents had both gone missing. It was only after the climactic battle with Chimera Clausen that she learned they'd been placed under the protection of the Isuzu Alliance. While busy mopping up, she had drinks with Aaron and some others who were connected with the Isuzu Alliance. They'd mentioned how Ashley and Leene had been safely reunited with their child, and that was when Mira put two and two together and realized that she'd both met the two before and heard of them somewhere. It was because they were Tact's parents.

She wasn't very good with names and this was a case of her not being very perceptive.

Moving on from thinking about those days, Mira broke out into a smile as she thought about how happy Tact sounded. The whole family was getting special training. On some days, Cyril, the guild master of Écarlate Carillon, would train with them personally.

Tact seemed to really respect Cyril, and so he would train even harder than usual on those days. Leene also seemed to be a big fan of Cyril's. Despite Tact's painstaking attempts to impress her with his hard work, his mother always snubbed him to cheer on Cyril instead. He also mentioned in his letter how seeing this left him with mixed feelings.

"It seems like Tact is hard at work, too, huh?"

There were several thoughts Tact was trying to convey in the letter, such as how Écarlate Carillon was doing a good job of looking after him from time to time. She could infer from much of what he wrote that despite being very busy, he also felt quite at peace.

Taking all this in, Mira hurriedly pulled out a pen and paper and began writing her reply.

After leaving the letter she'd written with the receptionist, she continued her stroll down the main street.

"Wow, look at this place!"

Mira found herself standing in front of a very large shop right in the middle of the main street. The store looked like an art museum, and the exterior gave off an air of elegance and class. The products they dealt in appeared to match the same vibe that the exterior gave off.

Upon seeing this shop, a certain thought popped into Mira's head. She wondered if she might be able to add to her collection.

Chapter 13

"WELL NOW, I WONDER if they have any…"

Opening the thick, black door, Mira stepped foot inside the shop. The moment she did, a musty yet familiar scent filled her nostrils.

"Welcome," Mira heard, being greeted by the unassuming voice of one of the staff as she looked around the shop and took a big breath. "Whoa," she said, letting slip a small gasp of awe.

The name of the shop was "Café Kraftbell Antiques." It was a shop that dealt with various artifacts with long histories.

As its name implied, there was also a café attached to the right side of the shop. Thanks to this café-antique shop pairing, the whole store felt as if it were straight out of a fairy tale.

They sure have a big selection.

A sweet scent wafted over from the café. Somehow, Mira managed to resist temptation and headed over to where the antiques sat lined up.

This time, she wasn't after sweets. Rather, she was after furniture within which spirits dwelled.

Spirits often lived in items that were treasured and had long been used. With this in mind, Mira considered that she might be able to find some furniture spirits to give her Spirit Mansion a homier vibe.

Unfortunately, there weren't any furniture spirits in residence here. So, after taking a look at a few things other than furniture, Mira gave up and got ready to leave the shop. Then all of a sudden…

"You've sure got a great collection here. Especially all the things you have from the Kartenov era. I think you and I would get along well."

"Why thank you. I also feel as if this might be fate."

Mira beheld a man who seemed as if he were the shopkeeper, and a dapper, well-mannered man walking down a staircase above which hung a sign saying, *No Entry*.

The well-mannered man said, "I hope to see you again soon," before leaving the shop.

The shopkeeper must've been pleased with their interaction, as he returned to the sales counter with a big smile and began doing paperwork.

After having watched the two, Mira decided against leaving and turned her gaze toward the staircase. Then she recalled that phrase she'd heard earlier: the Kartenov era.

That was a period of the world's history and something Mira had heard about. The reason she'd heard about it was thanks to her history-loving friend, Autodi Dolfin.

He'd spoken enthusiastically about the Kartenov era. Mira smiled to herself as she wondered if, given how keenly and thoroughly he'd discussed the topic, he might very well hit it off with the two men. Considering how he repeated himself even more than usual while talking about the Kartenov era, Autodi Dolfin was quite fascinated by it. And having had the knowledge of it forced upon her, Mira knew a little about the period as well.

The Kartenov era was a time when a kingdom prospered on the continent of Earth to the far west of Grimdart. The kingdom had collapsed over four hundred years ago, and historians like Dolfin felt that the cause of its downfall had occurred a hundred years before its collapse.

The name of the era which had preceded the kingdom's collapse was the Kartenov era.

Over five hundred years ago, the kingdom's ruler had been its twenty-third king, named Kartenov Safin Dukhaya. The Kartenov Period referred to the period in which this king ruled.

King Kartenov, who was said to have caused the kingdom to fall into ruin, had loved art above all else. It was because of this that he went a bit overboard with one of his royal proclamations. The absurd law he put forth mandated that everything from large mansions to trivial items had to be artistic in some way, so as to make the royal capital a home to the arts.

The country changed drastically, as did the role of artists. Aside from becoming a place where artists could gain fame and fortune, it also became a place where they could fully express themselves through their art. And so artists flocked to the kingdom from all over the continent during that time. The arts thrived so much that it was all art, all the time.

However, artists were treated so well that the nobility became greatly displeased. The throne passed from King Kartenov to Prince Leorolf, and he stepped away from his official duties.

It was said that King Kartenov spent the rest of his days in a far-flung estate. It was recorded in the history books that he was allowed to possess only ten treasures. These became known as Kartenov's ten treasures, and rumors of them were well known, even among archaeologists.

Well now, I wonder if any have been found.

Dolfin had taken quite an interest in these treasures. But at that time, the search for them had come to an end with none being found. Mira smiled bitterly to herself at the thought of how she'd certainly spent a lot of time around him. Wondering where he was or what he was doing now, she opened her Friends List.

It said next to Dolfin's name that he was online.

The Rise and Fall of the Kartenov era, eh? Thinking back fondly on her old friend, Mira approached the stairs.

If they're treasures from over five hundred years ago, then they're bound to have spirits in them…

That era was more than long enough ago for spirits to take up residence. She looked up the stairs, hoping to see something, but all she could see was a wall.

Judging from what I heard them say, they must have things they're selling up here…

Mira thought back on the exchange she'd witnessed between the shopkeeper and the customer. She remembered what the customer had said about there being a *good* collection. That would have to mean that the floor above had a collection of antiques from

the Kartenov era, as the man had said. Perhaps they had other antiques up there as well.

Right as Mira was beginning to take an interest in the upper floor, she heard a voice.

"Dear me, can I help you with something?" the shopkeeper said to her, smiling. The suspicious way Mira was acting must've caught his attention.

"Ah, well…" Mira began, before cutting straight to the chase and asking him about whether or not there was any old furniture within which spirits dwelt on the second floor.

"Furniture spirits…?" Taking a moment to think, the shopkeeper looked at Mira's face and opened his mouth as if to ask a question. "I apologize if I'm mistaken…but from the looks of you, I wonder if you might be the Spirit Queen… Am I correct?"

Word of the Spirit Queen had spread so far that even antique dealers knew about her.

"Hrmm, yes. Some people do call me that."

There wasn't any need to deny it. If anything, his knowing that she was a high-level adventurer might make him trust her more. Mira nodded rather exaggeratedly.

A bright smile blossomed on the shopkeeper's face as if he had expected her.

"Ah, I might've known! You're both as beautiful and lovely as they say. So my eyes weren't deceiving me! Good heavens, it's a

tremendous honor to have someone of such fine repute visit us. Ah, please wait a moment," he said, tramping off toward the counter.

Watching him as she waited, Mira tilted her head unconsciously. She had a feeling that something wasn't quite right.

She felt as if his expression wasn't the kind one would wear when engaging with a well-to-do customer who might drop some big money. Rather, it was the kind of expression one might have if they were simply excited to meet a celebrity.

The impression she got seemed to be right on the mark, as the shopkeeper can prancing back with colored paper and a pen in hand.

"My daughter is a very big fan of the Spirit Queen. Would it okay to trouble you for an autograph?" the shopkeeper said, holding out the pen and paper with a pleading look in his eyes and a radiant expression.

Did he really want an autograph for his daughter, or did he want it for himself? Either way, there wasn't much use getting to the bottom of that mystery. Mira thought for a short moment before taking the pen and colored paper and answering, "Well, why not?"

Hrmm, an autograph, huh…? Look like it's finally time!

Despite how happy she was, Mira stayed as calm as she could and scrawled her name with the pen as if it were something she was used to.

Mira had spent the whole trip from Grandrings to Haxthausen practicing signing her name as "Spirit Queen Mira."

Learning that people were referring to her by names like the Spirit Queen in Grandrings, Mira figured that the practice would likely come in handy at some point. This might really make her seem full of herself. And yet, this time it came in handy. One can never know when such a thing could prove useful.

Upon handing him the autograph, the shopkeeper happily allowed her upstairs.

Overtaken by excitement, he then began saying things such as, "Why, isn't this incredible?! Someone like me getting a chance to help the illustrious Spirit Queen with one of her important duties!"

Just what on earth was he so excited about? His enthusiasm stayed high, however. The shopkeeper continued saying things like, "To think I'm playing a role in the history of the Spirit Queen!" and "Who would've guessed the day would come when my work would benefit the Spirit Queen?!" as he eagerly showed her upstairs.

"Wow, this stuff…is *incredible*," Mira said.

Seeing the second floor, she was rendered speechless by the scene before her.

The first floor was impressive in its own right, but Mira realized it couldn't even hold a candle to the second floor when it came to just how full of history it was. The second floor was a single, spacious room full of all kinds of antiques. It seemed to be divided up into different sections, with each devoted to a different type of antique.

Mira didn't know much when it came to antiques. And what she did know was either a tiny part of what she'd heard from Dolfin or

was limited to equipment. But everything Mira saw in front of her looked quite special.

First, there were the antiques from the Kartenov era. They lacked the pronounced ostentation or lustrous beauty of gold and silver but instead radiated the kind of opulence that could have only been crafted by human hands. The king's royal proclamation had been that even ordinary people who were normally unable to enjoy the arts should have art incorporated into their lives. Art could be made with a single chisel. Many such works were in the antique shop.

…And yet, after taking a look around, Mira was ultimately unable to find any of the spirits that she was after.

"Humans have remarkable sensibilities. And it's for that reason, Miss Mira, that you won't be able to find my kin there."

She heard the Spirit King's impressed voice in the back of her head. He had been watching. He told her that spirits wouldn't dwell in furniture from the Kartenov era. These objects were so incredibly artistic that they moved beyond being simple *furniture* and into the realm of art. It didn't matter how much one treasured a piece of furniture—if it wasn't lovingly used for the purpose for which it'd been created, it would not become a place where spirits would dwell.

The most essential criteria for a spirit to dwell in a piece of furniture was the intent of the craftsperson who made it, and the emotions of whoever possessed it. Should both of those align and accumulate over many years, then the furniture would become a vessel that a spirit might call home.

"I see. So whether or not it's well-loved and how it's used have an effect as well, huh?"

"That's right."

From what the Spirit King said, what decided whether or not a spirit would dwell in something wasn't just age but intent. Furniture from the Kartenov era was required to be highly artistic. And that meant that it wasn't the best place for spirits to dwell.

The shopkeeper next took her to see antiques from the Reverie Period, which was born from a movement attempting to revive the style of the Kartenov Era. There she found different kinds of antiques made by craftspeople who'd been captivated by the past. She could tell that the color of the antiques became richer and more vibrant as they went from the middle part to the late part of the period.

The shopkeeper said that from the middle to the late part of the period, the price of paint and dyes had dropped significantly. For that reason, many richly colored works were produced. The town where this color-forward movement had begun was known for its colorful scenery—so colorful that it seemed wrapped in rainbows. It, therefore, became known as Terra Iris.

Unfortunately, that town had been destroyed by war. There was currently a movement to recreate this town in the town of Ponetio, located in the Kingdom of Strife, and it was a must-see.

The shopkeeper thoroughly yet clearly explained all this before he finally made his way to his final stop, coming to a halt in front of the largest and most impressive painting on the floor. It sat in a large, locked showcase and was surrounded by magical devices that were

used for security purposes. It must've been quite valuable, given how it was more protected than anything she'd seen so far.

"Wow, it's… It really is marvelous," Mira said in awe after looking at the painting.

The shopkeeper laughed quite cheerfully and answered, "It is, isn't it?"

The painting was about seven and a half feet across and about six and a half feet wide. On that giant canvas was a meticulously painted townscape that was so colorful that it looked as if it'd fallen into a rainbow.

It was a painting of the town known as Terra Iris, back when it had existed. It was so striking and vivid that it would captivate even non-artists and give them pause. Even Mira found herself captivated by it.

"The first time I saw this painting, I felt as if the whole revival movement might've just been for the sake of seeing this created," the shopkeeper said profoundly as he gazed at the painting. He then closed his eyes, as if contemplating something. "We call that period, two hundred years ago, the Reverie Period. It gave rise to these incredible works, which were by no means inferior to those of the Kartenov era. We do so to honor the one who began the movement, Count Blanche la Reverie."

Having reached the end of his explanation, the shopkeeper slowly opened his eyes and quietly murmured how he would've liked to have seen the cityscape during the Kartenov era.

"I can't find anything…"

There weren't any spirits dwelling in any of the antiques from the Reverie Period.

"The rumor that spirits dwell in not only weapons but in furniture as well is known among us antique dealers. And yet, I have never seen one. I figured the discerning eye of the Spirit Queen might find one, but I suppose it *is* just a rumor," the shopkeeper said, with a mournful look.

Mira then asked the Spirit King some more questions about the criteria that needed to be met for spirits to dwell in furniture before relaying the information to the shopkeeper. The furniture needed to be well-loved and kept in a peaceful environment.

"Well-loved and kept in a peaceful environment…?"

Immediately upon hearing the criteria from Mira, the shopkeeper turned his gaze to the store and mused to himself. Then he looked feverishly about the room, all the while whispering various historical terms and names of eras.

His darting glances eventually concentrated on one spot, which he walked over to as if he'd finally found an answer.

"The wedding gifts over here sound like they'd be just what you're looking for!"

As soon as the words had left the shopkeeper's mouth, he dashed to the section farthest from them and looked around for a moment. The way he did all this made him look almost like a loyal hound. Then he turned and called out, "Over here!"

"Hrmm, all right."

They were pretty specific criteria, yet he'd found something that met them. Mira began walking over to where the shopkeeper waited as if expecting her to tell him he'd been a very good boy.

"Here we have a collection of marriage gifts from the Grolli-Krolli Kingdom, over four hundred fifty years ago," the shopkeeper prefaced as Mira looked toward the section. "These were all gifts known as marriage offerings…" he continued, going into the details.

Marriage offerings were celebratory gifts given to married couples from the Kingdom of Grolli-Krolli. While it seemed like things must've been going pretty well for the state to send wedding gifts, there was a reason behind it.

It had to do with a very extreme law that made adultery a crime instantly punishable by death, as decreed by the kingdom's overly prudish king. Thanks to this law, marriage rates and birth rates began to plummet. When it became clear that there weren't enough children being born, the kingdom hastily instituted a set of policies known collectively as the Marriage Project to entice couples to get married and have children.

The shopkeeper went on to mention that one of these policies was marriage offerings. By letting the state know that they were getting married, a couple would then be given furniture and other things that they might need in the future.

"The items gifted by the state were all crafted by master craftspeople. As you can see, despite being made over four hundred years ago, they have not faded in color. They're simply designed and made for ordinary families, crafted with practicality in mind. Most

importantly, the Kingdom of Grolli-Krolli was a peaceful one without war."

Having explained all this at length, the shopkeeper turned to Mira and, with his eyes full of anticipation, said, "So, what do you think?"

"Hrmm, it certainly sounds like they'd fit the bill."

Judging by their historical background, there was a chance that spirits dwelled in them. Even so, the Spirit King said it wasn't often that a piece of furniture was used lovingly for long enough that a spirit would dwell in it. It would certainly be nice if there was a piece here that did.

Just how well-loved was this furniture? Clinging to the faint hope that she'd find something, Mira began checking all the marriage offerings.

"It's not looking good…" she said, looking over everything once more after having finished checking them once. She couldn't find even one furniture-dwelling spirit among the marriage gifts, which seemed to meet all the necessary criteria.

Just how long would it take her to furnish her spirit mansion? Dreaming about her perfectly complete abode, Mira suddenly felt depressed about just how far away she was from completing it.

Seemingly understanding the situation from Mira's mood, the shopkeeper also felt disappointed and let down. Even in a shop as big as his, they couldn't find any furniture in which a spirit resided. It was about time to throw in the towel.

"Sir, I've already taken up much of your…" Mira began to say, turning to thank the shopkeeper for his assistance and understanding of just how rare such furniture was. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a sofa.

Without thinking, she cried out, "Huh? Is that…?"

It looked as if it'd been pushed into the corner.

Mira cocked her head and wondered how, despite having looked over each and every one of the marriage gifts, she hadn't seen that particular sofa.

The sofa sat in the corner of the section for marriage gifts. It was quite inconspicuous, placed in a secluded nook apart from the rest of the wonderful furniture which filled the section. More than secluded… The sofa looked completely unrelated to the section it was in. But since it *was* in that section, the sofa had to be a marriage offering as well.

Thinking this, Mira walked over to it with a look that said she'd give it one final shot.

"Ah, that's…" the shopkeeper called after Mira, looking dismayed after noticing what Mira had found and where she was going.

However, pinning her last hopes on the sofa, Mira didn't hear him and continued walking toward the corner.

It was a beautiful, olive-colored sofa. An exceptional piece that was well-upholstered and simply designed. It was so soft and overstuffed that you could tell it was comfortable just by looking at it,

but that wasn’t all. It also gave off a certain sense of comfort and safety.

“Oh ho, I see. So this is what he meant.”

As soon as Mira laid her eyes on the sofa, she immediately sensed that a spirit dwelled within it. At the same time, she also understood exactly what kind of furniture spirits liked to reside in.

And yet, she was curious. Why was that sofa tucked away from the rest of the furniture?

Chapter 14

"SOOO…WHY IS THIS SOFA in a place like this?" Mira asked, turning back to look at the shopkeeper.

It'd be quicker to ask him than it would be to speculate.

While wearing an anxious expression, the shopkeeper said, "Well, about that…" before beginning to explain.

The reason behind the sofa's location was that both times it'd been sold in the past, it'd been returned to him within the next several days.

"As you can see, it's in fantastic condition, and the design and color are quite soothing. It's an exquisite piece that would look great in all kinds of places. It was also quite expensive, and our regular patrons bought it immediately upon us putting it up for sale," the shopkeeper said, sounding like a salesman. That changed the very next moment. He now sounded as if he were telling some kind of ghost story. "But a few days after that, something…happened."

Several days after purchasing the sofa, that same loyal customer had come to return it for a refund. The customers couldn't relax because it constantly felt like something was watching them. The shopkeeper said that those selling antiques came across such things from time to time—haunted antiques.

"Shops like ours have our own dedicated clerics and exorcists, and so most of our pieces are purified."

This world had concrete ways to deal with things like ghosts or other things relating to the occult. Depending on their skills, a mage

might be able to do something about such an item.

But the shopkeeper said that the sofa was on a whole different level. Having been unable to purify it, their dedicated mage had even asked his masters for help. They ended up telling him there was nothing that could be done.

"But they said that they could *feel* something."

So what exactly was possessing it? They weren't sure of the cause, but it was quite clearly something otherworldly. The mage's masters said that they'd encountered other cases with entities they couldn't identify.

The two then suggested that the shopkeeper donate the sofa to the church, as the church had a warded room in which cursed items were stored. So long as it was there, it could rest peacefully.

"Hrmm… Those places are off-limits, right?" Mira knew about such places. She'd seen them quite a few times. Located beneath cathedrals in several large cities, they were used to contain unholy objects from all over the world and were often referred to as "holy dungeons." Mira had visited these places while assisting Artesia, as they often contained quests for clerics.

However, the shopkeeper wasn't willing to send it to a place like that…so he'd opted to put it in the corner where no one would notice it.

He believed that the day would surely come when he'd be able to get it purified.

"I see…" Mira interjected, thankful to the two masters.

The slight presence the two had felt was that of a furniture spirit.

The Spirit King said that furniture spirits were very inconspicuous spirits that didn't make themselves known. They dwelled in furniture and quietly watched over those who lovingly used the furniture. That was how they existed.

"Do you usually send stuff to the church in cases like this? What do other shops usually do?"

The owner of Café Kraftbell Antiques loved antiques so dearly and was so concerned about them that he refused to lock them up alongside unholy artifacts. He had instead opted to put them somewhere out of the way. But what about other antique shops?

On asking him that, the shopkeeper's face darkened slightly.

"Other places? Well… I'd like for them to hold out hope and look after them, but there are those that dispose of them. There are also those—and this is completely unacceptable—that hide those facts and ship them far away because it takes a considerable amount of money to entrust a piece to the church."

Despite his love of antiques, he understood this from a business standpoint. But the shopkeeper sorrowfully explained how such situations were handled as if there wasn't anything that could be done about it.

"I thought as much…"

Not knowing of their existence, people mistook furniture spirits for malevolent cursed spirits. That concerned Mira. Especially

distressing was the thought that perhaps people had unknowingly disposed of things that contained spirits.

After a moment, with a look that seemed to say that she'd made up her mind, Mira asked, "Sooo…if I said I wanted to buy this sofa, would you sell it to me?"

She had resolved not to leave the furniture spirits to their fate.

"This sofa? But this is the one I once mentioned is hopelessly possessed. There's no way I can sell it to you knowing that," the shopkeeper said plainly.

Had he been an unscrupulous salesman, he would've undoubtedly talked about how loath he was to part with it before adding something like, "But if you really want it…" and then listed all its good points before selling it.

However, this shopkeeper had an uncommon sense of responsibility when it came to the goods he was selling. From a business standpoint, he ought to have been overjoyed at the prospect of selling such a problematic product. And yet, he wasn't sure if it might be harmful in some way, so he flat-out refused to sell it.

At that moment, Mira saw just how kind of a heart he had. And while this was fortuitous, it wasn't exactly what Mira had hoped to hear when she asked him.

"All right, but what about if I told you this was *precisely* what I've been looking for?"

Was he so intent on being forthright that he didn't get the hint? She figured that at this point she'd rather see him get surprised when

he realized it himself. With this in mind, she gave him a clear hint.

"Precisely what the Spirit Queen has been looking for…?"

Sure enough, the shopkeeper stopped for a moment and stared at the sofa before turning his gaze toward Mira. Doing this several more times, his eyes then opened wide as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard.

"What?! Is it true?! Does it… Does this sofa have a furniture spirit residing inside of it?! No… Those masters didn't say anything about that… Aren't mages able to see spirits? If there was a spirit dwelling in this sofa, then they shouldn't have missed it…"

But his surprise only lasted for a moment. What Mira had said conflicted with what he knew of the situation, and so the shopkeeper began thinking deeply to himself as if puzzled.

He looks conflicted…

Judging from what the shopkeeper had said, Mira could understand why furniture with spirits residing in them ended up being dealt with the way they had been. It was the unfortunate impact of the general consensus that mages could see and speak with spirits. Surely, any mage worth their salt would be able to detect the presence of a spirit?

Even though it depended on just how skilled the mage was, things that weren't spirits in their own right, like spirit blades, could also be detected. Mages being able to see spirits was regarded as common sense. Everyone thought so.

But in this case, that perception was quite harmful.

How must the shopkeeper have felt when, after calling in those two highly skilled mages, they weren't able to detect any spirits, as they ought to have been able to, declaring instead that there was nothing they could do? After all, if two highly skilled mages hadn't detected the presence of a spirit, who on earth would? Therefore, with nobody suspecting there was a furniture-dwelling spirit inside, he began coming up with other spooky scenarios to explain the issue. And that was how the sofa in front of her ended up the way it had. In the past, it likely would've just been thrown away.

After giving it quite a bit of thought, but being more confused than ever, the shopkeeper looked straight at Mira and said, "Is there really a furniture-dwelling spirit residing in the sofa?"

On his face was a look of such great anticipation and hope that it threatened to completely overpower his dismay. If what Mira was saying were true, then the way in which other antiques that found themselves in similar situations as the poor sofa would be treated would change drastically.

Furniture spirits were like manmade spirits—referred to as humankind's kindly neighbors—in that they couldn't be communicated with. But, to most people, this was just a minor detail. For a long time, manmade spirits had existed alongside their primordial spirit kin and made fine neighbors nonetheless.

"Hrmm, there is. My eyes can detect spirits clearly," Mira said, nodding decisively as if to confirm the shopkeeper's hopes. Then, to prove her point, she brought forth and covered her entire body in the

pattern of the Spirit King's blessing and began telling him the reason why.

Furniture spirits were incredibly inconspicuous. The reason she could detect them was due to having the Spirit King's blessing and her connection to spirits. Perhaps owing to the incredibly persuasive effect those visuals had, the shopkeeper took her at her word.

"Oh wow! What a surprise! So it really is a furniture spirit! Ah, that's fantastic. Thank you! I'm so glad to hear it. I really am," he said toward the sofa, jumping up with a big smile on his face and tears in his eyes.

He really was glad that he hadn't sent it to the church or to be disposed of it. If he had, he would've really hurt the kindly spirit. The shopkeeper then thanked Mira again, ecstatic that the sofa had been saved. He'd thought it was possessed by something supernatural, but it was just housing a furniture spirit! The shopkeeper was on cloud nine over this sudden turn of events.

"And so I'll ask you one more time: Would you be willing to sell it to me?" Mira asked the shopkeeper, who'd begun affectionately squeezing the sofa's cushions.

The shopkeeper turned around and smiled abashedly, as if just coming to his senses. With a smile across his entire face, he answered, "Why, of course!"

So how much would the sofa go for?

To learn that such antiques weren't possessed by some hair-raising entity but rather had furniture spirits dwelling within… This knowledge would undoubtedly have a huge effect on the antique

market. Once the knowledge spread, the price of all these previously undesirable pieces of furniture was sure to change dramatically.

With Mira having told him about this, the potential price of the sofa would leap. It would likely go for quite a lot.

Having thought it over, the shopkeeper proposed, "How does a million ducats sound?" with a serious look in his eyes and a soft smile on his face. For a piece of furniture, that price was ridiculously expensive.

But considering that it was an antique that had a spirit dwelling within and how much it must've cost him up until then, she could tell that he was letting it go for a steal.

"Hrmm, are you okay with that?" Mira ventured to ask. From a business standpoint, this was a perfect opportunity to rake in a huge profit. She questioned if he would pass up such an opportunity.

The shopkeeper quietly yet proudly nodded and said, "I most certainly am."

"You rescued this sofa from being thought of as something dreadful. Not only that, you've given hope to every other piece suspected of the same thing. You've already done so much."

With a congenial look on his face, the shopkeeper gently stroked the back of the sofa as if it were a beloved child. He then boldly proclaimed, "If it will help the Spirit Queen, then I'll gladly let it go for the price I bought it for."

Having decided to purchase the sofa, Mira stood in a space where a table and chair had been set, waiting for the shopkeeper,

who'd gone off to get some documents for the sale. Even in this impromptu space, he'd displayed some small antiques to give the space a cozier vibe.

"Oh dear, thank you so much for waiting."

It seemed he had been in quite a rush to prepare everything, as he'd come back in quite a hurry. The shopkeeper took out a handkerchief to wipe his sweat-drenched brow. In his hands were a set of documents, and the sofa sat on a trolley behind him.

"All right, shall we get started on the paperwork?"

"Sure."

Waiting for Mira to sit first, the shopkeeper sat down and quickly laid out one set of documents on the table. Then, doing just as the shopkeeper instructed, Mira went over the warranty, certificate of authenticity, and other documents before signing them.

A cheerful look appeared on the shopkeeper's face, as if to say they were done with all the red tape. "Well, that takes care of the paperwork. From this moment forward, this sofa belongs to you, Spirit Queen!" he said with a truly exuberant smile. He then turned toward the sofa and added, "I certainly am glad."

He looked almost as if he were giving away his beloved daughter at her wedding. Then the shopkeeper seemed to think of something, turning toward Mira.

"By the way, Spirit Queen. Would it be okay if I requested something of you?" He had an exceedingly serious look on his face, and his calm voice also belied a sense of urgency.

"Hrmm, a request? What is it?"

Considering this was a man who loved antiques more than anything else, it must've had something to do with how to take care of the sofa. At least that was what Mira thought. His request was both unexpected and totally obvious.

"I'd like a photo to commemorate the occasion!"

Aside from the set of documents on the table, there was also a large box. From this, the shopkeeper pulled out a camera-like device and looked at Mira with eyes full of anticipation.

He proclaimed, passionately, that today would be the day that forever changed the world of antiques. He said it was thought that nothing could be done about possessed antiques, and so they were shunned by those in his line of work. But from now on, that would all change, and such antiques would now have their time in the sun.

"I won't say this about all of them. There are most certainly some pieces that have been sealed away by the church because they are dangerous. But those aside, I believe some of the furniture just had spirits dwelling in them and were sealed away mistakenly. Beginning today, and thanks to the words of the Spirit Queen, those pieces can be saved. If today isn't a day worth commemorating, then I don't know what is!"

From how impassioned the shopkeeper had gotten, it was clear that he felt very strongly about the subject. His words themselves were positively bursting with his love for antiques.

"Well, if you say so, then who am I to say otherwise?"

Knowing nothing about the world of antiques, Mira smiled to herself at the thought of how much he seemed to be exaggerating. And yet, she was extremely happy to think that she might be able to help the spirits that had been sealed away.

The shopkeeper informed her that he had another concern: whether or not he could persuade others of this. And so, he eagerly explained that he wanted to take a commemorative photo so that he might have proof that the Spirit Queen herself had attested to such.

"I see…"

If they took a commemorative photo, then they might be able to release those antiques and spirits who'd been unjustly regarded as haunted or supernatural, just as he said. Most importantly, they couldn't leave spirits in such predicaments to their fate. If there was anything they could do to help, they ought to do it.

Having thought as much from the beginning, Mira said, "Hrmm, sure. We might as well," and agreed to the commemorative photo shoot. It was for the poor furniture spirits' sake, after all.

"Thank you so much!"

Overjoyed by Mira's answer, the shopkeeper added that he'd take the photos right away. It certainly seemed like he intended to spare no effort on the photo shoot. He asked Mira to come back to the shop after a couple of hours. Moreover, she would even be paid a modeling fee.

Just as she was about to leave the antique shop, she saw something. On the other side of some beautifully displayed antiques, she saw a group of paintings all lined up next to each other. They

were of all different sizes—small, medium, and large—and all so incredibly vivid that it looked like they might jump off of the canvas at any moment. What's more, she could tell they were all painted with the same kind of brushwork, which made her think the same person had painted all of them.

"So is this the kind of thing he is into…?" Mira said, smiling as she looked at the row of paintings.

Perhaps whoever painted them was into painting young girls.

The girls in the paintings were depicted with a keen artist's eye and impressive techniques. It would've looked fine if there were only one or two of such paintings…but because the entire space was filled with them, it looked suspicious.

"Well…it takes all kinds."

Remembering his incredibly attentive demeanor, she decided to regard him as simply an antique-loving shopkeeper and resolved not to think any more of it.

Deciding to go outside while the shopkeeper was getting the photo shoot ready, Mira spoke with the Spirit King and the others about the spirits who dwelled in antiques. She told them of the plight of those spirits, and the Spirit King and Martel remarked that it certainly sounded sad.

Several thousands of years in the past, there were a chosen few who recognized those sorts of manmade spirits and cherished them deeply. But judging from what the shopkeeper had said, that kind of thing no longer seemed to happen. If that was still common

knowledge, there would be no way someone who loved antiques as much as the shopkeeper wouldn't know about it.

"Even the church has sealed away such objects without realizing it. Should they truly be close to that higher power, then they should be able to recognize us, even if we are faint… But from how things look at present, it seems the church has changed quite a bit," muttered the Spirit King, who had lived for a very long time in a place far removed from the human world before he met Mira. It seemed there was nothing to be done about it.

"You're right. Things certainly have changed. Not only the scenery but people as well," Martel said, having seen the current state of the world through Mira's eyes. "I wonder why." She sounded rather down, unlike her usual coy and kindly self.

"Yes, why?" the Spirit King mused, then deciding to follow up by asking, "What do you think, Miss Mira?"

If neither the Spirit King nor Martel knew of such things, then there wasn't much chance she would. Thrown off by having this question lobbed at her, Mira nevertheless did her best to answer him with the first idea that came to mind. "Maybe there aren't as many devout followers anymore, or something like that?"

It was worth noting there was no basis for what she'd said. It was simply the impression she got when considering the history of people in the modern world. Surely, religious faith in this world where gods, spirits, monsters, and demons existed was fundamentally different from its equivalent in the modern world. But not being particularly involved with any of that, Mira couldn't say for sure.

"Hrmm, faith declining, huh…? I don't think so, but… I guess it could be that…"

Sure enough, the Spirit King wasn't convinced. And yet, it seemed as if he'd struck upon something. The Spirit King muttered that he'd look into it later. It seemed he'd let her know more about it once he learned a bit more himself.

Chapter 15

WHILE SHE WAITED for the photo shoot to be set up, Mira enjoyed wandering about, window shopping wherever she saw something that took her fancy.

Hrmm… Medicinal goods all seem to be the same price everywhere. And yet, the price of snacks varies wildly.

Strolling around and comparing prices, Mira wondered why this was the case. She didn't feel like dwelling on it much. Her first priority was to take in the sights, so she quickly forgot the puzzle and turned her attention to what came next.

Standing among a row of stores on the shopping street, a large building bore a sign saying, *House of Asteria*.

"Wow, this must be a card shop."

Poking her head inside, Mira saw the familiar interior of the store sprawl out before her. It only took her a single glance to see what the store was selling.

Jeez, they really have a lot…

Surveying the store from the entrance, Mira smiled at how different it was from the last time she'd visited. When she'd seen the card shop back then, it was full of children such as Marian, who'd utterly fallen for Mira's devilish charm.

But for some reason, this card shop was different in that almost everyone here was an adult. Not only that, but the playing area also seemed to be positively bustling.

Having resolved to check out a card shop to see if there were any Danblf cards, Mira looked around the showcases as she kept an eye on the boisterous adults.

Ugh… There's even a Luminaria one!

Sure enough, she wasn't able to find what she was looking for. On her way out, she thought about buying a few packs of cards. As she was considering this, the group of adults began cheering.

They're oddly enthusiastic.

Turning toward the group, Mira learned the reason for their excitement. On the wall toward the back of the playing space, which was filled with adults, hung a prominent poster. Across it was written, *1st Legends of Asteria Continental Championship—First Qualifiers*.

So it was a big tournament. Mira was shocked to see the prizes that were listed on the edge of the poster. Aside from getting a special edition tournament-only card, the winner would get their favorite card set and the right to choose a model for a brand-new card. Those certainly were pretty cool prizes.

But what stood out to her most was the prize money.

"Whoa… Thirty million ducats?!"

For a trading card game, that was an exorbitant amount of money. That kind of prize money wasn't something you saw in the real world. While reflecting on the past, Mira fantasized about that fantastic prize.

But she only did so for a moment. She realized that rather than pouring her efforts into collecting cards and coming up with strategies

to win, she'd rather just go wild with summoning.

I was never able to beat Solomon at cards anyway. Not even once…

Having been utterly thrashed by Solomon in the past, Mira knew her card-playing capabilities well. For that reason, she didn't regret passing on the opportunity. But perhaps because she still found it interesting, she slipped into the group of adults to get a quick look at the preliminaries.

The crowd was about half men and half women. Thanks to her petite size, she was able to squeeze in between the adults.

Whether by happy accident or instinct, she slipped in among the female part of the crowd. Then, peeking her head out from the front row, she saw a handsome lad and a beautiful young girl facing each other at a table in front of her.

"If you can just hang in there, you'll be in the championship. Stay focused!" a man who appeared to be the boy's friend cheered. Immediately afterward, one of the staff gave him a warning that it was prohibited to say anything that might be construed as advice.

It's a pretty close match…

There was a tournament bracket on the other side of the table, and on it was written how the tournament was progressing. It seemed as if this was the final match of the preliminaries. The match was the best of three, and both players scored one victory. Both of their life points were down to twenty.

The handsome lad and the beautiful girl were facing off with enough power on the board to wipe out each other's remaining twenty life points.

It was like a scene from a movie. She could understand why there was so much hype.

"It all comes down to this turn, huh?" Mira muttered to herself knowingly after glancing over the rules. Then she watched the game play out.

But right then, the game state changed distinctly. As if to cement his victory, the handsome boy played a rare legend card. An audible gasp went up from the spectators, which was followed by giddy cheers from several women who were fans of handsome boys.

Mira murmured, "Wow," in a low voice at the same moment. The card the boy had played was *Simonikrith the Sniper*, who was one of the Forty-Eight Nameless Generals.

They were from the largest player-held nation, Atlantis. The number of players affiliated there was far beyond that of the Kingdom of Alcait, and it was a veritable treasure trove of top-class talent.

The Forty-Eight Nameless Generals was a group comprised of the most outstanding forty-eight people in the nation. Being the elite of the elite, each of the Forty-Eight Nameless Generals possessed fighting prowess far beyond that of any ordinary person.

Simonikrith was no exception, a monster who could launch a spear from incredibly far away and still hit his target right between the eyes. During joint practice, Mira had seen one of his great spears fly straight through the shield of one of her holy knights from such a

great distance that she couldn't even see him. She smiled to herself as she reminisced about Simonikrith, who'd been her friend ever since.

While she thought about this, the match took another turn as the men who appeared to be fans of the young girl let out a cheer.

The girl had played one of her rare legends.

It was now legend versus legend. It seemed like the match was really heating up, as even the spectators who weren't fans were now getting more excited than they had been before.

The most excited one there was none other than Mira.

"WHOOOA!" she unconsciously cried loudly in surprise.

This made sense. The card the girl had played was *Danblf, the One-Man Army.*

They really have a card of me! That's fantastic. I am the coolest!

The art of the card looked just like a screenshot she'd taken with Eizenfald, back when she was Danblf. The photo that she thought had been the absolute coolest had been made into a card. Having been unable to find the card, the joy she felt was immeasurable.

Without meaning to, Mira stared intently at the Danblf card as she bent halfway over the railing. Immediately, one of the staff warned her to be careful.

I can't believe I'm seeing it here. And not only that, a beautiful girl is playing my card. He he he!

The warning didn't phase her. She nevertheless politely drew herself back, a smile plastered on her face, and cheered for the girl

deep down with all her might. But as Mira had become hyper-focused on the match, she didn't notice that her behavior caused a good percentage of the spectators who'd been watching the match to now watch her.

"Is that girl someone's friend?"

"I haven't seen her around here."

"I feel like I've heard about someone who looks like her…"

"I wanna get to know her."

While the handsome lad and the beautiful girl were young, the fact that the rest of the tournament was populated by adults meant that Mira stood out quite a bit. And now talk of Mira—which had begun as whispers—ended up spreading throughout the entire group of spectators. Word of her even reached the handsome lad, who was in the middle of concentrating on the match, though what he heard wasn't necessarily accurate.

Due to two rare legends now being on the field, the state of the match had heated up. It was now a battle of wits that was so precise that even a single moment of distraction could cost either player the match.

But thanks to the special ability of *Danblf, the One-Man Army*, the match was sliding more and more in the girl's favor.

As this was happening, the handsome lad heard about Mira. In particular, he heard, "There's a fangirl that looks like some kind of angel."

At present, the handsome lad had been drawing poorly, and it was clear that he was now at a disadvantage. For that reason, he sought to draw some encouragement from the fans hoping for him to win. He turned his gaze toward the group of his fans.

"An angel…"

There among the handsome lad's fans was a girl so beautiful that it was clear why she'd been called an angel. At that moment, the handsome lad felt something warm flutter through his chest.

He felt invigorated. Despite being at a disadvantage, the beautiful, angelic girl with a radiant smile was cheering him on and had given him the courage to not give in.

I've been in these kinds of situations plenty of times. I can't fall apart in front of everyone in a place like this!

Somehow, he managed to survive the pretty girl's turn. Now, it was finally his… With the face of his angel burned deep into his heart, his turn began, and he called on the heart of the cards as he drew.

Mira watched how the final round of the preliminaries of Legends of Asteria was playing out with an anxious look on her face. Having played her rare *Danblf, the One-Man Army*, the situation on the battlefield momentarily swung in the girl's favor. However, with the single draw the boy had taken, whatever advantage she had was about to evaporate.

"That cheeky rascal…!"

Needless to say, Mira was rooting for the girl who not only had the Danblf card but was also very pretty. However, the handsome lad

had shown his tenacity at the eleventh hour, holding on by his very fingertips. It felt as if it were at the bottom of the ninth, with the score being three to zero with bases loaded. Meanwhile, all the girls around Mira cheered whenever the handsome lad began making a comeback.

After this happened several times, it finally hit Mira that she was in the wrong area.

It was nice to be in a situation where she was surrounded by women, but she felt very much in enemy territory. She wondered what'd happen if they all realized that she was rooting for the pretty girl.

Checking just how zealous the female fans were, Mira inconspicuously pulled herself away and moved elsewhere.

Hrmm… I see. It's pretty obvious.

While moving, Mira observed the spectators and figured out how they were dispersed. There were three basic camps: the people rooting for the handsome lad, the people rooting for the pretty girl, and the people who were just there to see the match.

From what she could tell, the male-female ratio of those simply there to watch the match was evenly split. There were ordinary townsfolk, adventurers, and those that looked rather well off. It was a diverse group, and they were dispersed all throughout the venue.

The handsome lad's fans were a mass of women with cheerleader gear clutched in their hands, making them a very easy group to spot. The pretty girl's fans were very much the same. They were all wearing matching cloaks and looked like some idol group's

cheer squad. The group was so bizarrely full of guys that they were readily recognizable, even to the uninitiated.

Having distinguished these three groups, Mira slipped into the safer, general spectator group, taking advantage of her petite size to push herself forward.

She thought that this time, she'd be able to make her way to the back. However, given how small Mira was, the other spectators just ended up kindly making way for her. And so, Mira once again ended up poking her head out from the front row as she continued watching the match.

As she did, she noticed that there was another group: the five people next to her.

They were mingled within the group of the normal tournament spectators but were giving off an unusual vibe as they watched the final match.

Who could they be? Could they be a group of stalkers targeting the pretty girl? That put Mira on full alert. But she soon discovered there was no need.

From the snippets of the conversation she overheard, she was able to guess who they really were.

"That was a good move."

"Yeah, but not assertive enough."

"They won't last much longer at this rate. It's too little, too late."

"I'd heard they were pretty popular, so I came to get a look. But to think it was all because of their looks…"

"Whoever ends up making it to the championship will probably get knocked out."

"I didn't expect to see a card of one of the Nine Wise Men."

"Yeah, the Danblf card. That card is a pain because there aren't many of them, so it's tricky to play around."

"I can't even believe there are still summoners."

"I know, it's like, 'Were there really people who did that?'"

The group laughed loudly.

It seemed they were also competitors and had come to scope out who they'd be up against in the championship. Mira glared at the group, mostly because she heard the way they'd disparaged summoners.

"Hey, we're getting eyeballed."

"I bet. We're the favorites to win, so there's been a lot of talk going around about us."

The group of competitors got a kick out of the fiery stare coming at them from a beautiful young girl. Of course, they were mistaken. Mira had poured nothing but resentment into her stare. But being so cute, her stare lacked much of a punch.

Then the color of Mira's eyes changed.

"Ah, ahe… Hi voith…" one cried out right afterward, his words slurred.

Hearing this, a man answered, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, ohn aeh," another one of them said, also unable to formulate words.

Mysteriously, the ones who were having trouble speaking were none other than the guy who'd just said that he couldn't believe there were still summoners and the guy who'd laughed.

The men began panicking. Slowly looking away from the men, Mira's eyes reverted to their original, bright shade of blue.

Judging from how precisely I can use it, my hard work must finally be paying off.

By using Paralyzing Demon's Gaze, she'd paralyzed only her targets' tongues. After much diligent practice, Mira had mastered the technique, which required both finesse and very precise control. And now, she could fully demonstrate the fruits of her labor.

It would last less than a minute, but because of the mana expended and how it'd been localized, it took effect very quickly. Depending on how she used the technique, she could even interrupt her opponent as they were casting a spell. And so, the human experiment, which doubled as payback for disparaging summoners, was an immediate success.

After the paralysis had worn off, the five conferred with each other about what on earth had happened. Their voices then dropped away like a fading breeze, allowing Mira and the other spectators to focus on watching the final match.

Chapter 16

THE FINALS OF THE TRADING card game tournament were coming to a head as both sides fought back and forth.

Having been cheered on by an angel, the handsome lad had played his hand while denying his opponent any opportunities she could exploit. He'd managed to survive by the skin of his teeth—again. Every time he managed to survive, girlish shrieks erupted from his fans and gasps came from the general spectators as well.

Occasionally, when not too invested in either side, people rooted for the underdog. This was especially true in situations when it seemed like the underdog was about to lose but managed to hold on and change the tide.

Hrmm… They're really jumping on the hype train. At this rate, I'll probably end up losing. And right after someone finally played my card!

Before she'd even realized it, the entire room had begun to favor the handsome lad. Everyone loves a comeback story where someone struggles back from the verge of defeat.

Danblf of the Nine Wise Men was going to lose to Simonikrith of the Forty-Eight Nameless Generals. Of course, this was only in the trading card game…not in reality. Nevertheless, the idea didn't sit well with her.

With an anxious look on her face, Mira watched closely as the match unfolded.

It was the handsome lad's turn. It was still a very tight race, but every play he made was clever and aimed at turning the tables. He wasn't just covering himself; he was concentrating more than ever before and exploiting even the tiniest gaps in his opponent's plays.

The pretty girl survived the handsome lad's onslaught by a hair. However, her composure was beginning to give way to frustration.

This was understandable. Just one more attack, even a minor one, would decide the match. A match in which victory had been in her sights but was now exceedingly close. Not only that, it even began to look like the boy might pull off an upset. You couldn't blame her for feeling like her back was against the wall.

This feeling of frustration seemed to have made its way to the pretty girl's fans, too, who were cloaked in dismay as they anticipated a loss.

This is precisely the time when you need to let her know that you believe in her!

There were such cheers coming from the pretty girl's fans, but they were tepid and dull—drowned out by the girlish shrieks that were cheering the handsome lad on.

At that moment, Mira decided to act. She once more extricated herself from the spectators and marched straight toward where the pretty girl's fans had gathered.

"This isn't looking good."

"Danblf should've moved the game in her favor."

"How the heck did he manage to survive that?"

These were the things the pretty girl's fans were saying as they looked at the board uneasily. The look in their eyes seemed to suggest that they saw an upset on the horizon.

"What's the deal with you guys being this lifeless? She's trying really hard! Now more than ever you should believe in her and cheer her on. Isn't that what fans are for?!" Mira chided, after crossing the fired-up venue and slipping in amongst the ranks of the pretty girl's fans.

The pretty girl wasn't losing due to a lack of skill. She had more skill than the handsome lad did. But right now, she was on the ropes. Why was that?

She was losing *mentally*.

The male fans recognized that they'd let themselves be swallowed by insecurity. And that was when they understood what they needed to do to break through the current situation.

"Yeah, that's true. You're exactly right. If we don't have her back now, then who will?!"

Mira's scolding having opened their eyes, they began fiercely cheering for the pretty girl as if a literal fire had been lit under them. Mira could be heard cheering as well.

Then they got a bit too loud and got a warning from the entire staff.

Everyone laughed at having been given the warning. Witnessing this, the pretty girl laughed as well. And then the state of the board changed.

Their heartfelt cheers had an effect. The girl's demeanor changed, and her unease seemed to melt away as she mounted a ferocious counterattack.

Perspective is crucial no matter what situation you're in. More importantly, it can even sometimes bring you good luck. Thanks to Mira and the other fans' cheers, the battle began to slide in the girl's favor.

At the same time, scream-like cries rose from the handsome lad's fans.

"He got ahead of himself," one of the pretty girl's fans murmured. Being a casual fan, Mira hadn't noticed it, but the handsome lad had misplayed and now wore an extremely perturbed expression.

The flow of the match changed almost at once. The pretty girl ruthlessly destroyed each of the boy's units with her plays.

At last, the final turn came, and the match was decided with one final blow from Danblf on the handsome lad's camp.

"Leona is the winner!"

A loud round of applause burst out, and the venue shook with the sound of cheers. It had been a comeback from a comeback. The match was lauded as one of the greatest in recent years, and it had been won by the pretty girl.

The neutral spectators who'd been rooting for the handsome lad were just as exhilarated to see how Leona had pulled off the upset.

The venue was buzzing with excitement that seemed like it'd never die down.

Leona and the handsome lad went into a waiting room to get ready for the award ceremony. Watching as they went, one of the Leona fans turned to Mira with an expression of anticipation, asking, "Who even are you? I haven't seen you around here. Are you a fan of Leona's?"

"Me…? No, I'm just a Danblf fan who happened to be passing through," Mira answered.

She couldn't reveal her true motives, and yet, her answer wasn't far from the mark.

"Gotcha, I see. But we like Danblf, too… He's Leona's trump card."

Despite having shown himself to be a tad let down, the fanboy quickly recovered and flashed a smile. Overjoyed to have met a pretty young girl, he began to awkwardly make a pass at her when he was gently pried away and replaced by another man who'd stepped forward.

"You have my gratitude. Her win was all thanks to you," the man seemed like the leader of the fans and smiled as he extended his hand.

"Huh? What're you thanking me for? It just felt like you guys weren't doing anything, so I butted in," Mira answered, grabbing the hand that'd been offered to her. She shot a harsh look at the Leona fans.

"The way we were acting can only be described as shameful."

"True."

"Yeah, really pathetic."

The fans smiled bitterly and swore that they wouldn't forget what'd happened and would make sure to learn from the experience and do better the next time. The group then pushed aside the leader who'd had hold of Mira's hand the entire time and scrambled to shake her hand, too.

As Mira shook their hands, she told them all to do their best.

Having watched the trading card game preliminaries, Mira prayed that Leona would succeed during the championships and left the store.

Meanwhile, the handsome lad was inside the store's waiting room, feeling utterly depressed.

"What in the world happened back there? Regardless of how desperate the situation was, it isn't like you to make a misplay like that," the concerned friend of the depressed boy said.

Perhaps not wanting to answer, the boy kept his head down, saying only, "Nothing."

"What do you mean *nothing*? You've been acting weird. Did they…do something to you?"

His friend had picked up on it. Right before the handsome lad had made his fatal mistake, his concentration had been more intense than ever…then it had broken. He then became more distracted than he'd ever been.

The precise moment this happened had been when Leona launched her counterattack.

"No, it wasn't that. You should know they're not the kind of people that'd do something like that."

The friend had assumed that Leona's fans had done something to put him at a disadvantage so that she would win. Given the circumstances, such a thing wasn't unthinkable. However, the handsome lad rejected that notion. Leona's fans treated her opponents with respect; he knew them to be a chivalrous group.

But more than anything, the handsome lad knew the exact reason why he'd choked.

"…Yeah, that's true. Then what was it? It's pretty silly to completely lose your focus right in the middle of a match, isn't it? What happened?"

His friend also seemed to recognize that Leona's fans were blameless. But aside from that, he couldn't think of how to explain what'd happened. He knew just how capable of a player his friend was and how seriously he took these tournaments. He couldn't get himself to believe what'd happened.

"Well…" the handsome lad said, trailing off.

Was it something hard for him to talk about, or was it just something he didn't want to talk about? Unable to figure out which one it was, his friend looked straight at him.

"Is it something you can't even tell me? Then I won't ask. But, hey, let me know if you ever need to talk."

It wasn't just about this specific time. If some other big tournament was to come up, then he couldn't let the same kind of thing happen again.

He ought to strike while the iron was hot and fix whatever had happened, his friend thought but bit his tongue. It was still right after he'd lost the tournament, so he'd most likely need some time to work through his thoughts and feelings.

And so, they began to chat about what he needed to do to get stronger hands, whether or not they should go looking for more rare legends, and so on. Judging by how they only really talked about cards, they must've really loved the game.

After they'd been talking like that for a while, the handsome lad spoke up.

"About what happened back there…"

Having calmed down a bit, he began speaking about what it was that'd made him lose his concentration. It'd all happened at the end of the match, when defeat seemed certain. Somehow, he'd drawn his rare legend after managing to escape death and saw an opportunity to counterattack.

"At that moment, I thought my luck had changed. But just like I'd expected, the very next turn Leona played Danblf. That's when it happened."

Recounting what he remembered, the handsome lad smiled dreamily as if in ecstasy. He then continued, "I heard it. I heard that wonderful voice."

"A wonderful…voice? What does that have to do with the way you choked? Stop beating around the bush and just tell me what happened."

The friend wanted to know why the handsome lad had fumbled so badly, but he wasn't making a whole lot of sense. The friend pointed this out, to which the handsome lad remarked calmly that he'd had a very important encounter at that moment.

"I saw an angel."

Having heard the handsome lad's absurd answer, the friend said, "…Huh?!"

Paying no heed to this, the handsome lad continued, saying that in the moment Leona played her trump card, he was convinced that defeat was certain. Then he heard a voice and looked up. And there he saw an angel, he said with a smile.

"From the moment I saw her, I remember my entire body feeling warm. She was right alongside all the girls that were cheering for me. An angel was rooting for me. The moment I thought that, I was filled with something so powerful that I couldn't even understand it. And then I began to see a way in which I might win that I hadn't noticed before. That must've been a miracle bestowed on me by that angel," the handsome lad said, sounding absurd again.

But his friend had heard enough to understand what it was that he was getting at.

"In other words, that was why you started doing so well. So did that angel also have something to do with how you started playing

poorly right after?"

The handsome lad had demonstrated powerful focus and incredible luck of the kind he'd never seen before. And this angel had had something to do with how he turned the entire match on its head.

The friend wondered if the angel was a metaphor or wondered if there'd really been a girl that beautiful there. If that was the case, then it was easy to presume that that same beautiful girl might've been responsible for him dropping the ball.

That was correct. The handsome lad dropped his head conspicuously.

"Yeah… I thought she was rooting for me, but I was wrong. That angel wasn't rooting for me," the handsome lad lamented as he recounted the scene.

With victory in his grasp and Leona on the ropes, he heard the sound of her fans cheering fervently. Their cheers were filled with such passion that it was clear they believed that she would emerge victorious. Despite them cheering for his opponent, the handsome lad said she must've had some great friends. He seemed quite moved.

"But I wasn't going to lose. I had everyone cheering me on as well. And, most importantly, I had…or should've had, my angel."

The handsome lad grew quiet, thinking about what happened. But after a little while, he began to talk about it.

Leona's fans had been cheering too loudly, and the staff had to go over and give them a warning. And there among them, impossible to mistake, was the angel.

"At first, I thought something must've been wrong with my eyes. I was so happy that maybe I was hallucinating or something. But that wasn't the case. The angel really was standing there," the handsome lad said as he dejectedly looked toward the sky. The angel seemed to be friends with Leona's fans! "At that moment, it was as if some kind of magic spell had been broken, and I couldn't see myself winning anymore."

"I see."

His friend understood. On top of that, he picked up on something that the handsome lad himself hadn't even realized: His friend had fallen in love with this girl he referred to as an angel. As a result, he'd been on a roll like never before. But once he saw her mingling with Leona's fans, he got extremely jealous. The roll came to a screeching halt.

When you put it that way, it made a lot of sense.

Despite how popular he is, he's never had any experience with love or having a crush, huh?

It was puppy love. And because it was his first time feeling any of this, his feelings must've been quite erratic. His long-time friend wondered what should be done.

Quickly glancing at the handsome lad, he could tell it was still bothering him, as he wasn't his usual, calm self. The friend had never seen him like this before. This might be a real issue.

It's best to resolve one's feelings in cases like these.

He'd fallen in love for the first time with a girl at the venue… Not only that, this love was so strong that it'd shaken him to his core. The friend thought that if he kept these feelings bottled up, they might resurface down the line and hurt him.

"Well, if you could meet this angel one more time, would you want to?"

The matches were all over, but there was an afterparty planned at the store. And if this angel was one of Leona's fans, she'd surely stick around to celebrate making it to the championships.

His friend thought for a moment about asking the girl if she'd go out with the handsome lad. Regardless of how it went, it'd be a closure of sorts. It had to be an improvement over the current descent into despair that seemed never-ending.

"…I would," the handsome lad murmured after thinking it over for a while. He then continued, "I wanna meet her and make sure."

"Make sure of what?"

"Make sure of her relationship with them."

The handsome lad's answer was immediate. He'd mentioned… *them*. He was referring to Leona's fans, who his angel had been cheerfully chatting with.

"All right, sure thing. I'll go look for her, so you just wait here. After all, if you go out there, the place will get all rowdy again."

Maybe they simply were all fans. He figured that if asking about this would make his friend feel better, then he'd do it. But he hadn't heard a single thing about what she looked like.

The friend turned around as he got to the door, asking, “Can you tell me what this angel looked like?”

“Ah, well…”

It’d been his first time seeing her, and yet, it seemed like he’d gotten a very good look. The handsome lad described her in great detail…

Chapter 17

IT SHOULD BE TIME.

Having left the House of Asteria, Mira checked the clock and then began heading back to Café Kraftbell Antiques. It was time for the photo shoot.

She'd managed to get a look at the Danblf card that she'd been eagerly wanting to see at the trading card game preliminaries. While she was happy to see herself in card form, she was especially happy that her card was able to beat one of the Forty-Eight Nameless Generals.

Curious, Mira pulled out her Legends of Asteria cards. "Now that I think of it, it was all because of this card."

In her hand was a card of Fuzzy Dice, a clue used to piece together the information that led to finding Lastrada. Mira laughed to herself as she walked into the antique shop where the shopkeeper was waiting. It had been a *quirk of fate*.

Meanwhile, back in the waiting room at "House of Asteria."

No way… I never would've guessed that the A-rank adventurer, Grandhiel the Moonlit Snowflake, would be into young girls. Now it makes sense why I've never heard about his love life. All the women who go up to him are adults, after all…

He had refined features, a calm disposition, and was an ace card player. But more than anything, Grandhiel the Moonlit Snowflake was a very capable and handsome A-rank adventurer. Given that he had all the qualities that made a man attractive, he'd always had loads of

women throwing themselves at him. Plenty of these were the daughters of nobility or women so beautiful that they seemed utterly out of most people's league. However, not even once had Grandhiel accepted any of their advances.

Surely, he had to like at least some of them… A lot of the ladies wouldn't even mind sharing.

But none of this mattered, as none of them were able to sway Grandhiel. Soon, his adventurer friends began to wonder if he was more into guys. It had been an uncomfortable time to be around Grandhiel when those rumors were going around.

This friend was a B-rank adventurer in the same guild as Grandhiel. Relieved as he was that Grandhiel wasn't into guys, he had mixed feelings about him liking young girls as he walked to the main area.

In front of the large room that'd been set up as a tournament space stood a well-dressed man in an area where cards and card-related merchandise were sold. His name was Elio, and he was a sales representative from the Grimoire Company. Beside him stood a female staff member from the shop.

"Ah, so the tournament must've wrapped up."

Having started to watch the tournament when it began, Elio had stepped out midway and had just gotten back. He watched as the tournament space was being dismantled and readied for the awards ceremony, a weary look on his face.

"Leona will be advancing to the championship."

"I see, so she *did* win," Elio muttered in response, looking as if he'd expected as much.

"But I was surprised to see you hurry out of the store. Did something happen?"

About an hour before, right in the middle of the heated tournament, Elio had dashed away.

He then sighed about how it'd all been for nothing before explaining what'd happened. He'd gotten some reliable intel from an acquaintance that they'd spotted a cute young girl with long silver hair.

"You're aware that an airship landed at the academy yesterday, right? I was curious about it, so I went to have a quick look. And after carefully inspecting it, I wasn't able to see anything that might tell me what country it came from."

Airships were extremely rare vehicles, and most of them were state-owned. However, the one that'd landed at the academy was not. Elio then rattled off every individual thing he'd seen or heard.

First, a large number of children had been riding on the airship.

Next, the children had gone into a newly erected orphanage that was behind the academy. Some of the children who'd seen the airship said that there were also a large number of spirits onboard. One said the airship had come all the way from far-off Grimdart.

Moreover, the children on the airship had kept saying, "Mira."

Having said all of this, Elio then said that he'd heard about the Spirit Queen a few days prior from his cousin Furio, who was working

the same assignment.

"That all happened in Haxthausen, in the Kingdom of Linkslott. The Spirit Queen showed up in the middle of all that hubbub over Phantom Thief Fuzzy Dice…"

Elio then continued, as if he were connecting all the dots… The Spirit Queen had been in Linkslott, the country neighboring Grimdart. The airship had come from the direction of Grimdart *and* had been full of spirits…

"But the most important point was that the children all mentioned Mira, which is the name of the Spirit Queen!"

It seemed as if the Spirit Queen was on everyone's mind these days. That name had gained so much traction that it seemed like no one was really saying her true name.

Having finished listening to Elio and connecting the name Mira to the Spirit Queen, the female staff member finally showed her surprise.

"The Spirit Queen is here in the city?!"

"Yes, those were my thoughts exactly. I have to say, 'a cute girl with long silver hair' isn't a lot to go on. But if you take into account all the intel we have that points to the Spirit Queen coming here, then the chances are quite high that it's her."

There had been a huge event that saw the abominable group Chimera Clausen taken down. It'd become the talk of the entire continent, and so the Grimoire Company was currently planning an expansion set based on those very events. They were going to reprint

cards of some of the famous adventurers who'd been involved and include new cards of those who'd played a prominent role…such as the Spirit Queen.

For that reason, it was the Grimoire Company's sales representatives' top priority to obtain permission to use the likenesses of these new individuals. Elio had flown out of the store when he'd heard a tip from a witness.

"But I'm guessing it didn't work out?" the female staff member asked after looking at the thoroughly exhausted Elio.

"No, it didn't. I heard she was in an antique shop, but it seems like I just missed her."

After running out of the shop, Elio had gone to check out the area near where she'd been spotted. However, she was no longer there, so he'd run around town trying to gather information.

With a bitter smile, Elio said it hadn't been of any use. The additional information he gathered had come too late, and the Spirit Queen had already left the antique shop. He was unable to get any other information, so he came back.

"That's a shame. If you can get her to sign a contract, then you'll get a bonus, right?"

"Yeah. There goes my chance to go live it up in Bacchus…" Elio said, muttering with a deep sigh that he deserved as much for getting his hopes up.

Then a man came running over to Elio and the female staff member.

"Emma, have you seen a girl with long silver hair? I asked the other guys and they said she just left," Grandhiel's friend asked, stopping just before he bolted out the door. He'd left the waiting room and gone straight to find Leona's fans, where he heard that the person he was looking for was a Danblf fan and had left just a moment before. He figured that if he went after her quickly, then he might just be able to catch her. But he had no idea whether she'd gone right or left after leaving the shop.

So he asked Emma, who was always standing nearby the entrance to the shop. But Elio answered the friend first.

"Hold on, let me ask you something!" His apparent fatigue vanished in an instant as Elio jumped toward the friend with a feverish look on his face.

"Huh? Well, now's not really…"

He wanted to leave to find her as quickly as he could—he didn't have time to sit and explain the whole situation. Or so he thought… Overwhelmed by Elio's intensity, he was stopped dead in his tracks.

"The girl with long silver hair. Was she, by any chance, dressed up like a magical girl?"

"Do you happen to know her?"

From what he'd heard from Grandhiel, the girl *had* been garbed in magical girl-style clothes. But aside from that, he had no other information about her. The only thing that the friend knew about the girl was what she looked like.

Elio's words had struck a chord. He seemed to know more about her than just her appearance. Elio replied, "All I know is what I've heard about her."

"Got it. Then I'll tell you what I know, and you tell me what you know."

"Deal."

Agreeing to share what they knew, the two traded information about the silver-haired girl.

"The Spirit Queen… I didn't expect we'd both be in the same line of work."

The way Grandhiel had described her matched Elio's description perfectly. Which meant that the Spirit Queen had been in the shop only moments ago. The girl he was searching for was none other than the A-rank adventurer known as the Spirit Queen. While shocked, the friend was nonetheless ecstatic that he'd found such a useful clue.

Elio was feeling particularly dejected that he'd have found her if he'd just stayed in the card shop and continued to watch the tournament. Emma tried comforting Elio by telling him that nobody could've predicted that such a thing would happen.

"I'm surprised an adventurer doesn't know about the Spirit Queen. The whole thing with Chimera Clausen was pretty big news."

The friend smiled bitterly, replying that they'd been so focused on polishing their card-dueling skills for the tournament that they'd neglected their adventuring a bit.

"Now that I think of it, you two have been playing every day for the last two months," Emma murmured. She smiled, remarking on the fact that his friend had still lost despite the training. She thoughtfully added that in every discipline, there are always bigger fish.

"All right, I'll go left."

"Then I'll go right."

All that aside, the important thing now was that they found the Spirit Queen and asked her to come back to the shop. If that didn't work out, then they'd get her contact information. Having decided this, the two dashed out of the shop.

Well, even if I'm not able to find her this time, at least I've learned she's in the same line of work… Or so the friend thought as he scoured the city.

The Spirit Queen was an A-rank adventurer, so he'd be able to contact her through the guild union. Even if he couldn't find her, it'd still be entirely possible to arrange a meetup with her. But it would take time to do that, and the real issue would be when exactly she'd get the message. It often took a lot of time to follow adventurers dungeon crawling or traveling from town to town.

Depending on how things played out, it could take months for her to reply to the message they sent and arrange a time to meet. And during that entire time, Grandhiel would stay lovesick. He couldn't imagine anything more annoying. So he searched for the Spirit Queen, making the utmost use of the knowledge and skills he'd picked up while adventuring.

Please let me find her…

Meanwhile, Elio figured that the only way to achieve his objective was to get in contact with her. He wasn't allowed to reach out to anyone for commercial purposes via the guild.

Elio had managed to secure deals under trying circumstances several times in the past. For now, he'd just do what he always did—make use of the connections he'd established and his people skills to question people on the street to track her down.

While this great search was underway, Mira had made her way to a room that'd been converted into a photo studio.

"Now, Spirit Queen, come and take a seat on the sofa," the shopkeeper said, gesturing to her recent purchase. She noticed that there were many other antiques set up around it. When she asked what the deal was, the shopkeeper tried deflecting the question. But after being further pressed by Mira's gaze, the trembling man revealed the truth.

This photo would be so significant that it would change the entire world of antiques. It'd be serving as proof. The photo and the name of the place where'd it'd be taken would likely make their way all across the continent. Word would probably spread from person to person and from antique-enthusiast to antique-enthusiast in a way that was impossible to even imagine.

Considering that, he wanted to promote the store a bit. He'd brought out some of the finest and most highly prized antiques in the store.

"I began thinking that I'd be able to advertise to the entire continent without needing to pay a dime in advertising. It'd be a shame to not take advantage of such an opportunity…" the shopkeeper admitted, as if he was confessing a crime. Though, he didn't appear to feel too bad about it. Then his expression grew serious, and he added, "Of course, if they make you feel uneasy, then I can clear them away!"

"No, there's no need. We'll do it however you'd like."

While he may have been an antique enthusiast, he still had a business to run. Realizing how shrewd of a move it was, she smiled at how everything looked perfect and decided to turn a blind eye to the whole advertising angle.

"Thank you. All right, then I'll go ahead and take the picture," the shopkeeper said, bowing politely. Then getting into position with the camera as if the time had at last come, he rattled off some instructions. "Ah, just…be normal. And please look this way."

"Hrmm… Is this okay?"

Having been lounging imperiously on the sofa like some sort of queen, Mira reluctantly returned to a more modest pose. Her attempt to look cool had failed.

Now sitting demurely, Mira had the look of a nobleman's daughter, which further emphasized her ladylike charm.

"Yes, that natural and innocent look is perfect! Wonderful!"

Expertly able to bring out the inherent cuteness that hid within Mira's petite form, the excited shopkeeper snapped a photo. Then,

while looking up as if he might ascend to the heavens, he murmured, "I may have just taken the greatest photograph."

He'd managed to capture the exact picture they needed to use as proof.

"Wow, really? Then I guess this will help the spirits."

Mira was pleased that the unfortunate plight of manmade spirits was likely to now improve. But as she was getting up, the shopkeeper told Mira to wait.

"Ah… One moment, Spirit Queen. Just to be safe, I'd like to take just a few more. Taking into account things like glare and the camera going out of focus…it's plausible that the first one might not be any good," the shopkeeper implored. While he seemed rather apologetic, he also looked deadly serious.

While he had felt he'd gotten the perfect shot, depending on how it turned out, it might well be unusable.

"I see… I guess only taking one does seem a bit risky," Mira murmured as she stared at the camera mounted on the tripod in front of her.

Only then did it hit her that the camera was not likely a digital one. The photo-taking device that was popular in this world had been developed from technology that former players were familiar with. All of these devices used film. Unlike digital cameras, there was no way to instantly check how the photo looked or if there were any issues with it.

If they only took one photo and that photo wasn't usable, then that was that.

Fully understanding the shopkeeper's point, Mira sat back down on the sofa. She assumed the very same pose and said, "Ready when you are," while smiling for the camera.

"Thank you. All right then…" the shopkeeper said before adjusting the photo-taking device and snapping another picture. "And just to be safe, let's take another," he added before snapping two more.

"Thanks to you, I was able to take some fantastic photos, Spirit Queen," the shopkeeper said, smiling cheerfully.

But the smile only lasted for a moment. A mysterious look appeared on his face as he took the camera off the tripod and began pacing, as if examining the area around Mira.

"It just struck me that we might be able to accentuate your charm even more by photographing from a different angle," the shopkeeper murmured. He asked if he might be able to take a few more pictures, arguing that a truly impressive photograph could generate a lot of interest in a subject.

If that happened, then this would go beyond the antique world and reach the masses at large. It might serve as a gateway for those with no interest in antiques to get into the hobby. And that would create a great business opportunity while further spreading awareness of the furniture-dwelling spirits, improving how they were treated.

"Hrmm… I'm not sure. Do you really think so?" Mira tilted her head quizzically, questioning whether the pictures he had just taken

hadn’t been good enough. She added that she wasn’t really familiar with advertising or publicity, and so she didn’t get it.

The shopkeeper seized the opportunity to persuade her further. “Were I just photographing some random object for promotional purposes, then it would be good enough. But someone with angelic beauty like yours—well the idea of what’s *good enough* is different! *Good enough* simply won’t cut it, don’t you think? To get it just right, I want to try a different angle!” the shopkeeper said, raising his voice.

With such fiery passion that it felt like he might burn the room to a crisp, he looked into her eyes and added, “It’s only because I’m taking a photo of you that there’s such an opportunity.”

“Oh ho… You can only get a photograph like that with me, huh?”

“Precisely. It would be inconceivable with anyone else.”

It’d been a short exchange, but it was enough to change Mira’s mind.

The photos they were taking were meant to confirm the existence of and spread awareness for furniture spirits. It would also serve as a bit of publicity for the shop as well. In such a case, compromise was not an option for Mira, who was very much concerned about the plight of spirits.

“Okay, I hear you. Let’s take some pictures that’ll convince everyone that spirits live in antiques!” Mira said enthusiastically, facing the camera and posing as if she was ready to go. She then flashed a bold smile and adopted a relaxed pose.

"Thank you. Yes, that captivating smile is wonderful!" the shopkeeper cried loudly, snapping a photograph with gusto.

Having started with that one, he then went on to take photos from several other angles.

"I should've expected nothing less from the Spirit Queen! Great, just great! Yes, I caught that regal smile! Okay, now look up! Good! Okay, now how about looking down a bit?!"

As the photo shoot continued, the shopkeeper's passion reached new heights, and he got so into it that he seemed like a master photographer.

He deftly moved around to not miss any of Mira's charm, which also allowed him to take photos from every possible direction. From time to time, he'd also direct her to make a certain pose to bring Mira's inherent and coquettish allure into maximum focus.

"How about this?"

Infected by the shopkeeper's enthusiasm, Mira followed along just as he instructed.

In keeping with her title of Spirit Queen, she did some regal poses…but before she knew it, she was lying on the sofa like some sort of pin-up model. The photo shoot continued with them also taking several sexy shots in addition to the cute, nymph-like ones.

"That's it! Perfect!" the shopkeeper said, releasing the shutter as he photographed Mira. He seemed to be in higher spirits than ever.

The photo shoot had started for the sake of his beloved antiques. That was the stated reason anyway. But gradually, with

every shutter release and every new pose Mira struck, the look in the shopkeeper's eyes changed.

"Nice, and this'll do it!"

Having taken a sexy shot of Mira's feet with his final shot and the last of his film, a smile of such satisfaction washed across his face that he seemed ready to die and go to heaven. The man fell to the floor. He shut his eyes, which were filled with equal parts love and lust, as if he'd finally succeeded. He looked as content as someone who was finally passing away after living a long, full life.

The shopkeeper had accomplished his primary goal: fully capturing Mira's charm on film. And he'd also gotten a photo that would change the history of the antique world. If he could get the photo and information out, it would no doubt change the status quo when it came to the previously unresolvable issue of "haunted" antiques.

The shopkeeper thanked the gods for the ray of hope that had shone on the world of antiques, and the fact that he'd managed to capture something that he'd treasure for the rest of his days.

Chapter 18

THE SESSION TO TAKE A…*commemorative photo* lasted around half an hour. Taking a quick break over some black tea that the shopkeeper had prepared, Mira stayed seated on the couch while sensing the spirit that dwelled inside.

The shopkeeper was busying himself tidying things up nearby. As if handling some precious family heirloom, he put the photo-taking device into a box and locked it shut.

Judging from the beatific smile on his face, the shopkeeper must've really glimpsed hope for those unloved antiques. Seeing his expression, Mira felt the treatment of spirits residing in antiques would finally improve from that point forward.

That was when she realized they still had one thing left to do.

"While we're at it, I might as well give you some information that might help those spirits that kept getting mistaken for supernatural phenomena," Mira said, after waiting for the shopkeeper to put away all the photography equipment.

"Information?" the shopkeeper returned. He had an enigmatic look on his face that seemed to say he was intrigued. He wondered to himself if a perfect photo wouldn't be enough. What else could they possibly need? Could it be that they'd need to do more than just take photos?

His imagination was leading him in the wrong direction—the information Mira had to share wasn't sexual at all.

"It has to do with the reason why I'm looking for furniture with spirits inside," Mira explained, standing up and turning to look back at the sofa. Then, in full view of the shopkeeper, she activated [Contract Forging].

"What's this…?!"

The moment Mira lifted her hand, the small beads of light that came pouring out of the couch became like twinkling stars that were then sucked into Mira's hand.

Having seen the whole thing from beginning to end, the shopkeeper was taken aback and wondered what exactly had happened. After racking his brain for a moment, he realized that Mira had done something.

"So…you really *are* a summoner. And that spirit…did you forge a contract with it just now?"

The existence of rumored furniture spirits had never been confirmed. And obviously, the shopkeeper had never heard about anyone forging a contract with a furniture spirit.

…But summoning weapons spirits, which were also manmade spirits, was considered the foundation of summoning. It shouldn't come as much of a surprise that the same was the case for furniture spirits.

Having reasoned as much, the shopkeeper looked toward Mira expectantly.

"Hrmm, bingo! Summoners can forge contracts with furniture spirits as well. And then we can summon them like this," Mira replied,

her chest swelling with confidence over just how much unexplored potential summoners had.

Riding this wave of emotion, she quickly performed her first summoning of the spirit.

[Evocation: Trusty Sofa]

As she cast the spell, a small magic circle formed, from which a sofa gently appeared. It was a small, single-seat navy blue sofa that looked like it could comfortably fit one adult.

"That's incredible…!"

The brand-new sofa had appeared in a spot where nothing else had been. While shocked at this development, he hungrily stared at the couch.

"It looks as if it's from the Fueslot Era, and yet, it has a design that I've not often seen. I don't recognize the materials either. Ah, but…I really am glad."

Despite being labeled as a lost cause, the shopkeeper had kept the sofa and taken good care of it. Now he was able to see the manifestation of the spirit that dwelled within. The shopkeeper gave a heartfelt smile, pleased to see the fine-looking sofa.

"But it's rather strange, isn't it? It looks a lot different from the original," the shopkeeper asked, after standing pleased for a time.

Mira smiled as if she'd expected the question. He didn't really seem to know anything when it came to summoning. In order for him to understand and spread awareness in a way that'd be sure to reach the most ears, she began explaining thoroughly.

The way manmade spirits appeared changed depending on how the summoner visualized them—and the deeper a connection they had, the more this was the case.

"I only just acquired non-combat evocations. And so, while I can't explain the specifics, judging from what I've felt until now, these types of evocations have a lot of unexplored potential. That much is a fact." As Mira explained all this, she thought about the future of evocation. A truly crazed grin came onto her face.

Previously, while she was in the bathroom of her spirit mansion, she'd been thinking about how nice it would be to have a window. And, as if responding to this very thought, a large window appeared. So she'd already seen how versatile spirits could be so long as one was within their area of effect. The question now was, just how versatile were they? Endlessly fascinated by such things, Mira had very high hopes for her newly acquired spirit sofa.

If word got out about all of this, it'd not only raise awareness about the existence of spirits that resided in antiques but also spread new information pertaining to evocation. If she looked, she'd surely find tables, chairs, beds, and other furniture summons. The quality of rest one could get while out adventuring depended on whether or not one had access to such things. With a sturdy table and some chairs, an adventurer could enjoy proper meals. With a soft bed, they could get some good sleep. And with all those accoutrements that reminded them of daily life, an adventurer could feel relaxed and at home.

Comfort items were quite bulky and difficult to lug around, but with summoning, they could be set up like new at any time. This

would mean that with the space they'd save, adventurers would have more room to carry other equipment and medicine. This would make the entire occupation more stable.

The status of summoners would be elevated enough that others would consider adding a summoner to their party, despite them not being strictly necessary. But the wonders of evocation didn't end there…

"By the way, did you know that spirits even dwell in houses?"

Having been asked this, the shopkeeper answered honestly, "Is that so? I had no idea." But after a moment, he picked up on what Mira had hinted, and an incredulous expression washed over his face. "Does that mean…you'd be able to forge a contract with a house…?"

The shopkeeper saw a great many possibilities flash through his mind. Perceiving the way in which adventurers lived and that the current standing of summoners would be undergoing a monumental change, the shopkeeper glanced at Mira with an excited and hopeful look in his eye. Once more recalling his days as an adventurer…

"It does. Just the other day, I happened to meet a mansion spirit and forged a contract with it." Mira jumped on the opportunity to begin talking about the mansion spirit.

"That's truly incredible. With that, you could sleep soundly without ever needing to worry about anyone breaking into your home. And because you have walls, you'd be fully prepared in the event of a surprise attack. But the best part is that you wouldn't have to worry about the elements. If you were to hire a summoner who could summon a home, then it'd also make stocking up on supplies that

much easier. That's especially true for those who make a living peddling items. For someone like that, a summoner with access to such things would completely change their way of life."

Having finished listening to Mira, the shopkeeper grew more and more excited as he listed the unique advantages of a spirit mansion. It seemed as if he had a much higher opinion of summoners than he'd had before. He seemed to realize that he ought to have a personal summoner, as they might very well be able to help with a great many things. The shopkeeper was beginning to consider hiring one.

As he said this, he glanced expectantly toward Mira, but only for a moment. It'd be difficult to raise enough funds to employ an A-rank adventurer, not to mention one as famous as the Spirit Queen. Fighting back tears, he appeared to give up on the idea.

"Oh ho, are you really…?"

She had been fairly confident to begin with, but Mira was quite surprised. The shopkeeper's reaction had exceeded her expectations.

She began going into further detail with the shopkeeper about the benefits of being able to summon a home. Chief among these was the issue of lodging. Without needing to consider where one would stay when making an itinerary, many more options opened up.

A lot of people didn't have a home-like place where they could relax. The shopkeeper proclaimed that this was revolutionary to professional adventurers, merchants who usually lived on the road, and anyone else who stayed outside while traveling from city to city.

"Yeah… Yeah, you're right! Soon enough, summoners will start getting pretty popular, huh? You'd better try to hurry and hire one

while you still can," Mira said haughtily, not caring how that made the shopkeeper feel.

Mira firmly believed the day would come when summoners would skyrocket in popularity. But hearing what the shopkeeper had said, she was now convinced of it. What's more, there was other evidence to support her conviction.

There was the case with the uproar over the water spirit in Haxthausen and Cleos's hard work at the academy.

But yeah…he has a point. The utility of evocation isn't limited to just its use by adventurers, is it?

Mira, realizing this after hearing what the shopkeeper said, pondered the future of evocation. Having a mind for combat and a love of adventuring, she had only thought of the future of evocation from the perspective of an adventurer. She'd thought that the best way to revive the art of evocation would be for summoners to gain prominence as skilled adventurers.

In the world she was in, top-class adventurers were treated like heroes. If she could popularize the image of summoners as powerful, then they'd naturally become popular. At least that's what she'd thought…

But now she knew that there were other alternatives when it came to gaining popularity.

She'd even witnessed quite a few of these very alternatives. People were using necromantic golems as taxis, and dedicated exorcists were employed by antique dealers… Things had changed

since the days when this was a game. Mages were no longer only useful for combat.

It made her think that summoners, who could have a wide range of abilities depending on how many contracts they'd forged, could thrive even more in daily life than they could putting their life on the line in combat.

Cat Sith could investigate, Garuda could be used for air transport, the Korpokkur sisters could be used to safely traverse forests, and the Sea God Turtle could be used to easily travel across the ocean. And if one made a contract with a home spirit, they could open up an inn wherever they wanted. The possibilities were endless.

Summoning might become more popular if it were put to use for everyday tasks such as those.

Then another thought struck her. That would be using summoning as a tool to make money. Up until then, she'd made quite a bit of money selling vast quantities of water and loot, but would she want to completely turn it into a business?

Having thought this much, it struck Mira that her summons ought to get paid for the work she did.

Hrmm… I'll need to thank all of them.

About half of her contracts were something akin to servants, and yet, they were friends first. Thinking this way about all her evocations, Mira resolved to ask her evocations if there was anything they wanted the next time she had a chance.

Mira explained that the easiest way to find a home spirit was to ask other spirits before explaining in detail how it was that one went about forging a contract.

"Good heavens, thank you for all that valuable information," the shopkeeper said cheerfully. His pen had been racing across a piece of paper as he diligently jotted down all the information he heard.

Odd fetishes aside, the deep love he had for antiques was genuine. And now he'd found an ideal solution to one of the issues that'd been plaguing him over the years. He was quite happy.

"It's nothing! It's not like I could doom those furniture spirits to such unjust treatment. I'll have to leave the rest to you."

When it came to how spirit-containing antiques were handled, it would most likely be fastest to leave it in the hands of a professional. So Mira left the matter in the shopkeeper's care—including rescuing those antiques that'd been locked up by the church and spreading the truth about them.

If someone rather famous like Mira helped, then it'd probably be quite effective. However, she'd wouldn't be able to spread as much information as a professional with connections in the industry.

In addition to all the helpful information he had, he also had a great many pictures to back up his claims. And knowing this particular shopkeeper, she was sure he'd use said pictures to great effect.

Thinking about the fiery passion she'd felt from him, Mira looked straight at the shopkeeper.

"I will most certainly do my best to accomplish the task you've entrusted me with, Spirit Queen!" the shopkeeper said, meeting Mira's gaze and speaking as if he might just get down on one knee. He looked almost like a knight, swearing an oath of fealty to an actual queen.

"Hrmm. See that you do."

Having extolled just how convenient summoning was, Mira began getting ready to leave, wholly convinced that one day summoning would reign supreme.

The first order of business was the spirit-housing sofa which she'd just purchased.

There was no longer a spirit inside. Unlike primordial spirits—such as wind or water—once a contract had been forged with a manmade spirit, they moved to make their new home within whoever they'd forged the contract with.

Mira had no intention of selling the sofa or of simply leaving it there. She used the Ethereal Art [Itemify] and then stored it in her item box.

Originally, furniture wasn't considered an item and, thus, couldn't be targeted, but after mastering [Analyze] and [Augment] From the *Encyclopedia of Skills* and adjusting them a bit, it became possible to do so.

"Hrmm, it worked."

She'd successfully stored the antique sofa in her item box without issue. Having checked to make sure this was the case, Mira

chuckled to herself that she could now search for furniture spirits to her heart's content.

The vessels that spirits dwelled in were like parents to them, meaning that such things were to be cherished. For that reason, she planned to continue using the vessels that the spirits had cherished.

"Wow, you put the sofa in your item box… I should've expected as much of the Spirit Queen," the shopkeeper said, sounding both surprised and impressed.

A glance around the store confirmed that most of the antiques he sold were furniture and other decor. And furniture was heavy and rather bulky.

The shopkeeper wanted to find a mage who could use the altered [Itemify] skill to store furniture in item boxes. He'd been thinking that if he were able to contract a dedicated mage to do this, then he could go right on purchasing things.

However, the kind of mages who could alter skills were usually quite experienced. Were he to hire one, he'd be kissing his profits goodbye.

Mira really was the ideal mage. With the mansion spirit, she could summon lodging, and with armor spirits, she could summon guards. And she was able to use [Itemify] to store furniture in item boxes. And then there was the icing on the cake: how she looked. From the shopkeeper's point of view, Mira was the woman of his dreams.

But from Mira's point of view, she was anything but.

Her work at the furniture store finished, Mira smiled broadly and said, “Thank you, Master Shopkeep. I was able to get my hands on something really nice.”

“I should be thanking you. To me, this has been the best day of my life…”

…If only he’d managed to contract Mira as his dedicated mage. Returning to reality after fantasizing about this, the shopkeeper thanked Mira as his face lit up. His fantasy wouldn’t become reality, but even so, he’d gotten a great deal.

Looking reluctant to leave, Mira followed the shopkeeper as he showed her out of the store.

“Thank you very much for coming,” the shopkeeper said, with the utmost sincerity. Mira waved back at him, as she left Café Kraftbell Antiques behind.

Chapter 19

DUSK BEGAN TO FALL, and the sky burned red. Elio and the friend's search had been in vain, as Mira was now above the clouds and could see a city with nine towers before her.

The Linked Silver Towers, the foremost magical research institution on the continent, towered high in the center of Silverhorn. Having returned to the Tower of Evocation, Mira went to her quarters and saw a smile burst across the face of the girl there.

"Welcome home, Miss Mira."

"Hrmm, glad to be back."

Hearing Mariana welcome her, Mira finally felt that she was home. Filled with contentment, Mira caught Luna, who'd jumped up toward her and said, "Have you been a good girl?" before nuzzling her cheeks against the rabbit's.

She spent some time unwinding on the sofa in the living room with Luna still in her arms. After tending to Mira for a bit, Mariana made her way to the kitchen. Watching her as she went, Mira noticed a whole bunch of ingredients.

Solomon must've let her know that she'd be returning, as it seemed that Mariana was getting ready to make dinner. And from the ingredients she saw, she was quite confident that the dinner would be a feast.

"I must say, I'm pretty excited for this!" As Mira began to fill with anticipation for dinner, Luna squeaked happily as well.

Loads of fresh, high-quality vegetables sat among the other ingredients. Aside from the ones for cooking, there were also some that would end up being food for Luna. The rabbit seemed to be in even higher spirits than usual.

With dinner preparations almost complete, the feast was just about ready.

As she might've expected of Mariana, the incredible meal was chock-full of Mira's favorite foods and vegetables, even the ones in short supply.

Mira thoroughly enjoyed her fill of her favorite food while Mariana quietly stole glances at her. Meanwhile, Luna sat beside them and ate her special salad as Mira continued giving her affection.

The spirited dinner with friends the night before had been a lot of fun. And yet, the dinner with just the two girls and a rabbit felt like a family dinner and was no less special. While it may have looked completely different, beneath the surface, it was the same. And so, the three of them enjoyed a peaceful family dinner with each other.

After dinner, it was time for a bath. Naturally, Mariana would be joining…

"…That's what I said. But that wasn't exactly the whole truth." As Mira relaxed in the warm bathtub, she talked animatedly about everything that'd happened in Haxthausen.

She talked about her success in reviving interest in evocation, the chief detective and Fuzzy Dice, the heated battle at the Mages'

Guild, and the events in the underground waterway. And finally, she talked about how Fuzzy Dice was none other than Lastrada.

Mariana sat on the other side and occasionally smiled while cheerfully tending to Mira. Spending time in such a way was what made her truly happy, and the smile on her face was one of true tranquility.

Luna seemed to be quite happy about getting to spend time with Mira as well. She showed off one of her tricks by leaping from her dedicated bathtub, which had been set up in one corner of the main tub, before swimming all the way across the bath until she was right beneath Mira.

"Oh ho, you're quite the little swimmer!"

Unlike how nimble and agile she was on land, the way in which Luna clumsily struggled to swim was too cute to handle. Mira couldn't help but pick her up. Then Mariana mentioned how it was the first time she'd ever seen Luna swim.

She had leaped into the bathtub because she wanted to be next to Mira. Feeling even more touched after hearing this, Mira showered Luna with a heftier dose of affection.

While she played with Luna in the tub, Mira recounted everything that'd happened up until that day. Lost in her story, Mira never even noticed as Mariana crossed over to her side of the tub to be beside her, much like Luna had done.



Getting out of the tub, Mariana assisted Mira by helping her change into a sleeping robe. She also took all the clothes that Mira needed washed. Deep down, Mira felt as if they really were a married couple, and yet, the exchange was closer to one of a mother and her child…with Mariana being the mother.

After this, they went straight to the living room and enjoyed a friendly chat over a few drinks. Once she began to feel sufficiently sleepy, Mira made her way toward the bedroom with Luna and Mariana in tow.

"Well, I'm ready to call it a night. But I plan on staying here all day tomorrow."

"Then you'll be having lunch with us as well. Is there anything you'd like to eat?"

"Kyeee!"

"Sure, Luna. That'll be a peach apple for you then?"

"Wow, you two can already understand each other…?"

The two girls and their furry friend got into bed, talking about their plans for tomorrow until they slowly drifted off to sleep. Upon hearing Mira and Luna peacefully breathing, Mariana smiled softly and sweetly before closing her eyes as well.

The next day, Mira had nothing on her schedule. So she relaxed, spending the morning taking it easy.

"Ah, Miss Mira. I found several notes inside of your pockets while doing the laundry yesterday. I put them on the table, so please take a look."

"Hrmm, sure thing."

After eating the breakfast that Mariana had prepared for her, Mira played with Luna while chatting back and forth with Mariana as she did chores. At the moment, she had no leads on the whereabouts of the remaining Nine Wise Men, so there was nothing she could do even if she wanted to. She'd managed to gather the minimum number of Wise Men, and so her mission was no longer quite as urgent. To make up for how busy she'd been thus far, Mira allowed herself to completely decompress.

After doing this for a few hours, and then having lunch, a thought popped into Mira's head as she watched Mariana. The fairy was busy taking care of Mira but had not forgotten to clean the house.

With her mission no longer quite as urgent, shouldn't Mira be even more busy? She had evocation research and Synchronized Senses training to do. She needed to find new ways of improving the current state of evocation and ways of monetizing it. She had new skills to learn and ascendent-level evocations to attain…

There was a veritable mountain of things that she'd been wanting to do. But she was so ensconced in peaceful, domestic life that she'd allowed herself to completely slack off.

Realizing this, Mira leaped to her feet and said to Mariana, "I'll be in my laboratory for a bit."

"Understood. Please let me know if you need anything."

The words *in my laboratory* were enough to communicate everything she wanted to say. Gently picking up Luna, Mariana

watched as Mira walked off toward her lab.

Just like the rest of the Nine Wise Men, when it came to studying spells and training, Mira's focus was in a league of its own. Knowing this, Mariana made no attempt to intrude.

Upon entering her laboratory, Mira's very first order of business was to compile all the evocation notes she'd taken on her travels. There were some on partial evocations, arms evocations, new techniques she'd learned, and so on. She'd taken the notes here and there on the fly and now had to sit down and properly record them.

Time flew by. By the time the sun had set, she'd finished beautifully rewriting all her research notes. Being full of information and new evocation techniques, it wasn't an understatement to say that her research notebook was truly on the cutting edge of evocation.

Having sorted out all of her own thoughts while compiling the jumbled-up notes, an invigorated look floated over Mira's face.

Then Mariana's voice rang out from the other side of the door. Dinner was ready.

Mariana had given her space, so as to not disturb her research, but this was different. She had no intention whatsoever of allowing Mira to burn herself out. She understood that taking a breather was yet another important element of study.

"Hrmm, coming," Mira said, standing up. She then took a big stretch, grabbed her notebook, and left the room.

Returning to the living room, she found none other than Cleos. Having heard that Mira had returned, he'd hurried over. "Miss Mira, I'm a day late in saying it, but welcome back!"

There were some things he wanted to discuss in regards to the academy, and so he'd been waiting for her to emerge. And he wasn't the only one who wanted to talk about the academy, either.

After they greeted each other, Mira quickly began chatting with Cleos. Their discussion of the academy lasted from before dinner until after. They chatted happily and yet seriously, as the purpose of their discussion was to help the students. Aside from the course outline, they also thoroughly discussed what the curriculum would consist of.

And while they were discussing this, Cleos brought up something that'd been troubling him. "Recently, we've gotten quite a few troublesome inquiries…"

"Inquiries? About what?"

Cleos began to explain the situation in detail. They ended up all being things that Mira was already aware of.

The inquiries directed to the School of Evocation were about such things as the shortest amount of time necessary to forge a contract with a water spirit, how long it would take to summon a mansion, and so on. They came mostly from apprentice-level summoners. Given how they were about water spirits and mansion spirits, the inquiries were likely a result of Mira's campaign to promote evocation. People had only seen how easy it was for Mira to do such things, not knowing it wasn't possible for apprentice-level summoners to pick up such skills.

If they were lucky, they might be able to forge a contract with a water spirit. But unless they developed their skills as mages, they would be unable to use or maintain such evocations.

Having told the students as much, more than half left in disappointment. However, there had also been quite a few motivated individuals who'd either enrolled or had bought introductory books on evocation that'd been published by the Linked Silver Towers.

"It would seem that word has recently spread among adventurers of the utility of evocation. And while I'm very thankful for that, they think it's easier than it really is," Cleos muttered, sounding troubled.

"Is that so…?" Mira whispered, looking away from him. She realized that, moving forward, she ought to make that part a bit clearer.

"On that note, I was thinking about using evocation via the use of Endogenous Sense the other day. What are your thoughts on that?" Mira asked, bringing up a thought that'd recently occurred to her to quickly change the subject.

Her reasoning was that when it came to revitalizing the art of evocation, rather than advocating its use as one's main job, there might be potential in advocating its use in a support role.

"Endogenous Sense, huh…? I see… It's not only about increasing the overall number of summoners. So if we can make the benefits of using evocation via Endogenous Sense clear, then we'd be able to attract other mages who're currently active…"

Cleos continued that, most importantly, they needed to dispel the negative image of summoners that'd built up over the years. Then, whether they were using Endogenous Sense or not, evocation would begin playing a more active role. The more it did, the more people's perception of it would likely improve. Looking at how things stood, a slightly different approach like the one Mira had suggested was quite interesting.

Mira showed him her research notebook with all her recently composed notes. She'd written about partial evocations, the Synchronized Senses technique, and various techniques that could be used with low-level evocations.

"These are…! Wow, you even wrote about this…!"

The notes had been written by one of the Nine Wise Men and the leading authority on the art of evocation. After looking at them for but a moment, Cleos couldn't tear his eyes away. The knowledge that'd been compiled in the notebook advanced the state of the art and reached a level he still had yet to master.

Toward the beginning of the notebook, Mira had written primarily about summoning methods that depended solely on mastery of technique. These methods were ones anyone could use so long as they knew the technique, even if the only thing they could summon was a dark knight. They were also techniques one could fully employ even if they were only using summoning via Endogenous Sense. With those, there was potential to further popularize summoning.

"These are incredible… If other mages can just learn these, then summoning will likely be in the spotlight like never before."

It would be extremely difficult. And yet, the amount of unrealized potential out there was also immeasurable. Or so Cleos said, shuddering with excitement.

"Right? Don't you think so?!"

To ensure the future of summoning remained bright, they'd propagate those techniques. Having resolved to do so, Mira looked at Cleos.

"When can you get started?"

Currently, Cleos was both the head of the School of Evocation and a teacher at the academy. Therefore, in order to propagate these new techniques, he would need to learn them. Smiling, Mira offered to start by teaching him about partial summons. Predicting that he was going to have to undergo some hellish special training, the smile died on Cleos's face.

His session with Mira lasted late into the night.

Ever since he heard Mira mention partial summoning, Cleos had tirelessly practiced doing it. He'd managed to get down some of the basics. But he wasn't doing something quite right, and so he couldn't get the evocation to appear.

But under Mira's direct instruction, all of his hard work came together as Mira readily identified what it was that he was doing wrong.

"I…I did it! Did you see?!"

The holy knight's shield that Cleos summoned finally caught and absorbed the full-strength attack that'd been leveled at him by Mira's

dark knight.

The partially summoned shield was just as durable as it would be on a holy knight that'd been properly summoned. There was no disputing that he'd been successful.

"Hrmm, I certainly did. Well done. You pass."

Cleos's partial evocation had been shattered and sliced in half countless times. And yet, after tweaking his technique countless times under Mira's guidance, he finally managed to pull it off.

Hearing Mira announce that he'd passed, Cleos was as happy as a child on Christmas morning. What's more, he kept asking to try again and was able to fully block the dark knight's blows each and every time. He seemed to have really gotten a good feel for it.

Mira was pleased to see Cleos's growth. And now…she wanted to see him grow even more.

"Moving forward, why don't you try and partial summon a dark knight."

Cleos readily answered back, "Sure thing!"

He must've been quite pleased with his success, as he had an air of invincibility about him which seemed to say that he thought he could take on anything.

…But that aura transformed into one of complete helplessness just a few minutes later. This was because it was vastly more difficult to partially summon a dark knight than it was to do so with a holy knight.

For holy knights, all you had to do was bring forth their shield. For dark knights, there were two movements involved: swinging their swords up and bringing them down. And this all happened within a split second.

"I feel like I'll never get it…"

Having used up most of his mana during the intensive training, Cleos hung his head as if utterly broken. It must've really been difficult, as his expression had done a full one-eighty. He now wore a look of complete despair.

"Hrmm… It seems like you're just about at your limit."

Mira noted that he'd been overconfident after summoning the holy knight. She let him know that he ought to get some rest after he objected and said that he could keep going. Pushing oneself too hard wasn't good.

Nodding in agreement with what Mira had said, Cleos meekly went back to his room. Before leaving, he told Mira that he'd be looking forward to tomorrow's training.

After Cleos's intensive training, Mira enjoyed a nice relaxing soak.

And just like that, her busy yet relaxing day came to an end.

Chapter 20

WAKING UP AT EIGHT O'CLOCK the next morning, Mira ate breakfast and then immediately began her evocation research.

She couldn't think of what to do next, and so she just focused on deeply exploring evocation.

While on her travels, she'd done research and tested things when she'd got the chance. However, it'd been quite a while since she'd been able to sit down and properly do so. All the things that Mira had wanted to do but been unable to up until then began popping up in her head.

"If I do this, then the distance from which I'll be able to use Synchronized Senses will…"

"Hrmm… So the Spirit King can even effect something like this…"

"I see… The upper limit is set by the system, huh…?"

"If I can just figure out how to do this with this, then I'll be able to…"

"So weapon spirits can be used for that, too…"

"Whoa, and you can even…"

Going over an extensive array of research, Mira continued carrying out various trials and experiments. And so, while determining what worked and what didn't, she considered ways in which she might improve what *wasn't* working. Thoroughly investigating and studying all of this, she paid no heed to the time, diving single-mindedly into her research instead.

However, there were two beings who gently helped bring Mira back to reality. They were none other than Mariana and Luna.

Just the night before, Mira had told Cleos that one shouldn't push themselves too hard. That advice went for her as well. When it was time for lunch or dinner, Mira made sure to sit down at the dining table and eat. After eating, she played with Luna and chatted about nothing with Mariana before heading back to her laboratory.

After eight o'clock, Cleos came by, and Mira began instructing him.

Partially summoning a dark knight was difficult. However, as one might expect from the deputy of a Wise Man, it wasn't impossible. When they wrapped up intensive training for the day, Cleos could see how it might be done much more clearly than the day before. Saying that he'd see her tomorrow, he went back to his quarters.

Her spirits buoyed by how capable he was, Mira got ready for bathtime.

Bathing with Mariana filled her with an incomparable sense of serenity. Coupled with how much Luna's presence soothed her, Mira felt as if she'd died and gone to heaven.

After getting out of the bath, she enjoyed some dessert in place of a midnight snack, chatted with Mariana, and got into bed once she started feeling sleepy.

Things continued like this for quite a while. Each day was the same, with her more or less following the same routine. And yet, far from feeling bored, Mira felt the most satisfied she ever had been.

If happiness had a shape, it would probably look like the ones you loved. Mira realized this while watching Mariana sleep beside her and smiled softly.

The next day, Mira went with Cleos to Alcait Academy after hearing that they'd be holding a Spell Symposium. She had participated once in the past.

I've heard it changed a lot since then, so I'm excited to see what it's like now.

She'd heard the emphasis was no longer on aesthetics, like it had been before, but students were now evaluated with practical considerations in mind. Participating as a spectator rather than a speaker, Mira was excited to see what kind of techniques the students would perform—particularly those belonging to the School of Evocation.

And so, she was waiting for the symposium to begin when she heard someone ask her a question.

"Miss Mira, I was hoping to speak with you about that matter regarding enrollment that we spoke of the other day. When do you think she'll be able to come?" Cleos said, his face burning with excitement.

He was most likely talking about Rina, whom she'd recommended to Alcait Academy while in Haxthausen. Mira had recognized her talent, and so Cleos seemed to have pretty high hopes for her.

"Hrmm, good question. She's with some other adventurers. They'll need to persuade the others, get packed, and travel here first,

so it should still be a while."

Mira had made it home in a day via the spirit airship, but Rina and her companions would be going by land. Even if they took the continental railway, it would be quite a few days from Haxthausen. And it would take the adventurers she was traveling with a considerable amount of time to get prepared.

"Aaah, considering she's a future summoner whose talent caught your eye…I really can't wait to meet her." Cleos continued that he was sure she'd be a welcome addition. It seemed like he genuinely was excited. He'd even finished all of her enrollment paperwork.

After discussing Rina and the man known as Bruce, who was going around teaching evocation, the symposium finally began. Representatives from each school of magic were to demonstrate several techniques that they'd been training for that day to use.

And that was where Mira noted one difference from the time she'd participated before: the number of representatives. This time, there were three. Cleos said this was to give even more outstanding students a chance to shine, as well as to show off a wider array of techniques from each discipline.

The techniques and spells shown off by the representatives would become the signature spells of each discipline. People would rush to learn them if they were powerful, potentially stifling the innovation and development of other spells and techniques. For this reason, they decided to choose three representatives who excelled at using different spells and techniques.

The symposium was undoubtedly much more meaningful than it had been back when Mira first attended. And yet…the representatives were still very much *students* from Mira's point of view. Still, seeing how dedicated they were and how much they aspired to improve reminded Mira of when she was just starting out.

I've gotta work my butt off so they don't beat me someday.

As she watched the students' demonstrations, Mira once more burned with determination.

She'd spent the past week researching things that were doable at her level. But soon, she'd have to aim higher. Perhaps it was time to really give ascendent evocation a go.

As she was thinking this, it came time for the representatives from the School of Evocation.

"Oh ho, isn't that…?"

The first of the representatives was the blonde girl with pigtails. The day she'd come back to the Kingdom of Alcait, she'd seen the girl as she was passing through the academy's grounds. It definitely felt like she'd met her somewhere before. Mira leaned over and casually asked Cleos about her.

"Oh, her? Well…"

Speaking confidentially, Cleos explained the girl's situation without pretense or concern for it being privileged information. Her name was Emilia Flores, and she was one of the three daughters of house Flores, which belonged to the noble line of Ozstein. Despite

being only fourteen years old, she was standing on the stage as one of the most talented students in the School of Evocation.

"Oh ho, so she's a noble lady, huh? I see…"

That would explain why she'd seemed a bit full of herself. Mira was clearly prejudiced by knowing that she was the daughter of a noble family, and yet, Emilia did give off that vibe.

However, from what Cleos explained, she was very dedicated and passionate about her studies. Also, she was very righteous and disliked anything unfair.

"Most importantly, and she's mentioned this to me before, she's the leader of a coalition of fans that love Master Danblf."

"You don't say?!"

Mira recalled a story she'd heard about a girl of noble birth going after students from another department who were making fun of Danblf. That must have been Emilia.

Perhaps as a testament to this, the technique she'd begun to demonstrate was the simultaneous dark knight evocation that Danblf had been so skilled at. Danblf, the One-Man Army, was capable of simultaneously summoning a thousand evocations. And his ability to do so was an indispensable part of the myth surrounding him.

Having deep respect and admiration for Danblf, the girl had spent all her time training obsessively to do the same.

"Oh ho. She's only just learned that technique? And yet, she can already summon two at the same time? She's quite skilled. Hrmm, yes, this one has got potential."

The thought she'd had about the girl being a bit full of herself went out the window. Watching her like a parent during a school play, Mira now fully approved of her. Emilia's skills were the real deal. She couldn't summon instantaneously like Mira and needed some time to prepare. But the fact that she could do it at all was huge.

In the art of evocation, there existed a factor known as the maximum number of summoning slots. And so simultaneous evocation didn't involve simply calling forth multiple evocations to help one do battle. The major benefit of simultaneous evocation was that it allowed one to summon multiple armor spirits using only a single summoning slot.

Those at a student level were likely limited to three slots. In other words, were they to summon three individual dark knights, then they wouldn't be able to summon anything else. However, if they were to summon three at once, then they'd still have two summon slots open. This increased the number of options available when coming up with a battle plan.

Mira felt as if she might have some things to teach the girl who'd devoted herself to learning simultaneous evocation. She looked closely at the evocation techniques she was demonstrating while carefully studying the flow of her mana and how exactly her techniques were formulated.

The Spell Symposium concluded without incident.

The judges gathered around and assessed how each school had done, something which Mira was present for as well. Once judging

had been concluded, it was the School of the Holy Arts that came away with the most points. The School of Evocation came in sixth.

Emilia's simultaneous summons didn't end up getting much attention. It was impressive from a technical perspective, but since she hadn't demonstrated how to make practical use of such a technique, it left something to be desired. Mira could understand their assessment. Given how the symposium now emphasized practicality, if one were to demonstrate simultaneous evocation, it'd be important to show how their remaining summoning slots could be utilized.

Even so, the School of Evocation managed to get sixth place because the other two summoners had summoned a griffin and a red-footed pony, showing off not only how to use them as transportation but the different ways one could fight while mounted.

While they still hadn't won, they managed to escape last place, where the School of Evocation had perpetually languished. It was all thanks to Cleos, Professor Hinata, and all the other students.

"Still, that's a bit of a shame…"

The results of their assessment and the details of their rationale were delivered to the students by the teachers individually. Emilia was probably getting the bad news right about now.

On her way to the dressing room with Cleos to congratulate the representatives from the School of Evocation, Mira thought about how Emilia must've felt. She must've really put in a lot of work to pick up simultaneous evocation. And yet, the score she got reflected none of the hard work she'd put in. Despite going up on stage as a

representative and doing her best, she'd ended up bombing. That must've felt pretty rotten.

Approaching the dressing room, they heard a voice ring out from the other side.

"Stupid! I'm so stupid! I let myself get carried away because I learned how to use simultaneous evocation like Master Danblf! Sixth place doesn't cut it! Master Danblf would laugh his pants off at anyone who'd be happy with that!"

Considering the words, the voice had to be Emilia. It seemed like she was beating herself up over what'd happened.

"You're wrong. You did very well!" Mira called out as she opened the door to the dressing room before walking imperiously over to Emilia. She wanted to tell her this so badly that she couldn't even bother to worry about how it might look to open the door to a girls' dressing room unannounced.

Despite jumping in shock at Mira shouting out to her, she turned to look at Mira. Then a look of surprise washed over her face as if she'd realized something.

"Huh? Ah…! You're…!"

"Sorry for bursting in, Emilia. Um, this is Miss Mira. She is Master Danblf's disciple, whom I told you about the other day."

"Ah… I thought as much…"

Emilia also remembered seeing her while she was passing through the campus grounds the week before. After discreetly checking on the situation, Cleos had gone in to introduce Mira. At

first, a faint look of joy flashed over Emilia's face, but it was soon replaced by visible embarrassment.

She must've really felt bad about the results of the symposium. Sensing as much, Mira let Emilia know that her simultaneous summoning was very impressive.

"Was it really? Thank you," Emilia said despite still being a bit bewildered.

It seemed hearing as much from the disciple of her hero managed to cheer her up a bit. The disappointment on her face lessened, and she began to recover a bit of her pep. Yet she still looked quite bewildered. The reason for this look was Mira…

Looking a bit unsure but finally resolving to speak, Emilia bowed. "Uh… Um. I'm sorry about before!"

Now it was Mira's turn to be bewildered. "What do you mean by *before*…?"

They'd been far away from each other when she'd seen her at the academy, so there wasn't really anything that could've happened then. What exactly was it she was referring to?

Clueless, Mira stared at Emilia to see if she could recall something. As she did so, the feeling she'd previously had came rushing back to her. It really did feel as if she had seen her somewhere. Perhaps because she was being ogled so intently, Emilia began to look embarrassed. Paying no heed to this, Mira continued racking her brain.

Nothing was really coming to mind.

Emilia quickly interjected, "…At the continental railroad station."

"O-oh! That's right. You were the young girl with that grizzled, old gentleman, weren't you?!"

Having remembered who she was from the hint Emilia had given her, Mira finally remembered what she'd been referencing. She had been standing on the platform for first-class passengers at Silverside Station when an older gentleman and a younger girl had gotten off the train.

At the time, she noticed the archetypal steeliness of the elderly gentleman, accompanied by a younger girl. Now that she thought about it, the young girl had had all the same features as Emilia. The train had arrived at the platform coming from Ozstein…

Long story short, she'd passed by Emilia while on her way to Alcait Academy.

"What a coincidence, bumping into you again like this," Mira said, recalling their encounter.

Emilia still seemed agitated. "So um…" she said before glancing furtively at Mira.

"Hrmm, I'm glad I remembered… But did you do anything that would require an apology?"

She remembered their first meeting now, but what made her want to apologize? Mira only recalled it having been a brief moment, and so she really had no idea what it could be.

And so, Emilia began to explain, despite it seeming difficult for her to say. At that time, she'd blown up at Mira because she thought

Mira had been staring at her.

Hearing this and finally understanding what she was talking about, Mira let out a laugh. She had cared so little about the incident that she didn't even recall it. She let Emilia know that there was no need to worry about it.

"Th-thank you," Emilia said, seeming both happy and relieved. To a girl like her, who looked up to and admired Danblf, his pupil was also someone to be held in high esteem.

However, she'd acted very impolitely toward Mira. And ever since she saw her at the academy, Emilia had been worried sick about how she'd acted. But Mira's magnanimous words came as a relief.

"I saw just how skilled you are at the symposium. Your simultaneous evocation was quite impressive," Mira said, getting back on track and praising Emilia once more. But that wasn't all she had to say. "But if I could help you make a few small changes, I think you could do it even better. So, Emilia…do you have any time after this?"

Mira was ready and willing to immediately show her the ropes when it came to simultaneous evocation. A private lesson from Danblf's pupil was something she couldn't even have dared to wish for. The idea must've really pleased Emilia, as her face immediately lit up.

But it fell the very next moment, having seemed to remember something.

"Today…I've got sword-fighting lessons…"

She had something to do afterward. Cleos chimed in that in order to sharpen the students' dark and holy knights' skills, an instructor employed at the castle had been coming by once a week to give special lessons. Up until recently, Cleos had been acting as their dark knights' sword-fighting teacher, but there was only so much he could teach. He added that ever since the instructor from the castle had started coming, he'd been learning a lot as well. In short, the instructor was even more skilled than Cleos's dark knight.

"Oh ho, that sounds interesting!"

Mira was interested in this training herself now, hoping that she might be able to help her own dark and holy knights grow. Perhaps it was due to the Spirit King's blessing, but within the past week, she had learned from her research that the upper limit that'd been set for the growth of her armor spirits had increased. They now had a higher level cap.

Considering this, sword-fighting practice was the perfect opportunity to see whether or not they could learn some new moves.

"Why don't we take a rain check on my lessons then?" Mira said to Emilia before turning to Cleos to say that she wanted to watch these sword-fighting lessons. Her study of evocation was always her top priority.

"All right. We've still got some time, but how about we head over to the training area?" Cleos answered, beginning to walk away. He must've picked up on what Mira had been thinking.

"By rain check, you mean…" Emilia said, sounding troubled, before following after them.

She’d been worried that that day would be her only chance to get special lessons from the Wise Man’s pupil. But there was no way that Mira wouldn’t give special treatment to an aspiring summoner, especially when the summoner in question was a Danblf fan.

And so, Emilia’s special lesson was already a done deal.

Of course, Emilia had no way of knowing how Mira felt. She wondered if Mira hadn’t just said all that to be nice and whether she could believe her. Worried and anxious, she kept her eyes fixed on Mira and Cleos, who’d gone ahead of her.

Chapter 21

RIGHT BESIDE THE MAIN BUILDING of the school was a training hall where students could practice various spells and techniques.

Having been taken there one time in the past by Professor Hinata in order to see the School of Sorcery's training, Mira looked around the first-floor lobby nostalgically before heading to the training areas inside.

At the end of the hall, she came upon the training area that she'd seen the last time. It was a fantastic place that was large enough for loads of students to train at once.

Cleos turned and went up a set of stairs in front of her.

"Where do you plan on going?" Were they not going to the training area at the end of the hall?

Cleos answered that the School of Evocation was currently using the training area on the second floor. The training hall consisted of five separate training areas. The one Mira had seen before was the main one: training area one. There were also training areas two through five, which were different sizes and served a variety of different uses. Today, they'd be doing physical training and, therefore, using training area two.

"I thought this place was big, but they've got all of those, too, huh?"

Aside from the training areas, there was also a cafeteria, changing rooms, showers, a laundry room, and equipment rooms with arms and armor. The training hall housed everything one might need

to train, as its name suggested. It was a facility befitting the top educational institution for mages on the continent.

Satisfied that it was a fine place to pursue one's studies, Mira went down the second-floor hallway. And when reaching the end of the hallway, she heard a sharp cry coming from inside the training ground.

"Hmm… Who was that…?"

Cleos said, "It looks like he got here early today as well."

There was still half an hour until the School of Evocation's fencing training was to begin. However, the instructor had come an hour early to warm himself up. Emilia mentioned that he was a fantastic teacher who always taught with incredible enthusiasm.

But that wasn't what grabbed Mira's attention.

It was his voice.

Well, now… I feel like I've heard that voice somewhere before…

Who was it? While she was pondering this, Cleos opened the door to the training area.

He must've been quite an accomplished swordsman—for a split second, they could feel a rush of wind sweep through the hallway from the swing of his sword.

"Greetings, we're here for today's lesson."

"We certainly are."

Hearing the pair greet him, the man returned in a calm yet steely voice, "Ah, you're early."

The voice sounded familiar. Looking inside the training ground, Mira and the instructor's eyes met. The moment they did, the instructor seemed surprised to see Mira…but only for a moment.

"Would you look at that! It's little Miss Mira. Long time no see!" the instructor said, laughing cheerfully.

He was dressed in a military uniform and had a sword in his hand, not an axe—making him look completely different than he had before. However, hearing his voice and seeing his face, Mira clearly remembered him.

"Wow, if it isn't Aaron!"

Standing there was Aaron, the A-rank adventurer Mira had worked alongside during the Chimera Clausen incident. Despite her surprise at the unexpected reunion in an unexpected place, she walked over to him, recalling those events.

"Oh my, so you've already met Master Aaron, Miss Mira?"

Mira and Aaron were both happy to have been reunited. Seeing the two of them, Cleos looked a tad shocked as well. He didn't know how Aaron had come to be there.

"Hrmm. He's one of the adventurers I fought with when we were dealing with Chimera," Mira answered concisely, now even more curious as to why Aaron was there.

On the last night she'd seen Aaron, he'd said that once he finished with that job, he'd be retiring as an adventurer. He had other things he wanted to do while he was still able to be physically active. Now he was here, working as a sword-fighting instructor.

Very curious to find out why, Mira cut straight to the chase and asked, “So what’re you doing here?”

“Well, that’s an easy one,” Aaron answered, briefly explaining what had happened. What he wanted to do after retiring as an adventurer was train new adventurers. While standing by at headquarters, a group of young adventurers had requested that he train alongside them. In doing so, he’d decided that it wasn’t a bad way to spend his twilight years.

“Then, one time, I mentioned as much while out drinking. And I have no idea how she heard about it, but Lady Uzume came up and said she’d introduce me to a good place to do just that.”

And so, thanks to her referral, Aaron ended up becoming the instructor for the soldiers of the Kingdom of Alcait. Kagura, one of the Nine Wise Men, had put in a good word for him with Solomon. It was unlikely that he’d ever get another proper referral quite as generous as that one, so Aaron signed on immediately and headed to Alcait.

Now he was teaching the soldiers the various techniques and know-how that he’d accumulated over his career as an adventurer. This included practical ways of fighting monsters and other skills such as survival-oriented techniques and tactics that weren’t covered by military training. These were tips and tricks backed up by decades of experience being an adventurer and could be considered to be utterly priceless.

Cleos added that the percentage of successful monster hunts had risen dramatically within the kingdom.

“I see. That was a smart move.”

They'd managed to get their hands on some impressive talent while also improving the quality of their military. It had been quite the masterstroke, but Mira was just happy to see Aaron again.

"And thanks to that, I'm now able to productively live out my days. I've got Lady Uzume to thank for all of it," Aaron murmured emotionally, smirking happily.

The situation worked out perfectly for both the kingdom and Aaron. Happy to see how well Aaron was doing, Mira smiled softly.

"On that note, we've still got some time until practice starts, little Miss Mira. Would you mind lending me your dark knight so I might finish warming myself up?"

Their time catching up came to an abrupt end with a fiery spark burning in his eyes. He took off his top and cast it aside. He then put down his sword and pulled out his beloved axe from a bag that was standing against the wall.

"Hrmm, sounds good to me. Why don't I lend you a few?"

Regardless of what anyone said, what an armor spirit truly needed to improve was to fight strong opponents. And the suggestion had come from the ideal training partner. Mira immediately agreed and began summoning.

"Huh? What the…?!" Emilia gasped in shock as she looked at the armor spirits that Mira had summoned.

Having neither sensed nor felt any indication of Mira summoning, Emilia was at a complete loss for words as the knights appeared without warning. It was far beyond anything the students

could do. In fact, the knight was so impressive that she could tell from just one look that it was superior to the ones that Professor Hinata or Cleos could use.

But none of that was what surprised her most…

"That's… I ought to have expected as much of you, Lady Mira. It looks like your skills have improved since then," Aaron said amusedly while standing before the armor spirit.

What she'd summoned this time wasn't a dark knight or a holy knight but rather a combination of the two: an ashen knight. They excelled at both defense and offense and had combat capabilities that were capable of matching even an A-rank adventurer.

"Then let's get started!"

He must've gathered how powerful it was. Despite saying he was just going to warm up, Aaron dashed forward with such vigor that he certainly seemed to be serious. The moment Aaron and the ashen knight met, the violent sound of arms clashing rang out and shook the air.

"Ah…"

Seemingly overwhelmed by this sudden burst of intensity, Emilia stumbled. She'd never seen something this impressive before.

"Just when I think I'm getting a little closer, the higher up the mountain she climbs," Emilia murmured to Cleos, who was gently propping her up.

Mira was keeping a sharp eye on how the battle was progressing while smiling brazenly.

I might've expected as much of Aaron. Despite how powerful the ashen knight is, he's managing to push it back… Either way…this'll be a great learning experience!

Convinced that the battle with Aaron would help the armor spirit grow, Mira began using all kinds of techniques that she'd previously been unable to try out on an opponent.

The battle between Aaron and the ashen knight lasted for about ten minutes. In the end, Aaron clinched the match after finishing off his opponent by focusing all the fighting spirit that he'd been emanating into one devastating blow.

"So it couldn't hold up against that, huh?"

"If it had, I'd be out of options."

The technique he'd used had been his finishing move, which he'd used to defeat countless foes back during his days as an adventurer. Having skillfully created an opening in the ashen knight's defense before exploiting it, the finishing move could legitimately be described as masterful.

"I thought I'd strengthened it quite a bit, but I guess not enough to take on someone like you."

"What're you talking about? As far as I'm concerned, the fact that you could summon a knight as if it were nothing is terrifying, little Miss Mira. If you'd summoned another, then it would've been all over."

Having finished their one-on-one match, Mira and Aaron chatted and laughed.

Meanwhile, having seen both Mira's ashen knight and Aaron fighting at full strength, Emilia looked at the two of them with even more respect than she had before. It had been a climactic battle, the likes of which were rarely seen. It'd been a good opportunity for Emilia to see the limits of what was possible.

Unfortunately, they'd gotten a little too into it, and so she'd been unable to really grasp what tactics they'd used or what strategies they'd employed during the battle. There wasn't much she was able to learn from it. But a fire had been lit within Emilia. Her greatest asset was none other than her go-getter attitude, which allowed her to boldly challenge herself without fear of the unknown.

While Emilia was still reflecting on what would become her inspiration for the future, Mira and Aaron were being admonished by Cleos.

"Um… Next time, if the two of you plan on going all out, can you please do it outside?"

It'd been fine while they were just clashing weapons, but once they started unleashing special moves at each other, that changed. The blowback from such strikes—enough to easily send monsters flying—had been far too great.

Taking a quick look, they noticed that all of the training equipment and furnishings in the room had been scattered around and now lay strewn about. Half of it was damaged or broken. What's more, in Cleos's estimation, the physical barriers that had been erected around the training ground had also taken some serious damage.

After Cleos informed them of this with a bitter smile, the two surveyed the damage before hunching their shoulders dejectedly and answered, “Got it,” and “Sure thing.”

“I sure am excited for today’s lesson!” While they cleaned up the disheveled training ground, Professor Hinata made an enthusiastic entrance.

Catching sight of Mira, Cleos, and Emilia, she screamed, “What’s going on?!” and jumped back.

The presence of Mira and Cleos had caught her off guard. After being pushed forward by the students behind her and showing her face once again, Hinata allowed herself to be pushed into the room.

“Looks like you’re in high spirits, Ms. Hinata.”

“That was the kind of greeting that students should aspire to give.”

Hearing this praise from Mira and Cleos, an increasingly conflicted look began to show on Hinata’s face. Aaron’s training was a part of the class. And yet, being so excited to take a class as a teacher made her feel a bit self-conscious.

It was all she could do to say, “I don’t know about that.”

All the students began gathering around. Despite looking bemused at the devastated state of the training ground, they began helping to tidy the place up. Thanks to that, Aaron was able to begin his sword-fighting lessons on time. Or at least he should’ve been…

If not for Mira. As soon as she was introduced, the students all realized she was the Spirit Queen everyone had been talking about.

Ten minutes passed with her just answering questions.

As this was going on, Mira allowed herself to get a bit carried away. Then she remembered where she was and began lecturing the students that it was time for their precious sword-fighting lessons, explaining how important they were.

That day's training was even more intense than usual.

However, that wouldn't be the end of the lessons. After Aaron's training and per the students' requests, Mira began her special class.

"Listen up. Speed is important, but you can't forget distance…"

Mira's class focused on beginner-level summoning techniques that could be used at higher levels and included everything from basics to the practically endless applications of evocation. She'd faced some of the very highest-level opponents at points in her career. Hinata, Cleos, and Aaron were now standing among the students listening to Mira while occasionally firing off questions.

After-school activities had ended, and the sun was going down when the final school bell rang, also bringing Mira's lesson to an end.

"Lady Mira, please teach us again sometime."

"Lady Mira, thank you for teaching us today."

Reluctant to leave because they'd had such a good day, the students returned home.

Perhaps because of her title as the Spirit Queen, Mira realized that the boy students had started calling her *Lady* Mira. The female students, meanwhile, simply called her *Miss* Mira.

"Farewell, little Miss Mira. Should we get the chance, let's go head-to-head again."

"Hrmm, you took the words out of my mouth."

Having exchanged their goodbyes, Aaron returned to the castle. Hinata hurried off, too, as she had to prepare for her next class.

The only ones left were Cleos and Emilia, who had been standing right beside Mira the whole time.

"By the way, what's tomorrow's lesson schedule like?" Mira asked Cleos, after glancing at Emilia.

Emilia had no time for their private lesson today, but what about the day after? Did she have time then? Cleos, gathering what Mira was asking, answered, "We'll have the same schedule as usual tomorrow. So long as it's in the afternoon, she should have time."

"I see. Then let's do it tomorrow!"

If the master of the School of Evocation gave it the thumbs-up, then there would be no issue.

Upon hearing Cleos give the green light, Mira turned to Emilia and said, "So is tomorrow afternoon okay with you?"

Emilia finally realized that the two had been discussing her private lesson. "Y-Yes…! Um…"

Though overjoyed that the lesson would take place sooner than she'd expected, she shot Cleos an inquisitive look. The School of Evocation normally had special lessons in the afternoon.

"There's no need to worry. Thanks to all the requests we've gotten from students, this week the plan is to learn all about the

basics of simultaneous evocation."

Cleos said that for someone like Emilia, who'd already learned the basics, it might be a tad boring. He continued that he was quite grateful that Mira had suggested giving her private lessons, as it'd ensure that she spent that time more constructively.

"By all means, please learn all you can from Miss Mira. And next time, when we practice simultaneous evocation in class, I'd love it if you could assist me," Cleos said, smiling.

Emilia enthusiastically replied, "Sure! You can count on me!"

It was decided that their private lessons would take place at training area two. And Cleos would take care of all the paperwork to ensure they could do so.

With everything worked out, Emilia went back home with her butler, and Mira went back to where Mariana awaited her. It seemed that Cleos still had some things left to do, and so he left the academy two or three hours later.

Returning to her private quarters in the tower, Mira had dinner and then took a bath with Mariana and Luna, enjoying some heartwarming family time. Soon, her batteries were recharged, and Cleos arrived.

After preparing in the office which served as his private quarters, Cleos went to find Mira.

"All right, shall we get started?"

"Yes, please."

This and her class at the academy were different animals.

They were making progress on learning partial evocation, but there were also techniques such as arms evocation and Synchronized Senses left. There were still loads of things that Cleos had to master.

Once more, their intensive session went on deep into the night.

Chapter 22

THE NEXT MORNING…

Because Emilia's private lesson was to be in the afternoon, Mira spent the morning doing things like chatting with Mariana, playing with Luna, and going about her research. Before noon, she left her tower and leisurely made her way to the academy while enjoying Mariana's packed lunch in her wagon.

She arrived at the academy about twenty minutes before afternoon classes were due to start. Dotted about the campus grounds, she saw students enjoying a brief moment of respite.

Word of Mira had spread. She noticed several students calling out, "It's the Spirit Queen!"

From what they said, she could tell that the students' perceptions of evocation had changed for the better. Surely, everything she'd been doing, along with Cleos and Hinata's hard work, was finally starting to pay off. Having observed this, Mira strolled cheerfully toward the training hall.

Despite it still being before their lesson, she found Emilia already ready and waiting in number two.

"Good morning, Miss Mira. I'm ready for today's lesson!"

Judging from her prompt greeting and the anticipation on her face, she must've been looking forward to this quite a bit.

Seeing Emilia like this, Mira considered something else. The fact that summoning was once more gaining recognition wasn't only due

to her, Cleos, and Hinata's hard work. It was because of the brand-new generation of summoners who were giving evocation their all.

"Hrmm, it's a bit early, but why don't we get started?"

Now thinking a bit differently, Mira dove into Emilia's private lesson.

A few hours had passed under Mira's instruction. Emilia was assiduously practicing immediate simultaneous summoning while being given signals by Mira.

"Hrmm, you're getting there. With that speed, you can probably use it in actual combat."

This was the foundation of Danblf's simultaneous evocation technique, which he'd poured his knowledge and know-how into creating.

Thanks to her raw talent and Mira instructing her in the basics of the technique, Emilia's speed had increased dramatically. So much so that it far outclassed the simultaneous evocation that she'd demonstrated at the Spell Symposium.

"Th-thank you!"

Despite being utterly exhausted, Emilia was happy to hear the praise. At the same time, she was surprised. Her concerns that she'd plateaued had vanished. Basking in this happiness and surprise, she smiled as if everything she'd worried about up until then had gone out the window. But when it came to summoning, Mira was uncharacteristically strict.

"Don't let that go to your head. You're only just getting started," Mira reminded Emilia sharply. She then told Emilia to set her goals higher before demonstrating her own simultaneous evocation.

Mira didn't need a single gesture to execute the technique. Yet she'd instantaneously summoned two dark knights before her. Not only that…she did it twice. Then three times.

"Incredible…"

It was beyond what Emilia even imagined possible. It took a substantial amount of focus and concentration just to use simultaneous evocation once, and Mira had done it without batting an eye while talking and showing no sign that she was about to do so. From Emilia's point of view, it must've seemed superhuman. And yet, she wasn't discouraged by the sight, simply filled with childlike surprise. She hastily asked Mira to teach her whatever was next.

Seeing the fiery passion burning in Emilia's eyes, Mira proposed a question to her before moving on to the next subject.

"That's the spirit. All right, in that case… Emilia, what do you think are the advantages of simultaneous evocation?"

"The advantages?" Emilia's excitement had yet to die down, and she regained her composure upon hearing Mira's question. And after thinking it over for a moment, she gave her answer.

The benefits of simultaneous evocation were first that she could muster greater fighting strength while only summoning a single time. Or she could distract the enemy by summoning multiple evocations, all the while cutting back on the summoning slots one used.

She seemed to have thoroughly studied the basics.

"Hrmm, those are all correct. However, that's not all."

Nodding her head as if impressed, Mira nevertheless said it wasn't fully correct. Dismissing all of her dark knights, she used some rather conspicuous gestures to perform a summoning technique. And right beside Mira, a dark knight appeared. However, Emilia tilted her head inquisitively, having noted that there was only one.

They were talking about the benefits of simultaneous evocation, and yet, she'd only summoned a single knight. What had been the purpose of doing so?

However, Emilia had been hasty to jump to that conclusion. It only *looked* like Mira had summoned one.

A solid hand fell on Emilia's shoulder with a thud.

"Huh?"

Turning around in surprise, Emilia then cried out. Amazingly, there stood five dark knights in a line.

The technique Mira had used moments before had been simultaneous summoning. But this time, she had set all the summoning points but one behind Emilia's back.

"Summoning points are quite versatile. You can utilize them even more effectively when using them with simultaneous evocation like I just did."

What Mira had shown her was a technique that had the potential to turn the tables during battle in an instant. After a

moment, Emilia finally comprehended what'd happened and was astonished.

The more skilled a mage was, the greater the range they could set summoning points at. For a mage as skilled as Mira, it was possible to summon anywhere within a sixty-five-foot radius around herself.

Using that technique, she could encircle an enemy in the blink of an eye. As if that weren't enough, were she to summon one evocation in front to distract them, she could even cut off their escape route without them realizing it.

This was another potential advantage of using simultaneous summoning.

"All right, how about we get started?"

"O-okay!"

She would need to expand where she was able to set summoning points. Mira began teaching her that this was another crucial element when it came to simultaneous summoning. The first thing she checked was Emilia's summoning range. She was pretty good at this, summoning an evocation about sixteen feet in front of her.

However, she only summoned a single evocation.

"Hng… What's…this? What's going…huh?"

She was attempting to use simultaneous evocation sixteen feet ahead. This wasn't necessarily an issue. But, due to a miscalculation, the spell itself ended up failing.

When she split up her summoning points, she used to set one immediately in front of her and the other farther off. Until now, every time she'd used simultaneous evocation, it'd been to summon two evocations right next to each other.

But the goal this time was simply to summon one of them elsewhere.

Despite this being all she had to do, Emilia struggled with it more than she had with anything that day.

"Miss Mira…" Emilia almost always took on whatever was thrown at her but now seemed to be at the point where she just couldn't figure out what she was doing wrong. Utterly exhausted, she beseeched Mira for help.

"Well, it is your first time, after all."

Simultaneous evocation demanded a high level of skill. But despite it being one technique, there were various hurdles that needed to be cleared to use it. Using separate summoning points was but one of these very hurdles.

"Listen up. The way you direct your mana isn't much different from how you would normally summon…"

Having keenly watched how Emilia was executing the technique, Mira told her where it was that she was making a mistake and thoroughly explained how to avoid doing so. A lot of it had to do with feeling, and so the most important element wasn't knowledge but experience.

Following Mira's instructions, Emilia doggedly practiced again and again so that she might pick up a sense for it. But, as one might expect, it took time. Emilia didn't manage to do it that day, but thanks to Mira's advice, she seemed to have gotten a feel for it.

"Oh my, it's gotten pretty late. Let's stop here for today," Mira said, bringing the lesson to a close after hearing the final school bell ring.

Her reluctance to leave was written all over her face, but Emilia said, "Miss Mira, thank you for today!" before bowing.

"There's no need to thank me. I'm teaching you because I enjoy doing it," Mira said cheerfully, answering Emilia—a serious student who burned with passion for her studies. Then she added, "So I'll see you at the same time tomorrow."

And the moment she did, the look of exhaustion on Emilia's face turned to one of utter shock.

"Huh?!"

And the moment Mira saw this look, a dark thought flashed through her mind. Had she been too strict with her? What if Emilia dreaded the thought of having to practice the next day?

But she needn't have worried. Far from dreading the thought, Emilia had thought their special lesson would be one day only, so she'd just been surprised to hear Mira say that she'd see her tomorrow.

"Can we do tomorrow, too?!"

Sure enough, the fatigue and weariness that'd been on her face seemed to vanish as she smiled broadly.

"Hrmm, if you'd like to and have time. We certainly can."

"I would! And I do! I'd really love to!" Emilia answered immediately. Her passion when it came to summoning seemed to be the real thing.

She must've been quite happy, as she proudly chatted to the butler about how she'd be having special lessons tomorrow when he came to take her home.

Tomorrow, we'll continue what we were practicing today… But what else should I teach her?

Thinking about what her plan would be for the following day, Mira hopped into her wagon and headed home. Feeling that Emilia was very much a student worthy of teaching, Mira was quite happy herself as well.

After getting back to her tower and resting a moment, Cleos returned. This meant it was now time for Cleos's special lessons…

But before that, they had their daily chat, which had become a new routine. The topic of these chats usually had to do with the classes at the academy, with Mira asking what it was that Cleos would be teaching next. They also used the time as an opportunity to discuss how Emilia had been doing or how the curriculum was progressing.

"Everyone's working their tails off, aren't they? And I bet Emilia will become a fantastic example for them to follow."

"You think so? After just one day…?"

Beginning that day, the School of Evocation had begun full-fledged lessons on simultaneous summoning. Unsurprisingly, no one had succeeded in successfully executing the technique. But they had all begun to get a sense for it.

Mira laughed that the other students, not to be outdone by Emilia, must also be worthy of teaching. Cleos chuckled bitterly that she was teaching Emilia too quickly. Having overcome the same hurdles himself, Cleos knew this very well.

Wrapping up their discussion, Cleos threw himself into his intensive training. Today, he appeared to be raring to go.

It'd been one week since the Spell Symposium…

Mira had been working on her research, experiments, and Cleos's intensive training. She'd also been continuing to give Emilia private lessons the whole time. Thanks to Emilia's hard work and Mira's instruction, the girl's abilities had improved dramatically. As a result, she was now even able to use simultaneous evocation from a distance of over sixteen feet. Her ability to do so surprised even Mira.

"Hrmm, you sure can feel the youthful energy at the academy in the morning."

Emilia's private lessons usually took place in the afternoon. But in order to get ready to bump her lessons up to the next step, Mira had come to the academy in the morning. Emilia's simultaneous evocation had reached a point where Mira thought she could

reasonably use it in combat. So today she planned on having her practice using it against monsters…

They were to meet in the lobby of the training hall. Poking her head inside, she heard Emilia's jovial voice.

"Good morning!"

"Ah, you're already here."

Mira had arrived a little bit earlier than they were scheduled to meet—and Emilia had come even earlier than she had.

"I woke up a bit early and just couldn't wait."

She must've been excited. She had the vibe of a child the night before a school field trip.

"Hrmm, in that case, why don't we head out early?"

They'd head out to do actual combat. Emilia appeared to be in such high spirits that she didn't seem the least bit anxious.

…Perhaps it was confidence. Or arrogance.

Sure that today would be a big day for Emilia, Mira steeled herself and took the girl outside. Getting into her Garuda wagon, the two made their way to a beginner-level forest.

"Ah, the city is already so far away… I wonder how far that mountain range goes. I can see the forest now!" Emilia was very much amped up by the view from high up in the sky.

But that wasn't all she was excited about. It must've hit home that if she could master summoning, then she could do all kinds of things. Mira could tell that she was getting more and more fired up.

Just like that, they arrived in front of the forest. After taking a quick look around, they finally ran into their first monster.

"Hey, there's one. Emilia, can you take it?"

Upon having Mira check with her, Emilia strode forward. "Yes, I sure can!"

Fearlessly facing down the real-life monster, Emilia began to do battle with it as Mira watched.

The girl's capabilities were the real thing. Regardless of the fact that it was her first real battle, she used simultaneous evocation and secured a flawless victory.

"Well, color me surprised. To think that you were able to defeat it right off the bat…"

Hearing such unreserved praise, Emilia cheerfully replied that it wasn't the least bit surprising.

"It's all thanks to everything you taught me. I knew if I just did what you said, I'd be fine."

The reason she'd faced the monster fearlessly was because of what Mira had taught her.

"Hrmm, really? I admire your attitude."

Being Emilia's teacher, Mira set her eyes in a firm gaze, even as her mouth unintentionally crept into a smile after hearing her words.

After finishing her first battle, Emilia went on to fight several more monsters. But the last encounter they had was with two monsters, which proved to be difficult foes for the inexperienced girl.

She'd managed to pull through and win by a hair, but there was room for improvement.

"I knew what to do, but I just couldn't move the way I wanted…" Emilia lamented. And yet, she didn't lose her spirit. With her eyes brimming with enthusiasm, she said that she felt fortunate to have been able to experience such a tough battle so soon.

She certainly was a tenacious girl. Seeing as much, Mira said they might next work on how to fight multiple opponents, deciding what she'd be teaching the girl next. At any rate, having experienced real battle, there was no doubt that she'd grown.

It was a little after noon by the time they wrapped up their excursion to the forest and got back to the academy.

"Thank you, Miss Mira. I'm excited for our lesson after school as well!"

While she ought to have been tired after fighting so many battles, Emilia ran eagerly toward the school building so that she could make her afternoon classes.

"All right, then what should I teach her after?"

They'd be having their after-school training just like usual. While thinking up some combat techniques that could be used to combat multiple foes, Mira headed toward the castle while pondering which exactly would suit Emilia best.

Mira waited for class to end while crafting blasting stones like Solomon had requested.

After school, Emilia began her intensive training with Mira in training area two. Focusing on the areas where they'd realized she needed to improve, Mira was giving her a lecture on how to take on multiple opponents.

"…And so you can also use it like that. What's wrong, Emilia? You look a bit down."

Emilia usually listened to Mira with a fiery look in her eyes. But today, it seemed as if she couldn't really concentrate. They'd been doing special training from early in the morning, so perhaps she was tired.

Emilia responded, "I apologize," before opening her mouth as if she'd made up her mind to say something. "Um, it's just that the portrait of Master Danblf that hangs in the banquet hall… Well, someone…"

Emilia's voice was filled with a fury that Mira had never yet heard.

She said that the banquet hall was the place where they hosted various events and functions. Hanging in that room were large portraits of all Nine Wise Men, and it was the school's most sacred space.

"Today, I was on cleaning duty for the banquet hall. And I went up to pay my respects before the Danblf portrait…" Then, while trying to contain the anger that was simmering within her, she shouted, as if unable to bear it any longer, "And someone had scribbled horrible things over Master Danblf's, and *only* Master Danblf's, portrait!"

"What…did you say…?!" Hearing this, Mira also found herself at a loss for words.

Had someone scribbled over all the portraits, then it could be considered just some troublemaker's prank. But this wasn't the case if someone had only done it to the portrait of Danblf. In that case, it was undoubtedly a deliberate and premeditated offense.

"I see. Okay, I got it. I can understand how it'd bother you that whoever did that is still out there."

Targeting only Danblf like that was utterly unconscionable. It was surely someone's way of declaring war. Having come to this conclusion, Mira roared, "For the time being, we'll put training on hold. If whoever did that wants war, then we'll give it to 'em!"

With the criminal still out on the loose, Emilia would be distracted and unable to focus on her special lessons. And Mira wouldn't be able to settle down if she allowed such a thing to go unpunished. Mira was feeling fired up.

"Okay, let's get 'em!" Emilia answered, with the same sharp, hunter-like glint in her eyes as Mira.

Chapter 23

"OH HO, WOULD YOU LOOK at this… It would seem that the culprit doesn't hold their life dear," Mira muttered as if swearing, her face a visage of rage.

Danblf's portrait had been covered in graffiti from top to bottom.

He'd been given a unibrow, had his eyes expanded in a disgusting stare, sprouted nose *and* ear hair, and now had *cueball* written across his forehead. He'd also been given clown-like circles on his cheeks, had purple lipstick painted on his lips, and looked to be in poor health.

The portrait was covered in phrases such as "just some old geezer" and "dirty old man."

"Yes, we will find and slaughter whoever did this!"

Anyone who saw it would certainly agree that Danblf looked to be in a sorry state. It was only the glass in front of the portrait that was covered in graffiti. If one were to wipe it off and clean it, it should go right back to looking how it had.

But Emilia knew the graffiti had been drawn with a permanent marker. She'd tried hard to scrub it off but hadn't been able to clean very much off.

Looking closely, there were some places in which the graffiti had been wiped away, evidence of Emilia's struggle to clean it. It should still be possible to fix. She'd already notified Cleos, and they'd be receiving a special detergent to clean it in a few days.

But the issue wasn't simply whether or not they could clean it.

Whoever had specifically targeted Danblf and graffitied all over his portrait was still on the loose. To Mira, this was a declaration of war.

"In situations like this, the first thing to do is survey the crime scene."

In order to get some clues regarding the culprit, Mira hurriedly got summoning.

Naturally, she summoned First Pupil and Woofson, who'd been frequent guests of late.

"No matter meow tough the case, you can leave it to me!"

"Dearest Master, might you need to use some of my knowledge, woof?"

First Pupil had made a flashy entrance while Woofson's was rather courtly. However, right afterward, the two noticed each other and immediately glared at one another.

Mira noted that they were the same as usual and tried to step between them, but when Emilia caught sight of them both, she began getting extremely excited.

"H-Huh…?! The way they look… Their mannerisms… They seem just like Master Woofson and Master First Pupil! Incredible! But wait… Could they be the real thing?!"

She managed to creep up to them lightning fast and, gazing at them with glittering eyes, said, "You look exactly like I've heard…!" with a jubilant smile on her face.

"Oh ho, you know your stuff, don't you?" She ought to have expected as much of a diehard Danblf fan.

"Of course! Everyone knows about Master First Pupil and Master Woofson!"

Cat Sith and Woofson shouldn't have appeared in stories about the Nine Wise Men, which were standard bedtime story fare… However, Emilia had learned about them from word of mouth despite them not making it into books.

Emilia knew more about Danblf than she'd imagined.

"Did Master Danblf pass them on to you?!"

While there were very strict conditions for doing so, it was *possible* to pass on evocation contracts. Emilia seemed to think that this was probable when it came to master and pupil.

She was sure that it was possible to inherit evocations instead of guessing that Mira was really Danblf. Relieved that the whole master-pupil idea she'd come up with was still working, Mira said, "Y-yes…" Thereby confirming Emilia's assumption.

Then First Pupil tilted his head quizzically and blurted out, "Pass on? What're you talki—"

Woofson quickly covered First Pupil's mouth, preventing him from spilling the beans. He even used his scent magic to render First Pupil unconscious. It was brilliantly done.

First Pupil's eyes rolled back into his head as he passed out.

"Um, is he okay…?"

"He does that," Mira told the concerned-looking Emilia as if there was nothing wrong. "They're dear friends that were entrusted to me by my master."

She'd lost First Pupil's help with the investigation, but she could make do with Woofson. Mira and her companions began searching the banquet hall to see if there was any evidence that the culprit had left behind.

For the time being, I should probably try to hold back from using evocations.

Emilia might know about other things as well. Resolving to be more careful not to expose her true identity, Mira continued her search.

Having checked out the entire banquet hall, they were unable to find a single shred of evidence that might help them identify the culprit. They'd even used Woofson's abilities, but surprisingly, he hadn't been able to detect any lingering scents.

"It seems like this place was cleaned thoroughly. Even my nose won't be of much use, woof," Woof said dejectedly.

Hearing him say this, there was one person in the room who felt especially dejected: Emilia.

"What…?!"

The graffiti had shaken her terribly. And yet, she had a strong sense of responsibility and cleaned the place as impeccably as she could along with the other students on cleaning duty.

All the hard work she'd put into trying to clean the portrait of Danblf had backfired, as she'd eliminated the culprit's scent. The tragic turn of events had happened because she was so earnest.

"Hey, there's no need to feel down. Despite being so shaken up, you felt compelled to clean it as best as you could. That's admirable." Mira commended Emilia by saying that she'd only done her duty. Then clapping her on the back, Mira said, "There are plenty of other ways of finding them…so there's no time to feel down in the dumps. Let's make whoever did this pay!"

"Yes, that's true. Let's do it!"

Feeling inspired and rising to her feet, Emilia said she might be able to narrow down exactly when the crime had been committed.

The banquet hall was normally locked. The key was usually kept in the Teachers' Room, so it was impossible to sneak off with.

"Students volunteer to clean this room and the last time the School of Evocation cleaned in here was three days ago. There wasn't any graffiti on Master Danblf's portrait then," Emilia said with certainty. She'd volunteered to be on banquet hall cleaning duty so that she could see his portrait.

And since she was saying so, it had to be true…

"There shouldn't have been any events in this room between then and now. In other words…the culprit must belong to whatever school was cleaning in here yesterday or the day before," Emilia deduced.

Considering what they knew at the moment, that was the most likely possibility.

"Hrmm, who was on cleaning duty yesterday and the day before that?"

And what was the motive for drawing graffiti all over Danblf's portrait? Not being able to think of anything she might've done to make enemies of anyone, including any of the academy's students, Mira hadn't a clue.

But Emilia seemed pretty convinced as she said this, "The day before yesterday it was the School of the Holy Arts, and the day before that was…the School of Sorcery!" Emilia loudly proclaimed as if she'd cracked the case.

The story of how Mira had trounced the School of Sorcery's representative, Caerus, during one of the past Spell Symposiums was well known throughout the academy. On top of that, even knowing that Mira was Danblf's pupil, Caerus had decided to attack Mira before getting a taste of his own medicine.

"He really is the worst for attacking you, Miss Mira. And he took advantage of being from a noble family to… Not that you heard this from me, but word of that going around put the School of Sorcery in a bit of a bind. I've heard that even at Spell Symposiums, the School of Sorcery is judged particularly harshly."

It was for those types of reasons that brand-new students in the School of Evocation had found themselves on the receiving end of various kinds of abuse. But now, there were students such as Emilia

who'd grown enough to stand up for themselves, and direct harassment had begun to stop.

With all of this considered, it was certainly possible that someone with a grudge had scribbled graffiti over Danblf's portrait. Or at least that was Emilia's guess.

Assuming that the chances of it being perpetrated by the School of the Holy Arts were extremely low, Woofson suggested they go question the School of Sorcery.

"Hrmm, good plan. Asking questions is the foundation of investigating."

"Okay, let's go!"

They'd search for the culprit on foot. Getting back to the basics of investigating, Mira and her companions left the banquet hall to march over to the School of Sorcery.

Securely locking the door once more, Mira's gaze lingered on several girls going into a nearby room. As fate would have it, the girls coming out of the room were all wearing gym clothes.

Oh no, so next door is a changing room.

Getting a better look, Mira noticed that the room near the banquet hall was the girls' changing room. The room nearby was the boys' changing room. Inside she saw the words *Gymnasium No. 2* written in big letters.

It certainly was a big school to have two gymnasiums.

Hrmm… The girls' changing room, eh?

The indescribably wonderful sounds she heard coming from the room sent Mira's mind racing. But then she heard Emilia's voice say, "All right, Miss Mira. Let's go!" and was brought crashing back to reality.

"H-hrmm, yes, let's go," she stuttered.

Having made their way to the School of Sorcery, Mira and her companions first sought out the ones who had cleaning duty in the banquet hall.

Finding them wouldn't be terribly difficult. While the inside of the banquet hall had been wiped clean, there were scents lingering outside. Using Woofson's abilities, they could pinpoint whoever had been in the banquet hall the day before.

"So that's what happened. How did cleaning go that day?" Emilia asked the students who'd been on cleaning duty.

She wasn't casting suspicion on the School of Sorcery and demanding that they confess. She was simply stating the fact that someone had scribbled graffiti on Danblf's portrait and asking whether or not they'd noticed anything.

"Hey, you're joking, right? Who'd do something that stupid…?" one of the students who'd been on cleaning duty said incredulously.

Woofson, who was wrapped in Mira's arms, reported, "It's very likely that he's innocent. His expression is one of surprise mixed with a hint of fear, woof."

They were investigating by asking a non-accusatory question and then having Woofson assess reactions.

Upon doing so, he observed no suspicious behavior from anyone that'd been on cleaning duty. Their question session concluded with them all being deemed innocent.

"If they were lying, then they ought to all think about becoming actors."

Having wrapped up their question session, Mira and her companions temporarily returned to the School of Evocation and went to a classroom to go over everything they'd learned.

"Considering how nobody could just walk in and grab the key, the School of Sorcery is clearly the most suspicious. After all, they were the ones on cleaning duty yesterday…" Emilia certainly had her own thoughts on the matter and still wasn't ready to rule them out.

"Hrmm, all things considered, it certainly seems that way…"

Emilia wasn't wrong. Considering the timing, it seemed improbable that anyone else had done it. But why would someone do something like that despite knowing full well that they'd be the first ones suspected of doing so.

But Mira was skeptical as to whether they even still held the grudge that Emilia had mentioned as a likely motive. From what she'd heard, there hadn't been much conflict between them recently. But it was certainly true that she couldn't know how they were feeling deep down.

So is there anyone we know who might have an ear to the ground…?

She was wondering if anyone might have an idea about how things were in the School of Sorcery that wasn't quite as biased as Emilia.

Pondering this, a lightbulb went off in Mira's head.

At right about that same moment, the final school bell rang, announcing that it was time to return home.

"All right, let's end the investigation for the day. We can pick up again tomorrow," Mira said, standing up. Emilia still seemed unsatisfied. But who could blame her? Something she loved had been defaced.

She nodded and answered, "Okay…" perhaps just because Mira had suggested it.

"All right, get home safe now."

Leaving Emilia in the care of the butler, Mira headed to the castle.

Chapter 24

"NOW THEN, where is she?"

After saying goodbye to Emilia, Mira had gone hunting.

Having said hello to the guards, with whom she was already well acquainted, Mira made her way into the castle and was searching for a certain someone while keeping an eye out for Lily or Tabitha. The person Mira was looking for was one who might know a lot about the goings on of the School of Sorcery…

…The sorcerer and Wise Man, Luminaria.

As she passed by, Mira asked the secretary where Luminaria was. As fate would have it, they immediately told Mira exactly where to find her. Luminaria was in the middle of training the mage battalion.

"Oh ho… She's really going at it."

Peeking into the training facility, she saw Luminaria rigorously instructing the battalion of mages. She was on the verge of being impressed at how serious Luminaria was…until she began teaching a female mage.

She got closer than necessary and began touching the mage with her hands to guide her step-by-step on what to do. And yet, the mage didn't seem to mind. If anything, it seemed like the spells she was casting got more accurate every time Luminaria did this.

Stunned to see the teaching method she was employing, Mira waited for the training session to end.

Nearly an hour passed…

Mira grabbed ahold of Luminaria, who was asking one of the female mages out to dinner, and headed into an empty conference room.

"So what is it that's so important that you had to interrupt my dinner plans?"

Despite having complained that she'd interrupted her, the chief expression on Luminaria's face was one of curiosity. Perhaps this was due to her getting so few visits from Mira.

Mira asked her simply, "It has to do with the academy. I heard that before, the School of Sorcery wasn't the biggest fan of the School of Evocation. But how are things now?"

She wanted to find out if there was still enough enmity to vandalize Danblf's portrait as a way to get even.

However, Luminaria merely answered, "…You got me."

"Seriously…?"

Considering the incident with Caerus, she ought to have a good idea about the situation. And yet, that was the answer she gave.

Mira stared daggers at Luminaria.

"I mean, I said I'd check in once a month. Don't worry. Everything's already cooled down. …Probably," Luminaria carelessly threw out. Then she counterattacked with, "Why're you asking me about this?"

Letting out a heavy sigh at Luminaria's attitude, Mira explained about the incident with the graffiti.

"…Graffiti?! Really?! Sounds like they're having a good time over there!"

The Nine Wise Men were national heroes, and to the students of Alcait Academy, they were figures to be respected and admired. Not since the founding of the academy had a single person done anything to disrespect any of the portraits of the Nine Wise Men.

And yet, Luminaria seemed to find it utterly hilarious that the first time it'd ever happened, the culprit had deliberately targeted Danblf.

"Stop laughing!"

While it may have been funny for Luminaria, to Mira, it was tantamount to a declaration of war.

"Well, yeah. Anyhow, that's pretty fun. I mean, such a thing is a grievous affront to the Nine Wise Men. In which case, how about I join your investigation? I *do* think I'm starting to get an idea as to the situation at the academy, after all," Luminaria said, looking thoroughly enthused while brushing aside Mira's angry stare. Then, as if she'd had a fantastic idea, she continued, "But if you go investigating with guns blazing, the culprit will be extra cautious."

She looked as if she were planning something nefarious. And giving no word about what it was she was planning, she said, "All right, then see you tomorrow morning at seven," before leaving with a spirited smile on her face.

Just how was someone as famous as Luminaria planning to help their investigation?

She wasn't sure what she was planning, but at this point, there'd be no stopping her from tagging along. And so, having a bad feeling about the whole thing, Mira decided to spend the night in the castle.

The next morning at seven thirty…

"Why me…?"

Meeting up with Luminaria just like she'd promised and faced with her current circumstances, all Mira could do was put her hands together and pray.

"Heeey, you really pull that off!"

That high praise had come from none other than Luminaria. And yet, it hadn't…

At the moment, Luminaria had blue hair and was dressed in an Alcait Academy school uniform. She was wearing glasses, giving her an intellectual air.

Mira, meanwhile, had dyed her hair black and was also properly dressed in a school uniform.

This was the plan that Luminaria had come up with.

Were the Wise Men Luminaria and Mira to investigate, then they would've undoubtedly put a lot of unnecessary pressure on the other students. Word might quickly spread, and the culprit was liable to lay extra low.

And so, by dressing up as students, they'd be able to investigate without attracting any undue attention. Or at least that was what Luminaria had suggested…

"Ya know, I always wanted to try dressing like this and roaming the halls of the academy. But it kinda…feels a bit shameful or something. You get what I mean, right? But like, having someone with me, I kinda feel like that's fine. Ya know?" Luminaria said excitedly, as if her whole plan had just been a front. She'd just explicitly admitted that she was using the whole incident as a pretext to go around in a school uniform. She was clearly very much in high spirits, given the circumstances.

"I agreed to wear this because you said it'd make it easier to talk to students if we looked like them…" Mira shot her an angry glare, but Luminaria simply shrugged it off.

"There's that… But hey, you ought to be getting used to that body by now. In which case, you should know how deliciously devious this feels," Luminaria said, suggesting that she wasn't the only one having fun.

Mira turned to check herself out once more in the mirror. "Hrmm…"

Looking at herself in the schoolgirl uniform, Mira found that, just as Luminaria had suggested, she did feel an indescribable sensation. Having that feeling shoot down her back, Mira's whole body shuddered. She was wearing a girls' school uniform. It was a difficult feeling to describe and likely something she would never do alone.

But Luminaria was right next to her and in the exact same position.

She didn't only feel weirdly at ease but also felt only half of the shame that she would've felt had she been by herself. And she felt

exhilarated in a way that was difficult to put into words.

"All right, let's get going."

"Hrmm…"

Having steeled her resolve, Mira joined Luminaria in heading off toward the academy dressed as she was.

It was about the time that everyone was getting to school. The expressions the students wore ran the gamut, from full of energy to half-asleep.

Mira and Luminaria walked among these very students as they passed through the school gate and headed into the main building. Once there, they headed off toward the School of Evocation so that they could first tell Emilia about their plans for the day.

"Hrmm… Is she not here yet?"

Peeking inside the classroom, Mira observed that Emilia's seat was empty. Perhaps she had yet to arrive at school.

Right as Mira was thinking this, Luminaria, also peeking inside the classroom, said, "Jeez, they really are all totally different ages."

New students and returning students in the School of Evocation were all grouped together, and so both children and teenagers all sat in the same classroom.

"We've only just gotten started! Just you wait!"

It looked like the kind of school you'd see out in the countryside, but soon enough, it'd be as packed full as the others. Or so Mira fantasized as she saw a familiar face approach her from the other side of the hall.

"Wow, perfect timing. Wait here for a second," Mira said, running over.

The person in question was Hinata.

Mira guessed that, being the teacher of the School of Evocation, she would likely know about Emilia.

"Ms. Hinata, I have a quick question for you. Do you have a second?" Mira called out casually, having completely forgotten that she was in disguise.

"Ah, ummm…"

It seemed like some student who she'd never seen before had called out to her as one would a buddy. One of the stricter professors at the academy might've admonished Mira for speaking that way toward a teacher.

However, Hinata was too busy racking her brain as to who this student was. Had she somehow forgotten about her? That would be impossible. Considering how warmly she'd greeted her, they must be well-acquainted. But she couldn't figure out who the girl was.

Thinking it was unacceptable for a teacher to forget their students, Hinata glanced at Mira several times while trying to think who she was.

"Heeey, Ms. Hinataaa!" Mira said to Hinata, who stood before her stony-faced and motionless, while waving her left hand.

As soon as she did, Hinata's eyes opened wide, and a look of recognition flashed across her face.

"Mira! But…*why*?!"

Thanks to the User's Bangle of her left arm, Hinata saw through Mira's disguise. And the moment she did, she demanded an explanation. The expression on her face shifted between curiosity and disgust.

"Well…"

Now able to speak to Hinata properly, Mira explained their investigation into the graffiti incident and how it was going.

"I'll do whatever I can to help!" Hinata announced after having finished listening to Mira's explanation.

The school administrative committee had instructed the staff not to make a big deal out of it as they figured out some way of wiping the graffiti off. But being a summoner herself, Hinata couldn't quite get on board with this.

And so, Hinata was eager to sign on and promised she wouldn't say a word about Mira, who not only wasn't a teacher but also held the esteemed position of being Danblf's pupil.

"In that case…"

Having added Hinata to her list of allies, Mira quickly asked about Emilia. Mira wanted to know about what time the girl usually got to class.

"Huh? Emilia always gets to class before all the other students…"

After answering this, Hinata gingerly peeked into class and continued, "Ah… Her bag is there, so she must already be here."

It seemed that Emilia had already arrived. And yet, she was nowhere to be found.

Perhaps their investigation had been exposed, and Emilia had been taken captive. Or at least this was a thought that went through Mira's head.

"She's got to be somewhere. Maybe I'll call her here," Hinata then said, immediately going to call via the school PA system. A few minutes later, they heard an announcement summoning the girl.

Emilia, unharmed, showed up soon thereafter.

"Whoa…! Miss Mira?! You look so cute. And we're dressed the same, too!" she said, smiling happily in the hallway in front of the classroom and having recognized Mira in spite of her black hair and schoolgirl disguise.

Perhaps in response to her smiling face, Luminaria interjected, "You look pretty cute yourself."

"Th-thanks…"

Even in disguise, Luminaria was so beautiful that she could attract even other women. But someone Emilia's age was surely too young.

Despite blushing slightly, Emilia drew herself back as if she'd instinctively perceived something.

"Don't worry about her. She's just an acquaintance with the School of Sorcery. Well, she does happen to know a lot about the situation over there, and…after talking to her, she asked to tag along. So now we have no choice but to investigate…together," Mira explained while attempting to push away Luminaria, who kept making advances on her beloved student.

"The name's Riana. Nice to meet you." Due to the differences in their respective physiques, Luminaria dealt with Mira by locking her in an embrace before giving her name.

Meanwhile, Emilia replied, "My name is Emilia. The School of Sorcery, hmm? But I feel like I've seen you somewhere…"

It was no surprise… After all, she was one of the very people whose likenesses hung in the banquet hall.

"Well, anyway…!" Mira said, quickly changing the subject and diving into what their plans for the day would be.

Emilia had said she wanted to join in the investigation but, of course, her studies took precedence. While it was an academy for mages, there were also a good many classes teaching core subjects, and they couldn't have her skipping.

After explaining the plan to Emilia, Mira and Luminaria headed to the School of Sorcery. So Mira and Luminaria set about casually questioning sorcery students in between classes or while students were making their way from one class to another. They gathered detailed information on how things were within the school and the different cliques, any gossip, and how students felt toward other schools of magic.

"Jeez, it sure is easy to get boys to do what you want…"

Having more or less finished questioning students, the two then met in Cleos's office and began going over the intel they'd gathered. Cleos was currently in the middle of class, so they just walked in and started using it.

It was safe to say that their information-gathering session had gone off without a hitch. Per Luminaria's suggestion, they'd targeted exclusively male students to question and had managed to gather an absurd amount of information.

Regardless of what they might be on the inside, Mira and Luminaria looked like the quintessential pretty young girl and sexy lady. When stopped by either such woman, most men would easily give up one of two secrets, at least. Mira had even employed some of Luminaria's very own seduction techniques when questioning. A mere student never had a chance of resisting.

"I think that guy named Dielid is probably our top suspect."

"All things considered, that's probably true."

Having gone over all the information they'd obtained, one name, in particular, stood out when it came to who might've vandalized the Danblf portrait. The person they both suspected was none other than one of Caerus's goons. What's more, he was on cleaning duty with the other School of Sorcery students, despite them not having been able to interview him the day before.

From what they heard, Dielid seemed to be in pretty tough straits. Back when he was one of Caerus's goons, he was a big shot in the School of Sorcery. But after the whole incident, the situation had very much changed. Despite still being in the School of Sorcery, it was said he was now the odd man out.

In short, it was plausible that he'd committed the crime because he resented his fall from grace and blamed Mira, who was Danblf's pupil.

"But jeez, to think how much fallout there was from the Spell Symposium…"

There had been both positive and negative outcomes to what'd happened at the Spell Symposium. Luminaria seemed particularly bothered that there were other unforeseen consequences.

"What're you talking about? All I did was help them improve the curriculum."

Meanwhile, despite having tried to sound confident, Mira's words rang hollow.

Chapter 25

MIRA AND LUMINARIA then made their way to training area one in the training hall, where students from the School of Sorcery were polishing their skills.

"So where is this Dielid?"

Mira looked around the training area, which was filled with several dozen students. But the only thing they knew about the boy in question was his name and that he was a boy.

Considering that it'd take too long to find him themselves in such a situation, Luminaria went to grab a random boy to ask them when…

"Hey, don't you think it's gotta be him?" Mira guessed.

Luminaria then looked toward where Mira was pointing and immediately confirmed, "Yeah, he fits the bill."

There, toward the corner of the training area where the two of them were looking, stood a boy who was very clearly alone. It certainly matched what they'd heard.

Convinced it must be him, Mira and Luminaria marched up. On their way over to him, Mira used Inspect to confirm that the boy was Dielid.

"Hey, got a second?" Mira called out from beside him.

"Huh?" he said, turning to face her with an ill-tempered look on his face. Perhaps because of his current lonesome situation or

because he was struggling with sorcery, he was not in a very good mood.

But the moment he saw Mira and Luminaria, a puzzled look appeared on his face. "Wh-what is it?" Despite his attitude, Dielid's cheeks flushed slightly, and a faint look of excitement flashed in his eyes.

Any man would take a moment to dream when called aside by a beautiful pair of girls, even knowing that they had no chance.

"We wanted to ask you about something. You were on cleaning duty in the banquet hall yesterday, right?" Mira said, bringing him right back down to reality.

"…Ah, so that's what this is about. You're here to ask if I was the one who scribbled graffiti all over the portrait, yeah?" Dielid's manner changed completely, and he closed his eyes before sighing and smiling darkly. "Well, that was quick."

Dielid had correctly guessed that they suspected him. Seeing Mira's surprise at how quickly he'd caught on, the boy explained that it was simple.

"I knew because of the fuss the School of Evocation put up. We were the ones in charge of cleaning right before all that happened, so it makes sense that they'd suspect us. And a persona non grata like myself was with them. It wasn't very hard to guess," Dielid explained, sounding rather disgruntled, before continuing. "But it wasn't me. I only stuck around Caerus because I don't like other people going after me. If he's gone, then he's gone, and it's probably for the better. Right now, I realize I'm probably just getting what I deserve. But I don't

really mind the peace and quiet. I have no reason to hold anything against Danblf's pupil for doing what she did. And I'm not the kinda guy who'd do something as childish as scribbling graffiti over a portrait to get revenge."

Word of the incident with Danblf's portrait had already spread among the School of Sorcery. And what's more, they suspected Dielid of doing it. He acknowledged this but explained why he hadn't been the one to do it.

"But well, it's not like anyone would believe what I have to say anyhow," he added finally, chuckling grimly.

Judging from what he said and how he was acting, it seemed as if he wasn't trying to cover up being responsible for the crime but had given up and resigned himself to being accused.

"Hrmm, I see. But seeing as you had been cleaning that day, did you happen to notice anything? Like, was anyone doing anything suspicious or did you see anyone that looked shady?"

While it was suspicious that he was at the scene of the crime, it was certainly possible that he was telling the truth and was, in fact, innocent. Thinking as much, Mira changed her line of questioning.

While he was a person of interest, he was also an important witness who'd been in the banquet hall just before the graffiti incident had taken place. There was a chance he knew the real culprit or had noticed someone behaving suspiciously.

"Huh? A-ah… Let me think…"

Dielid seemed to be surprised that she'd changed her line of questioning. Not only were they not hounding him to quit making excuses and come clean, but they were treating him like a witness.

This change seemed to throw Dielid off for a moment, but he quickly recomposed himself and began thinking about it. After a moment, he gave his answer.

"Hmm… I didn't really notice anything like that. Cleaning duty went like it always does, and it took about as much time as usual. We usually split up to clean different areas, so if someone had been doing anything weird, then the area they were working on would've gotten finished later. But that didn't happen. We all left the room together. I honestly don't think there's anyone who could've done it," Dielid explained clearly.

It was clear from his testimony that he was quite certain of this, probably because he was used to cleaning duty. It certainly seemed that he wasn't lying or trying to mislead them about anything.

"In which case, none of those on cleaning duty could've been responsible," Luminaria proposed, having heard Dielid's testimony. She then added that while it would've been *easy* for those on cleaning duty to have scribbled the graffiti, that didn't guarantee guilt.

"That certainly could be. After all, if they did draw the graffiti, they'd be the first ones everyone suspected. It'd be pretty stupid to commit a crime like that."

"Yeah, that's true. But hey, crossing off potential leads one at a time like this is an essential part of investigating."

After thinking about it for a moment, Luminaria nodded in agreement with Mira's assessment while smiling happily that such was one of the joys of investigating.

To Mira, the whole situation was infuriating, and yet, it seemed to feel more like a game to Luminaria. It was like she wasn't taking it seriously enough…or rather, it was like she was being serious about a game.

And so, watching them discuss all this with a puzzled look on his face, Dielid then murmured, "Ah, now that you mention it…" as if he'd thought of something. Then he cut himself off. "No… On second thought…"

"What is it? You look like you remembered something."

"Yeah… You might feel better if you just tell us."

Seeing that Dielid had something on his mind, Luminaria and Mira both drew toward him.

Dielid seemed to be quite flustered at having been approached by the pair of beauties. But despite this, he managed to remain in control of himself and confessed what he knew to Mira and Luminaria just like they'd asked…

A week from the day before—or eight days ago—he'd witnessed something. Dielid had finished cleaning duty and was on the way home when he ran into a group of male students who were all whispering to one another.

"I was just passing by, so I didn't hear much, but I believe…they were talking about preparing to do something the following week. Or

something like that."

Pressed for details, Dielid finished giving his testimony before adding finally, "Well, I won't tell you to believe me." Then he said he knew nothing else and shut his mouth.

"Hrmm… It sure sounded like they were a pretty fishy group, huh?"

"Agreed. If they were the ones who drew the graffiti, then it means we're dealing with multiple culprits."

They'd been scheming eight days ago to execute some plan one week from that day. If all went as planned, then they'd have carried out the plan the day before, on the exact day that the graffiti incident had taken place.

This raised the possibility that multiple people had been responsible for scribbling graffiti on Danblf's portrait. And it'd been premeditated.

"So do you know the names of those in the group you saw?"

If they could rule out each and every potential lead for certain, then they'd get one step closer to solving the case. To do this, they'd first need to identify those who'd been in the group.

Unfortunately, Dielid had just passed by them and hadn't been paying much attention, so he didn't get a good look at them. He didn't seem to remember any of their faces.

But after being pressed to think a little harder, he recalled a single name.

"Oh yeah, I remember there was one guy… I think they called him Sven…"

So one of the group member's names was Sven. This was a valuable piece of information that would serve as their next clue in the investigation.

"Hrmm, Sven, huh…? How about we follow that lead? Thanks for sharing the info with us," Mira said, immediately turning on her heel to go after those who were the real culprits.

The moment she did, Dielid called out to her with an apprehensive look on his face. "Hey, wait. Didn't you come to bring me in?" Everyone had presumed him guilty, so he wondered if it was okay not to take him in to be disciplined.

"Hrmm, you didn't do it, right? Or were you lying?"

"No, I wasn't lying, but…"

It no longer seemed very likely that Dielid was behind the graffiti.

Mira simply answered, "In that case, then there's no need to, is there?" as she quickly walked away to exact vengeance on whoever it was that thought they could just draw that graffiti and get away with it.

Behind her, having gotten used to everyone suspecting him, Dielid watched Mira, utterly stunned.

Luminaria gently leaned in toward him and said, "Anyone can start over, ya know. Even you." Then she ruffled his hair and said, "Now get to it," before laughing as she left.

Watching as she left, Dielid felt something well up deep within his chest. He wanted to find out exactly what that feeling was and felt as if he'd been reawoken.

Afterward, he would apologize to all those that he'd caused trouble for and start over from scratch. But that was another story.

As they discussed who Sven might be while in the lobby of the training hall, Mira and Luminaria heard the bell announcing the end of morning classes. Were it a normal day, she'd have intensive training once the afternoon break was over.

But today was different. Her top priority was getting revenge on those scoundrels who'd started this war by scribbling graffiti all over Danblf's portrait.

"Hrmm, Emilia should be getting out of class, too. How about we go meet up with her? She might have an idea as to who this Sven character is."

"True. Yeah, let's ask Emilia."

The two went straight back to the School of Evocation. In any case, that was where they promised to meet up with her when they'd gone their separate ways that morning.

But once arriving at the classroom, they found Emilia was not alone but standing beside a young boy.

"You said the morning was no good, but the afternoon isn't, either?!"

"Yup, sorry. I've got some important business."

"…Fine."

"I'm really sorry, Phil. I think tomorrow should work."

From the looks of it, the boy was fairly close to Emilia. And Emilia seemed to have a soft spot for the boy…

At first glance, it looked like a caring older sister with her spoiled little brother. But now, the mood seemed a bit tense.

"Okay then, see you tomorrow. Remember…you promised," the boy said, leaving the classroom. At the same time, Mira recalled seeing his face before.

Oh ho? That boy just now… Wasn't he one of the top students from the orphanage?

There was one boy from the orphanage run by Artesia and Lastrada who'd enrolled in the School of Evocation at Alcait Academy. Remembering him to be a sullen and quiet boy, Mira was impressed to see that he'd brightened up and could properly chat with others. It'd been the right decision to enroll him in the academy.

Feeling pleased about this, Mira went into the classroom.

"That boy just now, I was worried he might be a tad timid, but it looks like he's broken out of his shell, huh?"

"Ah, Miss Mira!" Emilia turned around and excitedly rushed over to Mira once she heard her voice.

"Were you watching, by any chance?" Emilia said with a bit of a smile.

"Just toward the end," Mira answered. "It seems he's taken a liking to you," she continued.

Then Emilia briefly explained her relationship with the boy. Just as Mira had initially suggested, the boy had been extremely shy. But being one of the representatives of the School of Evocation, Emilia had taken the initiative and began reaching out to him so that he might adapt to class more quickly.

She began by just greeting him, before making small talk about class, then moving on to chitchatting and shooting the breeze. As this continued, he began talking to her more and more. And now, in an attempt to catch up to his peers, he'd been going with her to practice in the mornings.

"Wow, I never expected he'd come so far. You really are an excellent role model!"

Having been praised by Mira, Emilia smiled rather proudly as joy bloomed on her face.

Chapter 26

MIRA AND LUMINARIA had thought that Emilia might very well know something about the guy named Sven.

Sure enough, after meeting up and telling her about everything they'd done and learned, their prediction proved to be extraordinarily accurate. It seemed that she *did* know of a guy named Sven.

Sven was a student in the School of the Immortal Arts and was pretty popular with the female students.

"Oh ho… Is he perhaps a bit of a heartthrob or something?"

"And does he have a fan club? If so, we might need to come down on him harder than we'd planned."

They wondered if there were fan clubs devoted to particular students, which was a common trope in shows and movies about academies. Mira and Luminaria didn't bother hiding how much they detested such a thing.

But the truth was very different. And from what Emelia said, it appeared to be the complete opposite.

"No, there isn't anything like that. Well, he… That pervert always tries looking under girls' skirts. All the girls hate him," Emilia said, explaining about Sven. What's more, he was known by the nickname, *The Downstairs Peeper*.

It's fairly easy to imagine how he earned such a name. But he always seemed to appear beneath the stairs where he could peep up girls' skirts.

"That guy is a serious pervert. A couple of weeks ago he even did it to me."

Perhaps remembering this as she spoke, a look of open disgust washed across Emilia's face as she remembered the incident. Feeling an indescribable chill go down her spine, Emilia had turned around and found Sven looking up her skirt from a very low angle.

She mercilessly clobbered the boy, who was the scourge of the female students.

"I see…"

"He certainly has a motive."

After hearing about this whole incident, Mira and Luminaria came up with a hypothesis.

Perhaps in an attempt to get back at Emilia, Sven had scribbled graffiti on the portrait of Danblf, the person Emilia most admired. A week before yesterday, in order to prepare and scout out the place, he'd most likely come up with a plan while in front of the banquet hall.

"No way…"

Feeling the pieces fall into place, Emilia was shocked to think that it had all been because of her. She couldn't believe the portrait of her beloved Danblf had become a victim of her flying off the handle a couple of weeks prior.

But that was only one possibility.

"Well, we won't figure it out by just standing around talking here."

"In situations like this, it's best to go right for the guy."

They weren't likely to figure it out by standing around talking about it. It was only a hypothesis. And in order to get their next target, Mira and Luminaria both grabbed Emilia by the hand and dashed off.

Their first stop was the School of the Immortal Arts.

Having arrived at the School of the Immortal Arts, Mira and her companions began feverishly questioning others to determine Sven's whereabouts. They learned he belonged to the badminton club.

"Badminton?"

"Badminton."

For some reason, that modern-day sports had become quite widespread.

They also learned the badminton club always had practice in Gymnasium One.

From what they heard, Sven was a serious member of the club. But from what they knew of Sven, Mira and Luminaria guessed there was most likely some other factor at play. Badminton was a more active sport than most people imagined. And Luminaria knew the uniforms they wore were essentially the same as those people wore in the real world: exercise shorts and short skirts.

That's where his real interest lay.

At any rate, they had an idea of where Sven might be. All they had to do now was go to Gymnasium One.

"All right, shall we head over and check it out?" Mira said, taking a step forward.

As she did, Emilia said, "Um, Miss Mira," bringing her to a stop.

"Hrm, what is it?" Mira said, turning back to see what was up.

She saw Emilia staring at her, who then elaborated on what the present issue was…

"Miss Mira, did you bring gym clothes? You're not allowed to go into Gymnasium One unless you're wearing gym clothes."

"Hrm, no, I did not…"

Mira hadn't expected that. Emilia said that not only students but teachers as well had to change into school gym clothes in order to go into the gymnasiums.

What's more, the designated gym and club uniforms used by Alcait Academy were woven with a magic enchantment. They worked with the magic enchantment placed around the gym to deploy a protective membrane that protected its wearer from injuring themselves due to falling, sports accidents, not paying attention, and so on.

The gym was a place where people exercised their bodies vigorously, and so there were occasions where rather high-risk competitions and such took place. And so, it was required that everyone wear those school-issued gym clothes.

"The gymnasium is equipped with magic that checks whether or not your uniform is functioning properly, so you won't be able to fool it by wearing similar-looking clothes," Emilia added in closing.

If any abnormalities were detected, the Stalwart Dolls that the academy used for security would be summoned to forcibly eject whoever had been detected. In order to reach Sven, they'd need to get their hands on some school-issued Alcait Academy gym clothes.

Tilting her head as if pondering this sudden, unforeseen roadblock, Mira turned her gaze toward Luminaria. She had been the one to arrange the school uniforms. Mira wondered if she might be able to help with this as well.

"Nope. I brought my own, but I don't have any for you," Luminaria said, immediately opening up her item box and deftly taking out her gym clothes.

Once again, Mira was creeped out that Luminaria had such things on hand.

While this was all happening, a look of surprise appeared on Emilia's face as she looked at Luminaria's arm.

"Riana…is that…a User's Bangle?!"

When Luminaria had briskly taken out the gym clothes, Emilia had caught a glimpse of her item box and was taken aback.

"…Yeah," Luminaria confirmed, though not strictly true. A look of deep respect bloomed on Emilia's face.

User's Bangles served as proof that one was an active, first-class adventurer, and it was a good reason for Emilia to be impressed.

"All right, in that case, we don't have much of a choice. Emilia and I will head to the gym *by ourselves*," Luminaria said, quickly

putting her arm around Emilia's shoulder, before suggesting that the gym clothes-less Mira stay behind and continue investigating.

"Yes. We'll go have a word with that pervert about what happened, so please wait for us, Miss Mira," Emilia answered, nodding, as if they didn't have any other choice in this situation. Then she took a step forward at Luminaria's urging.

"No, I can't go along with that. This whole incident is personal. I can't leave it all in someone else's hands. Hey, don't you agree, Emilia?" Mira said, stopping her.

This was all true, but she had one other reason for saying it. And that was she couldn't abide leaving her beloved pupil alone with Luminaria, who might very well be even more of a pervert than Sven.

"…Yes, that's true. I understand how you feel, Miss Mira!" Emilia said, sympathizing with Mira's sentiment that she couldn't just let other people take care of avenging the graffiti incident.

So how would they get Mira into the gym?

"How about you just lend them to me?"

If she could just borrow the clothes Luminaria had brought, then she'd be able to go in without issue. Mira stated this as if it were a brilliant suggestion…but it wasn't quite that simple.

"Aww, too bad… Wrong size," Luminaria said, laughing as she dismissed the suggestion while looking up and down every inch of Mira.

Emilia confirmed that if they didn't fit well, the enchantments within the clothes wouldn't function. Considering how physically

different Mira and Luminaria were, there was no doubt that if Mira wore them, she'd be detected.

So what were they to do? The two had begun to ponder this when Emilia exclaimed, "Ah!" as if she'd thought of something.

"Oh ho, what is it, Emilia? Have you come up with a good idea?"

It was quite clear from the look on Emilia's face that she'd come up with an idea. But right afterward, she said, "Um, no… It's just…" before looking away.

"Don't worry. Anything works. Out with it!"

Emilia was much more well-informed when it came to anything having to do with the academy. And so she should surely be able to come up with something they couldn't. Mira eagerly pressed Emilia for more.

Emilia did seem to have an idea of how Mira might get herself into the gym, but for some reason, she just kept mumbling things like, "It's just, well…" without saying what it was that she'd come up with.

"You've thought of something, haven't you? Come on, tell us. You want to make whoever drew that graffiti pay, right?!" Mira said, pressing her further.

She wanted to serve justice to the vandal with her own hands… and keep Luminaria's hands off Emilia.

"…O-okay."

It seemed as if Mira's passionate appeal had reached her, as she then shared the method she'd thought up with resignation written all

over her face. The girl seemed to have realized that her body and Mira's body were just about the same size.

"…And so, I was thinking that if you were to wear *my* spare pair of gym clothes, the enchantment might still work."

That was the long and short of her plan. Truth be told, Emilia was physically more mature than Mira…but not nearly as much as Luminaria was. So if Mira were to wear her spare set, their problem would be solved. It certainly didn't seem like there'd be any issue with this solution.

However, the moment after explaining this, a gloomy look passed over Emilia's face. "But I used them during PE class today," she continued.

Emilia had forgotten to bring the gym clothes she'd used the day before home, so today, she'd had to use her spare pair. Both pairs of Emilia's gym clothes were dirty.

"And, well…I couldn't possibly lend you a dirty pair of gym clothes, so…"

It'd been a good idea remembering she had a spare set, but upon thinking about it, she realized they were in no condition to lend out. This explained her utter reluctance.

"Um, I'll go ask if anyone else has a spare set."

They were in a large academy full of students. She had to have some friends who were more or less Mira's size. And so, Emilia ran off to find a spare set…or at least she was about to when Luminaria called her to a stop.

"No, why waste any more time? Just lend her yours. Mira won't mind." She then turned toward Mira and asked, "Right?"

"Hrm? Hrmm… Good point. No need to worry. I'm more concerned with hurrying up and putting the screws to Sven." Mira dismissed the minor inconvenience since she was much more concerned about whoever it was that'd been drawing graffiti on the portrait of Danblf.

"Um… Okay, sure thing…!"

Emilia seemed to be a tad flustered at this turn of events. She had reservations about having Mira wear the dirty gym clothes. After all, it was embarrassing to lend someone such things.

However, having been outvoted by Mira and Luminaria, she reluctantly ran off to her classroom to grab her gym clothes.

Chapter 27

MIRA WAS IN THE GIRLS' changing room of Gymnasium One. In order to get inside the gym, she had no choice but to change into gym clothes.

Beginning to change her clothes as soon as she'd arrived, Luminaria was murmuring salacious comments such as, "Smells like young chicks," with a deadpan expression.

Mira, meanwhile, was in the process of getting gym clothes from Emilia.

"Um, here you are," Emilia said, discreetly giving them the sniff check before handing her the gym clothes that were in her right hand.

"H-hrmm. Sorry for all the trouble." As Mira took the clothes, she finally comprehended exactly what it was that she was about to grab.

She'd been so wrapped up in the whole graffiti incident. But standing with an actual set of used girls' gym clothes, she realized something… She realized how unbelievable it was that she was in a situation where she was being lent such things—something which was previously utterly *unthinkable*.

But now she was a girl…

Forcing herself to keep this fact in mind and trying not to let even the slightest hint of nervousness betray her face, Mira took the used gym clothes.

The top was a simple white shirt with a green stripe on the collar and sleeves. The bottoms were a pair of green shorts.

Having given Mira the gym clothes, Emilia then began getting changed.

Briefly catching sight of Emilia in her underwear, Mira looked away.

Under normal circumstances, she would've treated herself to an eyeful…but this was Emilia. She looked up to Mira as a teacher.

There was no way Mira could look at her in that way.

And so, she made her way to the corner of the changing room and took off her clothes with her back turned.

But jeez… This is kinda…

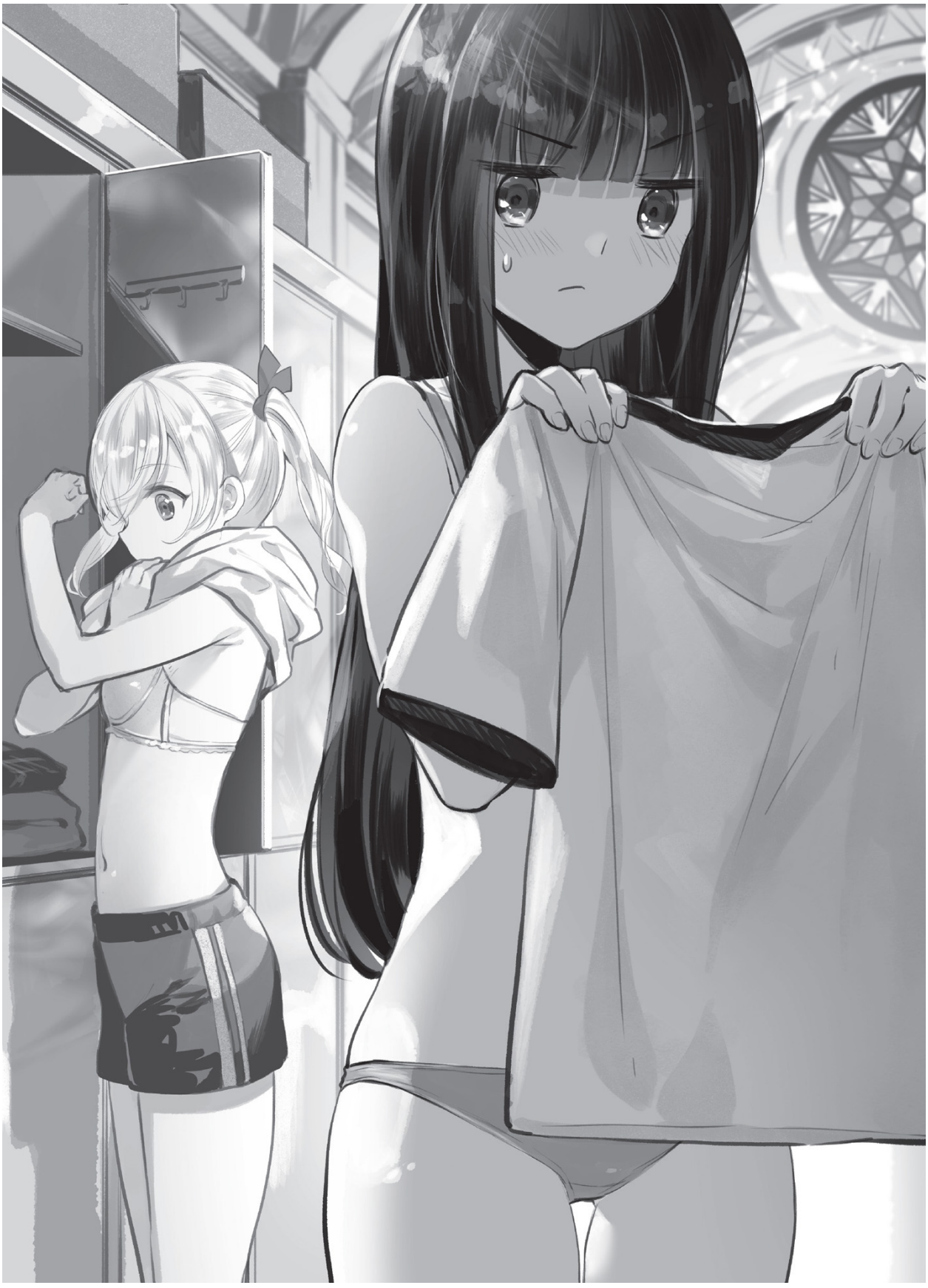
Now in her underwear, Mira froze with the gym clothes in her hands.

She was going to put on *used* girls' gym clothes and was now faced with the wrongness of such a thing.

If she didn't change into them, she wouldn't be able to go into the gym. She didn't have any choice. Or at least this was the excuse she told herself to justify what she was doing as she slipped her arms through the sleeves of the used gym clothes.

Oh ho… They've kinda got a faint feminine smell…

Thinking they smelled quite good, Mira finished changing clothes.



Garbed in the borrowed gym clothes, she felt a shiver run down her spine at how improper such a thing was…even more so than when she'd put on the schoolgirl uniform.

"How does it feel, Mira? To wear be wearing an actual set of girls' gym clothes," Luminaria softly whispered, just as Mira was struggling to come to grips with the indescribable sensation.

Looking at her, Mira caught a mischievous look in her eyes that seemed to be saying, "Mission accomplished." Now that she thought of it, it had been Luminaria who'd suggested that Emilia lend Mira her gym clothes.

"It's so fun watching you be at a loss."

She knew everything. She knew about the feeling of guilt and the indescribable thrill that Mira felt deep down. Having been played by Luminaria like a violin, Mira turned with a glare and murmured resentfully, "I'll remember this…"

Now that they'd all changed into their gym clothes, the three at last stepped into Gymnasium One to question Sven.

Hrmm, looks like it worked.

The enchantments in the gym and the gym clothes reacted, and a protective membrane stretched across her skin. Feeling it, Mira appreciated how far they'd gone to ensure the safety of the students.

Having made their way into the gym, they found that it was bustling with activity.

For being entirely indoors, the gym was quite large, about a hundred feet wide and one hundred thirty feet long. Inside, they

caught sight of not only the badminton club but also the basketball club, ping pong club, and several others.

Being filled with all these clubs and overflowing with youthful vitality, Mira felt herself out of place. Especially considering she'd already graduated. In fact, the scene she saw before her had so much youthful vitality that it was almost too much for her eyes to handle.

"They're still pretty young, but that's not always a bad thing," Luminaria said. She seemed to be enjoying their current scenery, despite being in the same position as Mira.

Emilia was scouting the gym as if she were some kind of hunter.

At any rate, having successfully gotten themselves into the gym, they went off toward the badminton club.

"There he is. That's him!" Emilia cried out in a hushed voice. She was pointing to a boy who was warming up in an area a bit removed from where the badminton club was gathered. He had a buzz cut and a strong physique that neither Mira nor Emilia could hope to compete with.

"Hrmm…I was thinking he'd just be some scrawny perv…"

"Oh…so that's him."

After hearing about him looking up girls' skirts from beneath stairs, Mira and Luminaria had expected him to be the gloomy, sullen type. But the two were visibly shocked to see what he really looked like.

Perhaps due to him being a sage, he seemed to have trained quite a bit. They could tell just from looking at him that he was

shredded and was quite flexible from the warm-up exercises he was doing. He followed this up with a back bridge using his head instead of his arms, which gave off an intimidating impression.

And yet, Emilia had walloped him.

Mira glanced over at Emilia and felt a shiver run down her spine about how terrifying women could be.

"All right, let's go ask him."

There was no way they could best him in a contest of pure physical strength. And despite this huge difference in physique, Emilia fearlessly marched straight toward Sven.

"Despite how he might look, it seems like the stories were true."

Sven continued to do the arms-crossed back bridge. While it seemed like his neck was quite powerful, Mira deduced what his true intentions were.

Checking where it was that his face was pointing, it was clear that Sven was merely feigning a warm-up and was trying to look up a female club member's skirt from an extremely low angle.

Mira and her companions approached him. He must've caught sight of them from the corner of his eye as he turned his head to look at them while still stretching.

He must've immediately noticed they were women because he practically began drooling. Starting with their feet, his gaze lasciviously moved upward.

He then noticed that Emilia was among them.

No sooner had Sven's eyes popped open in surprise than he sprang to his feet and immediately ran off in an unbelievable display of physical prowess.

"Ah, hold on!"

The way he'd fled upon seeing Emilia could certainly be seen as proof that he'd done something to feel guilty about. Surely, he was the one who had drawn the graffiti in a bid for revenge.

Or so the three companions thought, as they chased after Sven.

Sven nimbly leaped into the gym's audience bleachers before making a beeline to the aisle toward the back. In addition to his raw physical talents, he also had the kind of maneuverability one might expect of a sage, so he was top-notch when it came to escaping on foot.

And yet, he was still a student. There was nothing he could do when chased by an opponent with incredible mobility like Mira, who had the same knowledge of the Immortal Arts as him.

"Sorry, but this is where this chase ends."

Sprinting down the aisle, Sven then dashed up and down the steps to throw his pursuers off. It was clear from these tactics that this wasn't his first rodeo. Easily overtaking him, Mira lightly landed directly in front of him.

Cut off, Sven reacted swiftly. Instinctually sensing that he wouldn't be able to make it through, he quickly turned on his heels. But he had nowhere to go. There now stood a holy knight back where he'd come from.

"Huh…?!"

Shaken by the sudden appearance of the holy knight, Sven hesitated.

Seizing the opportunity, Mira got close to him and gave him a good shove in the back. Sven fell forward and crashed into the holy knight, who grabbed a firm hold of him.

"So I take it you yield?" Mira said, glaring at Sven, who was being held in a full nelson.

Her eyes were burning with rage toward the person she presumed had drawn graffiti all over the portrait of Danblf.

"You aren't playing around, huh?" Having finally caught up to them and seeing the situation before her, Luminaria chuckled. It'd be difficult for a first-class adventurer to escape the way he was being held, much less a student.

"Now we can ask him whatever we want."

Just arriving, Emilia saw the impressive way in which Sven was restrained and shot the boy the same kind of glare that Mira had.

"…What do *you* want?" Having struggled at first, Sven seemed to have given up after realizing that he couldn't escape.

But even so, his lascivious spirit wouldn't be deterred. In spite of the hopeless situation he found himself in, his eyes leaped at the opportunity to get an eyeful of the three girls.

"D'you know about what happened yesterday?" Emilia said, confronting him. Undaunted by his gaze, she drew steadily closer to him while smiling cheerfully.

Faced with Emilia's smile, Sven tensed up slightly. Perhaps the memories of her beating him to a pulp were still fresh in his memory.

However, acting as if he hadn't a clue, he answered, "…Nope, no idea."

And yet, it was clear from the way that he turned his dastardly gaze to a wall with nothing on it that he was hiding something. It appeared that he was rattled about having been caught, that he was now acting completely irrationally.

"I know you can hear me. The incident with Master Danblf's portrait. That was your doing, wasn't it? You wanted to get back at me for how I punished you, and so you did that to his portrait!"

Looking at him as one might a nemesis, Emilia maintained her cool, despite the anger creeping into her voice. She amped up the pressure by telling him that scribbling graffiti on Danblf's portrait was a grievous crime.

The moment he heard this, Sven's eyes bulged slightly. He began waving his hands, as if to say enough was enough. "That wasn't me." Smiling slightly, he stated that he was innocent.

"Then why did you run the moment you saw me?" Emilia followed up.

Sven answered that it had to do with what'd happened previously. "Your friend came and stopped you that day, didn't she? But it didn't seem like you were satisfied. I thought you came to finish what you started."

He seemed to think that she'd come to settle accounts. Imagining such a thing happening, he saw Emilia coming toward him and instinctually ran away. That, he claimed, was a rational reason to flee.

What's more, after confessing all of this, he sincerely apologized for what'd happened that day and bowed his head in remorse. That didn't last long. Soon enough, the puppy dog eyes he'd been making shot behind Emilia and fixed on Luminaria's bosom. He might've felt bad about it, but that didn't seem to mean he felt like stopping.

They continued to question Sven, but he remained adamant that he hadn't drawn the graffiti.

"So what do you think?" Luminaria said, returning to the subject.

Having let Sven go, Mira and her companions used the information they'd obtained to analyze the situation in the School of Evocation's classroom. They had no definitive evidence, so it wouldn't have been easy to keep Sven detained.

But Mira had noticed that something about his attitude was off.

"Hrmm… I just got the impression that when he first saw Emilia, he really went into full-blown crisis mode."

He said his reason for running away was that he thought she'd come to beat him again, but was it really? If anything, it looked as if he was trying to hide something. That was Mira's impression, at least.

"Yeah. I got the same impression."

With Luminaria in agreement, Emilia also chimed in. "It *is* suspicious, isn't it?"

And with that, all three were in agreement.

Then, in the middle of their discussion, Mira got a message.

"Oh my, there have been some sudden developments."

Having had a hunch that he was hiding something, Mira had quietly put the now-revived First Pupil on standby after leaving the gymnasium. The message she got had come from him. The target had nonchalantly left the gym, hastily changing his clothes before scurrying off somewhere.

Based on the intel they'd gotten from Dielid, there had been several other people besides Sven plotting something in front of the banquet hall. In other words, accomplices.

Sven had said that he didn't draw any of the graffiti. But even if that were true, it was still possible that he was still involved with the crime. Mira and her companions had intentionally not mentioned Dielid's testimony, and now Sven had heedlessly gone off to meet his buddies. They'd predicted that if they could shake him up a bit, he'd do something.

And they'd been right on the money.

Mira and Emilia's plan was to corner those responsible for the graffiti in such a way that they wouldn't be able to talk their way out of things, then punish them in one fell swoop.

With First Pupil on Sven's heels, Mira and her companions flew out of the classroom.

Chapter 28

NOW, IN A VACANT ROOM within the clubhouse…

"What's up with calling me over here all of a sudden? Weren't you in the middle of badminton practice?" a male student said, glaring at Sven. "Isn't clean up time when girls have their guards down? Are you okay missing out on that?"

"This is an emergency," Sven said, an extremely grave look on his face. This was not the usual Sven…

The other boy sighed deeply. "What happened?"

"Emilia confronted me just now."

The moment the words left Sven's mouth, a shudder ran through the boy. "What…?! She doesn't know about what we did, though…right?"

Emilia was someone neither of them could afford to ignore. Despite his sudden anxiety, the boy attempted to calmly clarify the situation, asking why Emilia had confronted Sven. How much did she know?

"I don't know. But I think I fooled her."

Thinking back on what he'd said, Sven stated that she probably had no evidence. But the other boy didn't look any less concerned.

"Either way, they suspect something," he said, immediately looking down uneasily.

"Yeah, that's true… And she was with two friends, neither of whom I recognized. One of them was a really skilled summoner. And

I’m not sure about the other, but from the aura she gave off, I bet she’s pretty skilled, too.”

As Sven continued with this information, the look on the boy’s face became more and more grim.

“Man, she’s got a badass crew now? Hmm… Then it’s probably a good idea not to underestimate them—at least until we’re free of suspicion. Let’s come up with a plan.”

The boy pulled out a notebook and began writing something.

“Roger…must still be doing club stuff, huh?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“In that case, I’ll tell him about everything with Emilia. You be careful not to do anything overly suspicious.”

“Got it. All right then. See ya.”

“Yeah.”

Despite no one else being in the room, Sven and the boy had spoken in hushed tones. Once finished, the two nonchalantly left the room.

Watching everything about eighty feet away, Mira and her companions quickly hid themselves before exchanging their thoughts.

“…And that’s what they said.”

“That sounds pretty shady.”

“They’ve gotta be the ones who did it!”

First Pupil was staked out nearby and had overheard the entire exchange between Sven and the other boy.

"So, Emilia, do you know anything about that guy they mentioned? Roger?"

Emilia immediately grimaced before nodding while saying she did. Roger was a character well-known among the girls in much the same way as Sven was. "I think I have a guess as to who the other person in the room was," she added.

Dilgen was the name of the other boy who'd been speaking with Sven in the vacant room. He was infamous, much like the other two boys.

"Hrmm… From what you've said, could those two also be…?"

Judging from the intense look of revulsion that appeared on Emilia's face, it didn't seem that Dilgen and Roger were famed for their good looks.

"They're perverts," Emelia spat before going into detail about what offenses they were guilty of. The pair were even bigger perverts than Sven.

Dilgen was said to possess an incredible talent for painting. In fact, he was so talented that he'd won tons of prizes. There was nothing inherently wrong with that talent—it was how he put it to use. He used his considerable talent and skill to go around painting nudes of the female students. These works were almost indistinguishable from the real thing, and they were bought and sold on the down-low.

Emilia went on to mention that one of hers had almost gotten out once. She'd managed to discover this at the last second and burn it, thus averting disaster.

"Jeez, what a waste of talent…"

There was no way the female students could tolerate someone going around painting nude pictures of them without permission. Mira laughed exasperatedly in agreement.

But there was one among them who thought differently…

"But if he's using his talents to do what he likes, then you can't really say he's *wasting* them, can you?"

Luminaria, standing alongside the two with a nonchalant look on her face, seemed to be more on the pervert squad's team. She sympathized with Dilgen, who was making the most of his talents.

"Look…I still think it's bad he does it without permission," she added, furtively looking away after seeing Mira and Emilia's reactions and gathering that they didn't agree even a single bit.

"And about the other boy…" Emilia continued, moving on.

Roger was said to have a prolific imagination and wielded some mysterious wind power. He would stare at girls who passed by him. He'd stare at girls as they exercised. He'd stare at girls while they ate. From what she heard, Roger used his powerful imagination to picture any woman he saw completely naked and in great detail.

She said that just the way he looked at girls felt like it should be illegal. But that wasn't all. Wherever he went, a sudden wind gust would send girls' skirts flying.

"…About two months ago, one of my friends had this exact experience. Some mysterious wind blew up her skirt, and when she turned around, she saw him standing there."

He'd said it was a coincidence and chuckled quietly to himself. However, over the next month, the same thing happened over and over again to her friend. It even happened *inside*, where no wind should be blowing.

And every time it happened, Roger would be standing there, staring creepily.

Having heard this, Emilia gave him a beating similar to the one she'd dished out to Sven. Perhaps because he'd learned his lesson, the incidents involving her friends abruptly stopped.

"In that case, it wouldn't be hard to imagine him also having a grudge against you."

Roger certainly had a motive for harassing Emilia. Maybe even enough for him to scribble graffiti over Emilia's beloved portrait of Danblf as revenge.

And so, they now had a theory as to the motive behind the crime.

"That's awful… Master Danblf had nothing to do with that…" Emilia was shocked to learn that the innocent portrait of Danblf might've fallen victim to someone seeking revenge against her.

"But that's still just a theory. First off, let's go ask this Roger guy and see how he reacts to make sure. If we can get enough evidence, you can guess what we do from there."

"Hrmm, beat 'em to a pulp!"

While he certainly seemed extremely suspicious, it wasn't as if they'd found any solid evidence. Fired up, Mira said that if they could

find such evidence, then they'd strike such fear into him that he wouldn't forget it for the rest of his days.

"Yes, we'll beat them to a pulp!"

Seeing how committed Mira was, Emelia brightened, once more filled with determination and resolve.

"All right, then our next issue is finding where Roger is."

They'd had a target, but where exactly was he?

"He said that he was doing club stuff, but what club is he in?"

Remembering the conversation between Sven and Dilgen, Mira thought about maybe going to find a few students to ask.

As she did, Emilia cried, "Ah!" as if she'd remembered something.

"I think he's in the swimming club. One of my friends said she used to be in the same club, but she quit because she couldn't stand him staring at her."

Judging from what she'd heard of Roger, the swimming club seemed like a perfect fit for him. It was easy to see the contours of girls' bodies in swimsuits, so he could likely put his imagination to maximum use.

"Hrmm, shall we go check it out?" Mira asked as she walked off.

But then Emilia spoke up. "Um, what will you do this time?" she asked reluctantly.

Seeing Emilia's reaction and how she was acting, Mira tilted her head quizzically, curious as to what the problem was this time. But after a moment, she figured it out…

"…Don't tell me. The pool, too?"

Emilia nodded. Much like the gymnasium, the pool was also equipped with special enchantments. You were required to wear a special swimsuit to even enter it. Since incidents with water could be potentially life-threatening, the pool was even stricter about this than the gym.

"Do you…?"

"Yes."

Turning around, Mira saw Luminaria casually pull out a swimsuit —a school-regulation one at that.

"I never would've thought…"

And so, once again, she was faced with the conundrum of leaving Emilia alone with Luminaria.

Mira didn't have a school swimsuit, but she took out the swimsuit that'd been custom-made by Lily and the maids. Unfortunately, it wouldn't work for going in the academy pool. After the gym clothing debacle, Mira wondered what to do.

But things were different this time.

"I can lend you my spare. And this time, it's not dirty!" Emilia proudly proclaimed, as if Mira could leave it to her, before dashing off.

Emilia was an extremely responsible individual and, therefore, had not only a spare set of gym clothes but a spare swimsuit as well.

Alcait Academy had an indoor pool that was open all year round and was located in the pool building, which was next to the main school building. Having made their way there, Mira and her

companions asked a nearby male student if he knew where Roger might be.

And, sure enough, he was still inside. What's more, he'd become pretty serious about the swimming club about a month earlier.

"All right, so all we need to do now is get a hold of him and have a little chat."

"Yes."

So what story would Roger sing? Smiling fearlessly, Mira and Emilia ran into the girls' changing room in the pool building. The three changed into school-issued swimsuits. Despite her never having much reason to wear it, Luminaria seemed to be oddly comfortable in hers.

"Damn, look at me. I don't know if I should be allowed to walk around like this."

Luminaria's voluptuous physique was so perfect that one might say that she could fulfill whatever fantasy a man might possibly conceive. This was only enhanced by the school-issued swimsuit, which looked rather subdued at first glance. Leaving a little to the imagination meant that Luminaria had now ascended to a level of attractiveness that was beyond measure.

"Th-that's…"

While Luminaria was patting herself on the back, Mira clamped her hands tight around the school-issued swimsuit she'd borrowed from Emilia. She was holding a real schoolgirl's swimsuit. More unbelievably, she had permission from its owner to wear it.

From a man's point of view, this artifact was more than just an article of clothing. But Mira would overcome this trial, just like she had with the schoolgirl uniform and the used gym clothes.

And yet, from here on out, she'd be in unfamiliar territory. She'd be hit with an even greater sense of deviancy mixed with a slight rush of euphoria. Mira swallowed heavily.

In any case, she couldn't sit around twiddling her thumbs. With Emilia about to finish getting changed, it'd look odd for her to stay there staring at the school-issued swimsuit.

All right, here goes.

Steeling her resolve, Mira took off the schoolgirl uniform in one go and gently put her legs through the swimsuit. The moment she did, a feeling that was impossible to put into words washed over her entire body.

"Stay calm… Everything's fine…"

She was no different from some weirdo pervert. Just like Sven and his buddies. Realizing this, Mira forced herself to think that she was just a normal, cute girl while rationalizing that all she was doing was borrowing some clothes from a friend. People did that all the time.

But in crept that creepy, dirty feeling. Staving it off, Mira somehow managed to finish getting changed.

Chapter 29

HAVING FINISHED GETTING CHANGED into the school-issued swimsuit, they worked out a few more plans before finally going to where the pool was.

"This pool is huge…"

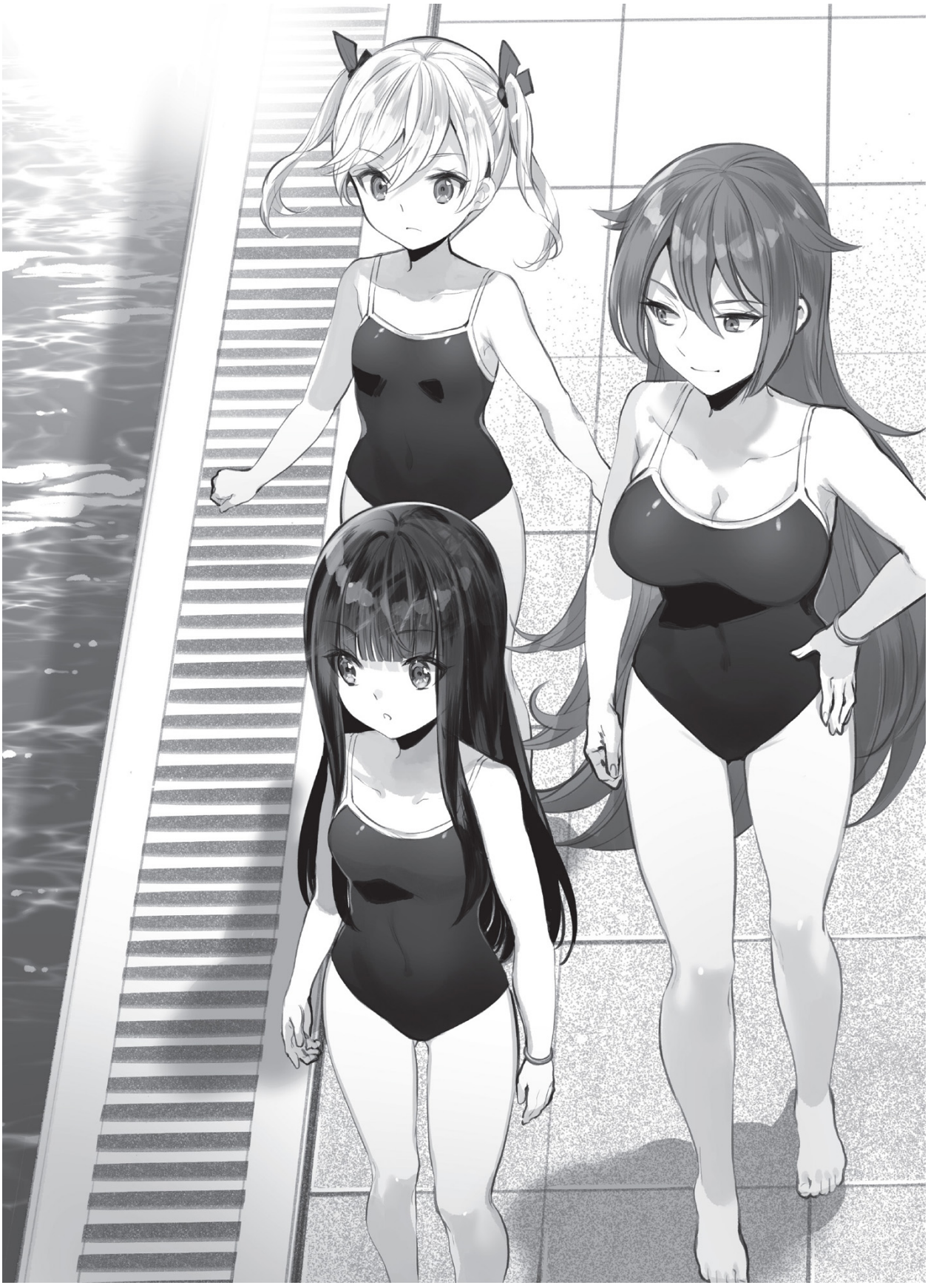
The indoor pool was very simply built and, yet, quite well equipped. The pool itself measured in at around one hundred sixty-five feet, which made it large enough to fit ten swimming lanes. The Alcait Academy pool was so large and impressive that it could conceivably even be used for the Olympics.

And crowded in this pool were the members of the swimming club. Some were racing to see who was faster, while others were simply floating above the surface like jellyfish. Others were testing out bizarre swimming strokes. While they were all in the swimming club, they were by no means all doing the same things.

But there was one thing they all had in common—they were all filled with youthful vitality.

"What can I say…? It must be great to be young."

"Yeah, to be young again…"



The boys who were racing were both friends and rivals. Winning or losing, they would alternate between joy and despair. Regardless of how they did, they'd simply resolve to do better the next time and begin swimming again.

Meanwhile, there was a girl giving instructions to another girl. Looking closer, it appeared that the one being taught was the upperclassman. Perhaps the two were childhood friends. They seemed to be fairly friendly with each other, and the girl doing the teaching was poking fun at the other while wearing a mischievous smile. Struggling to stay above the water, the older student grabbed her swimsuit and nearly pulled it down.

Nearby, they saw students fooling around while warming up and getting yelled at by their teacher. On the diving board was a student who, despite managing to climb the ladder, was now frozen in fear. There were also students holding their swimming boards under the water, only to then launch them at their friends. Other students crashed into the water after attempting to ride atop multiple swimming boards.

In short, the pool was surrounded by classic displays of the kinds of things people did in the springtime of their youth. Thinking back on the good old days, Mira and Luminaria had no choice but to feel the weight of the years on their shoulders.

Mira and her companions marched toward the pool.

"It seems like we're being stared at."

"Yeah. But I mean, it'd be hard not to look at a group of girls as pretty as us three, right?"

Two of their group were cute and young, while the other was a bombshell. It was only natural that they'd attract a fair bit of attention. But Luminaria was attracting the greatest share of attention—all the boy's eyes were glued to her ridiculously voluptuous figure.

Thanks to how much they stood out, someone else had noticed that there were students who didn't belong to the swimming club at the pool. A man who appeared to be a teacher rushed over to see what was going on. He looked at Mira and then Luminaria before noticing Emilia in the back. He immediately asked, "Excuse me, I don't think I recognize you two…but you're Flores. Are these two your friends?"

Flores was Emilia's surname.

"Yes, these two are…um…" Emilia said, her eyes darting around as she thought of an excuse to use.

"You must be Mr. Ringvelle. May I have a word?" Luminaria said, putting her hand on the teacher's shoulder and beginning to whisper something in his ear.

He tensed up as anxiety washed over his face.

"…So, for that reason, if you could just not worry about us, that'd be great."

"U-understood!"

Luminaria gently let go of Ringvelle's shoulder, at which point he immediately straightened up as if someone had stuck a steel pole up his backside.

She then added, "And would you be a little quieter?"

Quietly and yet with every ounce of sincerity he could muster, he answered, “My deepest apologies.” Then, bowing deeply, he went on, “It’s a pleasure to have you.”

Mira and Emilia hurried after Luminaria, who walked off as if the problem had been solved.

“Hey, what did you say?”

What was behind the teacher’s sudden change? Mira wanted to know. Luminaria replied that it was really quite simple… She’d just mentioned a bit about who she was. In other words, Luminaria used her authority as one of the Nine Wise Men to cow the teacher into keeping his mouth shut. It was a Luminaria solution to a Luminaria problem.

Mira could only shake her head in exasperation.

Emilia simply tilted her head quizzically. Having picked up that she ought not to say anything about it, she refrained from asking for details.

With the teacher strongarmed into granting permission to use the facility, the three surveyed the pool.

“Hrmm, it’s just…”

Despite feeling dirty about wearing the borrowed swimsuit at first, Mira no longer felt quite so self-conscious. In fact, she now felt quite confident wearing it. But confidence and comfort were two different things. The chest area didn’t quite feel right, and so she had to keep adjusting it.

Noticing Mira's odd movements and curious as to what she was doing, Luminaria asked, "Huh? What's wrong?"

"How do I put this? This is making it hard to breathe," Mira said, frowning, implying that her chest area felt tight.

"Yeah, I wasn't gonna say anything but, she might be a bit of a…" Luminaria smirked while looking over toward Emilia with a chuckle, "…late bloomer."

Having put on the borrowed school uniform, Mira did feel that the chest was a bit tight.

Luminaria was right on the money.

"It's fine, I…I noticed the same thing when we were changing… I already know… I'm sorry the swimsuit is too small." Emilia touched her hands to her chest, looking off into the distance with a look of despair in her eyes.

In terms of overall size, Emilia was a tad bigger than Mira. And yet, there was one department in which Mira had the advantage. She was the least—or second least—developed girl in that regard in her class, something that she appeared to be self-conscious about.

"Ah… No. I mean, you're only fourteen, right? You've got time. Right? Don't you think so?!" Realizing that she'd said the wrong thing, Mira rattled off the boilerplate words of encouragement and turned to the ridiculously buxom Luminaria for help.

"…Yeah, that's true. You've still got plenty of time to grow. We'll see how things go from here," Luminaria murmured while staring at Emilia's chest as if examining it. "I, for one, knew plenty of girls who

developed quite a lot in their late teens…" she continued, throwing out several girls' names. What's more, she said this with a look that seemed to imply that she'd developed in the same way.

"Really…? Then I'll do my best!"

Mira wasn't sure just how much of what Luminaria had said had been serious. But it still seemed to have given Emilia a small measure of hope, as the expression on the girl's face had brightened a bit.

Size wasn't everything. Even small ones could be wondrous beyond imagining. And yet, the gulf between the haves and have-nots was vast. Of course, if she were to say this, it would definitely cause Emilia undue distress.

Having witnessed the kerfuffle that'd broken out between Kagura and Flonne over this very thing, Mira and Luminaria kept their mouths shut and let her hope.

Despite fretting over those naive troubles, Mira and her companions made their way further inside. Deep inside the facility was an area furnished with other pieces of equipment used for building one's physique. After getting a better look at this particular area, Emilia called out, "Ah, that's him!" while pointing to a boy.

The boy in question was Roger.

Mira and Luminaria went to get a look at this Roger, who was a member of Sven's pervert squad. What they saw was a boy in swim briefs diligently doing pull-ups.

"Hrmm, that guy? I thought he'd look like a total pervert, but he doesn't look that way at all."

"Right? If anything, I get the exact opposite impression from him."

The first impression they got of Roger was that he didn't fit the profile, and certainly not while working out. Perhaps he worked out like this often, as his body was so toned that he looked like he could be the school's representative at swim meets. He was jacked. Enough so to make them assume he was pretty popular with the ladies.

And while Mira and her companions could only see him from the side, even if he didn't look exceptionally handsome, he did look strapping. He gave off the impression of someone who could be the leader of a group of friends. From the way he looked, it certainly seemed like such a thing was possible.

…And yet, there wasn't a single person around him.

"That's what I'm telling you. It takes a while to get to know what he's really like. But lots of female students…even teachers, have been victims of his mysterious wind. Even Ms. Hinata said it's happened to her before."

While staring contemptuously at Roger, Emilia gave the list of charges.

At first glance, Roger didn't look at all like a pervert. And it was precisely for this reason that he could commit his crimes while flying under the radar. He'd stare at girls and imagine them nude, and then, as if to check if he'd imagined them correctly, he used wind to blow their skirts up and expose what was underneath.

While he committed his crimes, he wouldn't move a muscle, as if to make everyone think he had nothing to do with any of it. It took a

long time for people to figure out what it was he was doing and that the gusts of wind that were blowing up skirts were manmade.

"It's the perfect crime."

"Is that wind some kind of spell? That's pretty impressive if he can use it without anyone realizing it."

Roger might be a pervert who engaged in sexual harassment, but he was also an evil genius. Having grasped this, Mira and Luminaria continued walking. When they got one or two steps closer, Roger finished his pull-ups and took a water bottle from a nearby bag for a swig.

He then let out a satisfied, "Ahhh," and nonchalantly turned around, as if he'd felt someone else nearby.

"Huh? …Huh?!"

The moment he caught sight of the companions, Roger's eyes lit up with joy to behold Mira and Luminaria. But his eyes quickly focused on Luminaria. His expression was quite serious, betraying no hint of perversion. It was difficult to imagine he was going full pervert-mode and fantasizing about them.

But the very next second, his poker face gave way.

Emilia had marched straight in front of Luminaria and grabbed his attention.

"Wha—?!"

And wouldn't you know it? The moment Roger laid eyes on Emilia, a look of fright washed over his face, much like what had happened with Sven.

What's more, what he did next matched what Sven had done as well. The moment he perceived Emilia's presence, Roger ran.

"Looks like he's running away, too."

"That proves he's guilty!"

"All right, shall we catch him?"

Having expected as much, the three hurried after him.

Chapter 30

CATCHING ROGER WAS MUCH QUICKER than they'd imagined. After running into the large shower room, he'd slipped and fallen.

The shower room was one of the pool's facilities and consisted of a dozen or so showers all lined up beside each other. On pulling one of the shower levers, water would pour down like rain from a showerhead in the ceiling. They were used quite frequently, which accounted for why he'd stepped into a puddle and fell.

"That's far enough!" Mira announced before Roger could lift himself up again and reach the exit. She was close enough that she could grab him or slug him before he was able to open the door.

"All right, hold on. Calm down…" Roger said, turning around and raising his hands as if to surrender.

Perhaps he'd caught on that he wouldn't be able to run any further. But during this whole exchange, his eyes had stayed focused on Luminaria.

He really was a pervert.

"You know why I'm here, right?" Emilia asked, subtly trying to feel out if he knew anything about the graffiti incident.

"No idea…" But a faint look of anxiety appeared on Roger's face.

The change in his expression was slight, and yet, his face very much seemed to say that he wasn't happy about Emilia being there.

"Then why did you run?" Mira shot back.

Hearing this, Roger looked away, as if refusing to respond. No longer able to flee, this attitude was like his final act of defiance.

"Come on. Things will go better for you if you just hurry and confess."

"That's right. You've got nowhere left to run."

Mira and her companions drew nearer to Roger, hoping to deliver the finishing blow.

Roger's gaze slowly crept toward Luminaria, as she made her way closer. Even with the walls closing in, Roger's perversity remained unconquered. Roger's lips curled into a smirk.

The moment they did, they felt a faint gust of wind blow forth. Wondering what going on, all of the showers above them began pouring water.

"What the—?!"

"Agh! That's cold!"

"Eek!"

Being drenched in water at the least opportune time, Mira and her companions shouted in a panic. What in the world was going on? Looking more closely, they saw that every one of the shower levers had been switched on.

"That rascal! Could he have meant to do that all along?"

Their opponent had done it to give himself an opportunity to escape. Even so, Mira couldn't help being impressed by the unexpected yet well-executed counterattack.

But what she saw next astonished her.

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His trick to turn on all the showers at once ought to have given him a chance to escape. And despite having that perfect opportunity, Roger was still there.

What was he thinking? Rather than running away, he was just staring at them.

"Why aren't you…?"

Roger's eyes were laser-focused on Mira and her companions.

What was he trying to do? Did he not plan on running? Mira couldn't make out what Roger was up to. She ought to have remembered what Emilia had told her earlier about when he was staring intently.

But before Mira was able to get to the bottom of Roger's odd behavior, the situation took a sudden turn.

"No way! What's happening?!" Emilia shrieked.

"What on earth…?!"

Turning to see what'd happened, Mira beheld the reason for Emilia's scream. What in the world was going on? It looked as if Emilia's school-issued swimsuit had begun to disintegrate. The entire upper half was almost falling apart. And it was still going—now the bottom half was being eaten away.

Emilia squatted down as if unable to bear it anymore.

…But it didn't end with her.

"What's going on?!"

"Uh oh, it's happening to me, too."

Mira and Luminaria's swimsuits were disintegrating in the same way as Emilia's. The upper half of their swimsuits were nearly gone, and now the bottom half was beginning to be eaten away.

"All right! Now this is a feast for the eyes!"

Mira and her companion's bodies were becoming more and more exposed. Smiling as if his plan had gone off without a hitch, Roger devoured them with his eyes—Luminaria in particular. He still hadn't tried to make an escape.

Finally, Roger called out, "Thanks!" and left.

"Jeez, it feels like despite everything going to plan, he really pulled one over on us."

"Yeah, he sure did."

While the two had maintained their composure despite being made completely naked, they didn't chase Roger as he ran off. They'd planned on him escaping from the very beginning.

After being interrogated by Emilia, he was sure to meet up with the rest of his conspirators. And the whole objective of their plan was to capture all of them.

"But what happened to our swimsuits? It seems like he caused a magic aberration."



"It does seem that way."

The pair already had an idea of why their swimsuits had disintegrated—a phenomenon known as a magic aberration. They guessed that Roger had tampered with the showers beforehand, such that once he pressed a certain switch, the water that came out of the showers would be altered.

Once covered in this water, the enchantments imbued in both the swimsuit and pool building would be disrupted, breaking down completely. And once that'd happened, the school-issued swimsuits would disintegrate.

"He's got potential, thinking up something like this while still only a student."

"He certainly punches above his weight when it comes to deviancy."

Deducing what'd happened from the magic that still lingered and the subtle reaction they'd detected, Mira and Luminaria laughed at how he'd come up with such a scheme despite being a mere student. Aside from being able to invoke a magic aberration, he'd figured out a way of utilizing the aberration to specifically target their swimsuits. It certainly seemed like his skill and passion knew no bounds.

The two of them commended Roger while they stood there stark naked. Someone with his talents might even make their way into the Linked Silver Towers.

"Hngh… How can the two of you stand there like nothing's wrong?" Emilia murmured tearfully, looking up at the two who, despite

being in the exact same situation, were utterly unperturbed.

The effect of the magic aberration was only temporary. The enchantment surrounding the pool was large enough that it couldn't be destabilized much. While the enchantment was still in effect and they were still in their destroyed swimming suits, Mira and her companions turned off the showers and quickly changed into their school uniforms.

Not being students, they hadn't used the changing room lockers and had instead taken all their clothes—including Emilia's—and put them in an item box so they could easily get changed back.

Good thing, too. If not, they would've had to walk out into the pool area stark naked. Emilia seemed extremely relieved that they'd been able to avoid doing this.

"All right, now the show really begins."

Mira's eyes glittered darkly as she dried her hair off. She added that the time had finally come to track down and punish those who'd been responsible for the graffiti. Her eyes were filled with an unquenchable fury.

Their number one suspect for who'd been behind drawing graffiti on Danblf's portrait was Roger.

Emilia had confronted him about the crime he committed, so he was bound to do something.

Knowing that they suspected him, he'd most likely work out a plan with his fellow conspirators, Sven and Dilgen.

The girls would corner them all in a situation they couldn't talk themselves out of and round all of them up in one fell swoop. …That was the plan, at least.

"Oh ho, I just got a couple of reports. They're on the move."

After getting a good look at Mira and her companions' naked bodies before running away, Roger was now being tailed by Woofson who had been waiting outside of the pool entrance. The report from Woofson said Roger had used a magical device to contact somebody before scurrying off somewhere.

First Pupil had been keeping an eye on Sven and reported that, after looking at something, he appeared to become anxious and began moving.

"Just like we thought!"

They were surely planning to meet up to iron out some kind of plan. Having deduced as much, Mira smirked, thinking they were in the home stretch.

"Let's go make them regret ever defacing my por…er, my *master's* portrait with every fiber of their being!"

"Yes, let's do it!"

Mira and Emilia cheered before dashing off with a fiendish look in their eyes.

"Well, now I wonder what'll happen," Luminaria said, looking as if she were unsure how things would end up. Nevertheless, she followed after them mirthfully.

In a far-flung corner of the clubhouse was a room, outside of which First Pupil and Woofson were standing guard.

"You can leave the rest to me, meow. You'd be better off dismissing that unathletic pooch."

"What do you plan on doing if all three of them decide to run in different directions, woof? Were that to happen, my nose would be able to track them all!"

Needless to say, the two of them were arguing with each other like usual.

"So what's the situation?" Mira asked, after picking up both First Pupil and Woofson and holding them in her arms.

And, as she might've expected, they answered simultaneously.

"Just now, a third person went inside, woof."

"There are three people inside, meow."

As soon as they answered, the argument continued…

"I'm the one giving the reports, meow!"

"My reports are more concise and to the point!"

"What am I gonna do with you guys…? All right. Take turns."

Despite being excellent at what they did, the two couldn't help but fight with each other. With no other choice, Mira heard them both out in turn—after they'd had one more fight about who would go first. She now had a general idea of the situation.

First off, there was no indication that anyone besides the three had gone in or out of the room. Next, they hadn't detected that

anyone had left after entering the room, so they were most certainly still inside. Finally, it didn't appear the three had contacted anyone else—they were most likely the *only* suspects.

"All right, what do you think the three of them are doing in there? Could they be reflecting on their crime? Or maybe they're trying to get their stories straight."

"Let's finish this!"

Their targets were right before them. Mira and Emilia walked toward the room as if to finally wrap things up.

First Pupil and Woofson had disabled all the security devices that'd been installed on the path leading there before First Pupil had masterfully picked the room's lock and severed their last line of defense.

Giving each other one final nod, the two flung the door open.

"That's far enough, scum!"

"Give up. It's over!"

Mira and her companions stormed into the room as if they were raiding the place. Just as the reports Mira had gotten indicated, they found Sven, Dilgen, and Roger.

The three appeared to be utterly taken aback by their sudden appearance. They let out a collective cry and jumped to their feet before looking over to see who it was with alarm clear on their faces.

"It's you guys…!"

"What're you doing here…?!"

"Were we followed?!"

While the three lads cried out upon seeing the three ladies, that wasn't all they did. For some reason, the moment they saw Emilia they hurriedly hid something, then ran toward the window.

"Sorry, can't let you do that."

Assuming that they meant to escape, Mira summoned a row of dark knights to stand guard. The three were suspected of vandalizing Danblf's portrait—she would show them no quarter.

The dark knights that appeared raised their black swords with such force that they seemed ready to cut down anyone who approached. And sure enough, the three boys shrieked and toppled backward when faced with such terror.

Roger dropped whatever it was that'd been in his hand. It appeared to be a box. Emilia paid little attention to it, glaring at the boys instead.

"How dare you draw that stuff all over Master Danblf's portrait… You won't get away with it!" Emilia said, filled with righteous fury. Her anger burned so hot that it rivaled even Mira's.

"Wait, wait. What're you talking about?!"

"Hey, hold on… That wasn't us…!"

With Emilia pressing for justice to be served, Dilgen and Roger pled as if for their lives. And yet, they still asserted that they weren't guilty of that particular charge.

That was when Sven spoke up.

"Hey? Wait a minute. Is that really why you're doing this? It's not to spy on us?" he said in both fear and confusion.

"It's no use playing dumb!" Emilia said, walking toward them as if there was no longer any use talking.

Mira stared at them and said, "If you have any last words, now's the time," with a frenzied smile on her face.

Vandalizing the portrait of Danblf was a grievous sin. Having become judge, jury, and executioner, Mira and Emilia advanced upon the three, paying no heed to their pleas. But then Luminaria spoke up.

"Hold on a second. I'm pretty sure these three aren't responsible for the graffiti."

"What?"

"What do you mean?"

Mira and Emilia turned around stiffly. Smiling at the two, Luminaria said, "Here," and handed them the box that Roger had dropped moments ago.

"Huh, is this…?"

"What *is* this…?!"

The moment she laid eyes on what was inside, a look of confusion passed over Mira's face. But Emilia felt her anger surge as she stared daggers at the three.

The three trembling boys had tried to hide photographs.

But they weren't just any photographs. Rather, they were perfectly taken voyeuristic photos. And there was a whole box full of them.

"Don't tell me you have more…"

Emilia shot Roger and his companions a look so ice-cold that it could've frozen the surface of the sun. Then she attempted to grab the box that Sven was hiding behind his back.

"It's nothing…really," Sven said, putting up a fight.

"Just hand it over," Emilia warned. Upon being threatened, Sven's face tensed up, and he meekly complied.

Opening the box, the contents were shocking, but not surprising: even more voyeuristic photos.

And the photos in Roger's box were *far* more unwholesome. There were photos of female students in swimsuits and gym clothes, as well as photos of girls changing and upskirt shots.

"This is wild. Huh? Ah, I see. They must've run away when they saw Emilia because they had these," Luminaria said, peeking over to calmly but assiduously study the photos inside the box.

She grabbed an envelope labeled *Recent* and handed it to Mira after getting a good look at what was inside.

"Hrmm, what do you mean?"

Wondering what Luminaria was talking about, Mira grabbed the envelope and took a look at what was inside, head cocked in puzzlement.

"What the…? These are…"

Inside the envelope were yet more voyeuristic photos. But these weren't like the others. They were *entirely* of Mira and Emilia and were exclusively lewd or risqué shots.

There were nineteen shots taken from the bottom of the stairs as Mira walked up them to the training hall. And while taken from farther away, there were eight upskirt photos of Emilia.

There were five upskirt shots of Mira as she was lifting her leg to get on Pegasus. Then five more of the same shot of Emilia when she got atop Pegasus as well. There were also twenty photos of Mira from every angle (mostly a low angle) in the training hall lobby when she'd decided to take a quick nap. Seven photos of what appeared to be Emilia in the changing room, changing her clothes, taken from quite a distance.

She found dozens of other photos taken in all kinds of different locations and situations.

"Look at all of these…!" Emilia said, disgusted.

The look that began to overtake her face was not fear or embarrassment…but anger.

What incensed Emilia more than anything was that there were photos of Mira there. And what's more, there were more photos of her than Emilia.

And while the first thing that anyone would notice was how often Mira let her guard down…the fact that Mira had taken Emilia under her wing before being targeted served to make the baleful look in Emilia's eyes even more dreadful.

Standing there, silently facing Emilia, Dilgen opted to hand the box that was in his hands to the girl without saying a word.

"…!"

"This is absurd…"

"But these really are incredible work."

The moment Emilia looked inside, she was struck speechless. Meanwhile, Mira and Luminaria were surprised at how skilled of a creep he was.

Inside were a dozen or so pieces of paper that were all about the same size as a photograph. On these pieces of paper were nude drawings of the female students, drawn with such finesse that they looked almost indistinguishable from actual photos.

Just how on earth had he managed to create something like this?

When Emilia asked him this, Dilgen confessed.

First, Sven would make use of his ability to stay concealed to take pictures of his targets. Next, Roger would employ his unparalleled imagination to remove all their clothing in his mind's eye, such that they became completely naked. Finally, Dilgen would put pen to paper and bring whatever Roger had imagined to life.

"They are the physical manifestation of men's dreams."

"Women wouldn't get it."

"We may have been born to different mothers, but we're united in a common cause."

They were masterpieces that none of them, no matter how hard they tried, could have created alone. And yet, with all their talents combined, the three of them had managed to bring such drawings

into existence. Sven and the others even boasted that their work surpassed real girls in terms of beauty.

"You're *sick*."

The three of them heatedly asked Emilia if she knew just how valuable each of the drawings was. Emilia pitilessly ripped each of the dozen pictures up and threw them away while staring into their eyes.

Sven and his companions begged for her to stop, but Emilia's hands kept ripping.

Well, there's no helping it.

The three had combined their exceptional talents to create a dozen or so nude drawings. But to make matters worse, they'd used female students they went to school with as their models. Fully understanding men, Mira could sympathize with their sentiments. After all, one did tend to be interested in their cute classmates while in the throes of youth.

But this time, she was on Emilia's side. Making no attempt to stop her, Mira simply watched as the girl tore the nude pictures to shreds.

"They sure are childish. But I guess at their age, there's not much helping that," Luminaria said. While she empathized with the three, it didn't stop her from passing judgment. She'd not only seen the things depicted in the pictures countless times but had also gone quite a bit further. Her smug attitude was an immature, vainglorious display.

Chapter 31

SVEN AND HIS CO-CONSPIRATORS had a horde of voyeuristic photos that they'd used to draw nude photos of their classmates.

After questioning the three, several other mysteries became clear.

First, there was the testimony from Dielid of the School of Sorcery, which had led them to suspect the three.

"I can't believe we got it wrong from the very beginning…"

Dielid had said that he'd heard the three of them conspiring to do something the coming week while outside the banquet hall. What's more, this discussion had taken place exactly one week prior to the graffiti incident. It was for this reason that Mira and her companions thought that they'd been conspiring about drawing the graffiti.

But the truth was something different entirely.

"To think they had these deals lined up right under the academy's nose," Luminaria said, smiling as if this were all some raunchy coming-of-age comedy.

The three had made a black-market deal to sell the voyeuristic photos they'd taken. While the cache of photos they'd obtained was for their hobbies and personal consumption, they were also a form of merchandise. Dilgen's nude drawings were made to order.

While they'd thought the three had gathered outside of the banquet hall, in light of all they'd learned, it would be more accurate to say that they were gathered outside the girls' changing room—which was right across from the banquet hall. And they'd been there

to scout the area and see whether or not they might be able to sneak some photos inside.

"Now that you mention it, the girls' changing room is right there, isn't it?" Mira nodded, thinking back to where exactly the banquet hall was situated.

On that note, it wouldn't make much sense to come up with such a plan right outside where you were to strike. Rather, you'd make plans somewhere a bit further away—which would be directly outside the banquet hall if they were planning on raiding the changing room.

And when Emilia had come up to them, it'd been right after they sold some of the photos of her. Thinking that she'd somehow gotten word of the sale, they'd fled the way they had.

Having questioned the three and heard what they had to say, they reached the conclusion that the three weren't responsible for the graffiti.

"Either way, we can't leave you alive," declared Emilia coldly.

At present, cameras were still new, and there weren't many laws when it came to such behavior. It was unlikely the three would be sent to prison anytime soon. And since the law wouldn't punish them, they couldn't just let them go scot-free considering all the privacy that had been invaded.

"All right, all right, how about you leave the rest of this to the adults," Luminaria said, grabbing hold of Emilia as she was about to begin another round of beatings. Then she turned to Mira and asked her to summon the principal.

This was an internal school affair, after all. It would be best to explain the whole situation to the principal.

"Hrmm, will do," Mira said, nodding back. She then asked First Pupil, who was waiting nearby, to deliver the message.

"…and so that's what happened. Now can you find the school principal and tell him that?"

"Leave it to me, meow!"

Considering First Pupil's considerable intuition and how agile he was, he would be able to deliver the message quicker than Mira would. With that in mind, Mira watched as First Pupil dashed off.

Mira and her companions had caught the masterminds behind a black-market Peeping Tom operation. Having successfully brought an end to these incidents that were secretly plaguing the school, the female students could all breathe easy again.

However, this presented another issue.

"But we're right back where we started…"

While they'd determined that Sven and his buddies were the perpetrators of another crime, this also meant that their investigation into who was behind the graffiti on Danblf's portrait was back to square one.

Questioning the three about the graffiti incident just to be safe, they determined that the boys had absolutely nothing to do with it. They now figured that the portrait had been vandalized sometime between when the School of Sorcery had cleaned the room and when Emilia and the others from the School of Evocation had entered the

room. During that time, Sven and his buddies had been super busy getting ready to make their sales. They needed to sort their photos, come up with buyer lists, and provide final invoices to their customers. They'd been so busy updating where and when sales were to go down that they hadn't even had time to go near the banquet hall.

"If you really want some proof, I can show you this hourly schedule of our transactions. And even if we did have time for such childish pranks, we'd be more likely to spend it in some shrubs trying to get the perfect shot."

Sven boasted that drawing graffiti or other pranks of the sort didn't profit them at all. Meanwhile, Dilgen proclaimed that he'd rather be drawing nudes, and Roger replied that he'd much rather spend such time watching girls in the school courtyard.

Furthermore, it didn't seem as if the three had spotted any suspicious-looking individuals.

So, after a brief interrogation, the principal and several teachers finally arrived.

"Oh dear, I apologize for the wait," the principal said, bowing to Mira. His gaze then turned to Luminaria and his face tensed up as an inordinate amount of anxiety began pulsing through his entire body.

They should have expected as much of the academy's principal. While Luminaria was disguised as a female student, he seemed to have seen through her disguise with but a single look.

"I've already heard about the situation, but…"

More so than why Luminaria was there, the principal seemed to be wondering why she was dressed as a *student*. Doing his very best to remain calm, he exchanged a few more words with them before dragging away Sven and his companions.

They would be suspended, forced to pen written apologies, and have whatever profits they'd earned confiscated and donated to their victims. In addition, they'd need to do several months of community service.

The teachers who accompanied the principal then collected the photos that served as evidence. They inspected the contents of the boxes that Sven and his companions had taken out and those of the other boxes that were in the corner of the room, then confiscated them.

While the teachers were checking these boxes, they managed to get a quick look at what was inside. Sven and his companions didn't just have photos of female students but of all different kinds of living things. There were photos of male students, teachers, and even pictures of small animals.

Perhaps owing to Sven's remarkable ability to clandestinely get close to others without them noticing, he'd managed to get some utterly adorable photos of small animals who'd been completely oblivious to his presence.

"These are…kinda cute."

"Right?"

The female teachers were utterly engrossed by the small animal photos. Mira was standing nearby, breaking into a smile at the sight of

such cuteness.

"They are… But I kinda feel like it's a shame."

"He's pretty talented at stuff like this, huh?"

At some point, Emilia and Luminaria poked their heads over to take a look, too.

While the secret photos he'd taken had been wrong, there was nothing wrong with pictures of small animals. If he worked to polish his skills when it came to those kinds of photos, he might be able to become a wonderful animal photographer.

Thinking as much, Mira watched reluctantly as the boxes (including a box full of upskirt shots) were hauled away.

While they'd managed to close one case, they were right back to square one.

"So what kind of criminal shall we go after next…?"

Having, for the moment, returned to the scene of the crime—the banquet hall—Mira and her companions brooded as they looked up at the graffiti-covered portrait.

"On second thought, it's kinda artistic," Luminaria chuckled, standing before the portrait of the now comical-looking Danblf.

Cleos said the graffiti had been drawn on the glass that was over the portrait. Once they received the cleaning agent that would come the following day, it would be as good as new. They could just scrub it off—problem solved.

However, Emilia and Mira were both of the opinion that this didn't mean they could just pretend like it'd never happened.

"How about we go over everything from the very beginning."

"Okay, let's do it!"

"Roger that, meow!"

"It is important to review the facts."

Since they were starting from square one, Mira and her companions decided to go over their investigation from the very beginning.

First, for some reason, the culprit had specifically targeted the portrait of Danblf.

Second, the culprit had somehow gotten into a room that was normally locked when not being cleaned.

Those two points were the most important.

Mira and her companions outlined the key points of their investigation once more and were left wondering where to go from there…

"Perhaps we ought to question everyone that came in here the day before yesterday…"

"If we can just have a *nice little chat* with all of them, then someone might even confess, don't you think?"

There was no need to question them like they had with Sven and his buddies and end up investigating another separate case. Still, Mira and Emilia began thinking that they might as well employ more extreme tactics.

Then, as the two stared up at the Danblf portrait and could feel

their blood beginning to boil, they heard something.

"Who is it?!" First Pupil cried out. And sure enough, at that moment the door flew open like the wind.

…Who was it?

"Agh!"

There, on the other side of the door, stood a young boy. He looked quite surprised, but moments later, a sheepish look appeared on his face, and he began looking about him.

"Hrmm, aren't you…?"

"Phil? What's up?"

This was Phil, who had been in the classroom with Emilia when Mira had gone to pick her up. He was also the talented boy who had transferred to the School of Evocation from the orphanage run by Artesia and Lastrada a few weeks prior, when it was discovered that he had an aptitude for evocation. He now seemed completely different from how he'd been when Mira caught sight of him in the classroom.

"Um, uh… I heard Emilia…was here…" he stuttered, looking at Emilia.

"Hrmm, I'm assuming you must have business with Emilia?"

Emilia had said she'd been looking after Phil. In which case, if he had any questions about his studies or evocation, she'd likely be the first person he'd go to. That was why Mira assumed he wanted to speak with her.

Phil stood there and blinked. Then, staring directly at Mira, his eyes opened wide in amazement.

"…Huh? Is that you, Big Sis?!"

Unlike when they'd hung out at the orphanage, Mira had dyed her hair and was now in disguise as a student. And yet, Phil had figured out it was her from the sound of her voice. His face shone with childlike joy and surprise.

"Oh ho, you realized it was me. That's right! It certainly is."

"Why are you here?" Phil asked, appearing confused after hearing Mira's confirmation.

"Well…I'm here because I heard someone scribbled graffiti on the portrait of Danblf. And as a lover of summoning, there was no way I could possibly let such a thing go unpunished!" Mira declared, her countenance seething with rage.

"I…see." Phil looked a tad pale. "Um…" he said, looking up fearfully and staring at the portrait.

"Hrmm. *That* man is the great, pre-eminent summoner known as Danblf!" Mira said proudly, really heaping on the self-praise. Behind her, Luminaria grinned at Mira's apparent need to pat herself on the back but was otherwise disinclined to jump in.

"And now, thanks to this thoughtless graffiti, he's in quite a sorry state. What kind of despicable villain would do such a thing? Really!" Mira said indignantly, looking up at the portrait.

"They really are the worst!" Emilia added in agreement.

Meanwhile, Phil's face was growing paler and paler as he stood and listened.

Luminaria quietly made her way over beside Phil, whose mouth was shut tight. Then, putting a hand on his shoulder, Luminaria leaned down and whispered something into his ear.

That moment she did, Phil's expression became a mix of surprise and sadness. And yet, as Luminaria continued to whisper in his ear, the look on his face gradually turned to one of firm resolve.

"Come on now, knowing those two, you'll be fine," Luminaria said, clapping Phil on the back.

"Hrmm? What's going on?"

"What is it?"

Having heard what Luminaria said, Mira and Emilia turned around to see what was the matter.

As they did, Phil quietly walked over to both of them.

"Um…" Phil said, hesitating. He took a deep breath and determinedly opened his mouth to speak. Then, summoning all his courage, Phil confessed, "I'm sorry! I was the one who drew the graffiti!"

Mira and Emilia had been furiously searching for whoever had been behind the crime. And it was Phil all along.

"What…was that?"

"Phil… What're you saying?!"

Mira and Emilia were taken aback. They both turned around and stared at Phil as if they'd been stabbed in the back. They couldn't believe that the boy—a fellow summoner—had committed such a

malicious, heinous, and unconscionable act! Accordingly, the look on their faces was one of complete shock.

"I didn't really wanna say anything because of how much fun this was. But jeez, it's crazy how much of a storm that little bit of graffiti caused," Luminaria said, shrugging her shoulders and smiling, while staring at the shocked figures of Mira and Emilia.

Just like Luminaria said, drawing graffiti was very much the kind of shenanigans that young children were known for. At most, one might get a little bit angry at a child for doing that or have them clean it up as punishment. Surely, it didn't make sense to do anything as draconian as calling for their head, like Mira and Emilia had been doing. Not only that, the graffiti had only been drawn on the glass protecting the portrait. Once it was removed, it'd be as good as new.

And yet, the one who had whipped up such a storm was Mira herself. If she hadn't been involved and if Emilia hadn't jumped on the bandwagon, it never would've become such a big deal.

Phil might've confessed earlier, too.

"I didn't expect you'd ever end up catching the masterminds behind a secret photo ring."

Laughing at the fuss they'd created over a child's prank, Luminaria looked quite confident as she said, "It's the kind of thing children do when they want attention, yeah?"

"Don't tell me you knew from the very beginning?" Mira said, glaring at Luminaria.

Luminaria answered by simply shaking her head.

"No, I only just realized it. It was plain as day that he felt bad about something and had come to apologize. But I guess neither of you were seeing clearly enough to notice."

She'd only just realized that Phil was the one behind the crime. But that didn't stop Luminaria from poking fun at the two by implying that they'd been blinded by rage.

"Grrr…!"

"Hng…"

Mira and Emilia then thought back on how Phil had been when he walked in. Sure enough, they realized that it had seemed as if he'd wanted to say something.

"Was it really you, Phil?" Emilia asked the boy with a demure look on her face after walking over to him.

She spoke calmly and with restraint, quite unlike how she'd been speaking up until then. Despite this, Emilia must've felt her blood boiling. And yet, while he was responsible for the crime, he was also her beloved junior whom she was looking after and taking care of. She felt a complicated mix of emotions.

"Yeah… I'm sorry." Looking down and nodding, Phil shut his eyes tight.

At that moment, anger flashed once more into Emilia's eyes. But who could blame her? After all, he'd purposely defaced something that she held so dear.

Nevertheless, she took a big breath and asked, "Why would you do something like that?"

She firmly believed that he wouldn't do such a thing simply as a prank or a practical joke. There had to be some reason…

"Well…because…I just wanted you to…" Phil said, holding back his tears and explaining why he'd done it.

His voice was so thick with emotion that it was hard to understand. And his feelings were getting the better of him, so he couldn't quite articulate what he was trying to say. As he continued to speak, he was able to express more and more how he felt and why he'd drawn graffiti on the portrait of Danblf. It all stemmed from childish jealousy.

First off, the School of Evocation was currently a bit unique in that the ages of the first-year students varied wildly, with some being children and others being teenagers or even adults. And so, for someone who'd enrolled midsemester like Phil, it must've been next to impossible to fit in. While this was going on, Emilia had shown up and taken him under her wing. Children are very open and trusting, and Phil quickly took a liking to Emilia. To help him catch up with the other students, she'd set aside some time in the mornings and after school to help with his training. To Phil, that extra practice time was very important and something he really treasured.

But always hearing Emilia saying "Master Danblf this" and "Master Danblf that" had begun to make him jealous. And while this jealousy was growing, his after-school practice with her had become self-practice. Emilia was now getting private lessons from none other than Danblf's disciple.

A few days later—yesterday, in fact—he'd decided to turn to crime.

The final straw was that, while the special lessons were supposed to only be after school, Emilia's private tutoring had even robbed him of his morning lessons. Danblf had robbed him of every minute of that precious time… Provoked by this, and filled to bursting with frustration, the dam holding back his jealousy burst. In a fit of rage, he vented his frustration by drawing graffiti over the portrait of Danblf.

That was the whole story.

"…It was because of me?!"

Learning that the source of Phil's frustration was none other than herself, Mira appeared dismayed, as if she were the one to blame.

"It sure seems that way. Talk about ironic!" Luminaria said, laughing. She then declared how it was a grievous sin to steal a sweet young boy's big sister and rob him of his time with her. And given that that was exactly what Mira had done, she got what she deserved.

Hearing what both had said, Phil tilted his head inquisitively, as if wondering why they were implying Mira was responsible.

"Oh, kid. Haven't you heard? Mira is the pupil of Danblf's who's been giving Emilia private lessons."

Having picked up from the boy's expression that he didn't yet know this, Luminaria filled him in on the other half of the story. Meanwhile, Mira, who had become the villain, processed what'd been

said and averted her gaze. It was true that their special lessons had gotten off to a pretty rapid start.

Knowing that she'd taken away Emilia's time with Phil, she felt a bit guilty.

"I see, so that's what happened."

However, upon learning that Mira was Danblf's pupil, Phil's countenance changed to one of relief. That was because he'd just learned that Danblf's pupil wasn't some strange, unknown person…but rather someone that he loved just as much as Emilia. It seemed whatever remaining feelings of jealousy he'd harbored were now gone.

"I'm sorry, Phil. I promised that I'd show you the ropes of summoning. But I was so happy to hear that Miss Mira would teach me that I started thinking only about myself," Emilia said, letting Phil know that she was sorry for making him feel lonely.

"And I'm sorry, Phil. I didn't know that you two had an important promise like that," Mira said, apologizing for being the one to cause all the trouble.

Hearing this, Phil repeatedly shook his head back and forth and answered that neither of them had done anything wrong.

"I'm sorry, Mira. And I'm sorry, Emilia!" he said, apologizing for impulsively drawing the graffiti.

Having all apologized to each other and heard what one another had to say, the three forgave each other.

And with that, the case of the graffitied portrait was solved.

Chapter 32

"BY THE WAY, PHIL. This door ought to have been locked, so how did you get inside?"

The culprit behind the graffiti incident had confessed, and the case had been solved. And yet, there was one mystery that remained: How had Phil managed to get into the banquet hall, when no one was allowed to just go and grab the key?

"Oh ho, yes, I'd almost forgotten," Mira said, recalling that this was a good question.

The key was inside the teacher's room, and one needed permission to take it. However, there were no records or traces of the key having been taken. How could this be?

"That's a good point. He shouldn't have been able to do anything to get through the enchantment on the key case," Luminaria said.

The key case had been specially made. She was curious as to what the boy had done to get into it. Everything considered, he should not have been able to open the door.

The three focused their attention on Phil as they sought to unravel the mystery.

"Um, it wasn't that hard…" Phil answered readily, feeling a bit flustered to have all eyes on him.

He'd never used a key because he'd used his inherent lockpicking skills to unlock the door to the banquet hall instead. It was

quite a bold maneuver and not at all something you'd expect of a child.

"…On that note, I heard they taught you a bunch of skills at the orphanage. I feel like lockpicking was something they taught…" Mira said, recalling the orphanage that was run by Artesia and Lastrada. They had several teachers skilled in different disciplines, so as to teach the students all kinds of skills. Some of these skills had to do with scouting. There was even a teacher who taught them how to pick locks and disable traps.

"Yeah, it was a unique orphanage, after all… But isn't the lock to this room pretty hard to pick?" Luminaria said.

As if remembering something, Emilia took a key out of her pocket. It appeared to be the key to the banquet hall. Mira and Luminaria scrambled to get a look at it.

Sure enough, the key had four sets of key teeth, with each side having ten different cuts.

"Whoa…"

The moment she laid eyes on it, Mira smiled. It was the kind of lock most would never even attempt to pick. But Phil nonchalantly stated that it was a rather old type of key, so it really wasn't that hard to pick.

"This one could very well end up being a scout someday. Don't you think he might have an easier time with that than with summoning?"

Despite his age, Phil's lockpicking skills were masterful. Luminaria said if he continued to polish his skills, he might one day become known far and wide as a world-class scout.

"What…did…you…say…?" Mira said, not allowing such a statement to go unchallenged. "Phil! You're going to come to our lessons after school from now on, too. That's fine with you, right?!"

Mira was getting pushy. She wasn't about to allow a promising future summoner to be taken from her to become something like a scout.

Looking back and forth between Mira and Emelia, Phil broke into a huge, bright smile and enthusiastically replied, "That sounds great!"

After school the next day, Mira, Emelia, and Phil stood in the banquet hall. Using the detergent that'd just arrived, the three wiped away the graffiti that covered the portrait of Danblf.

"Hrmm, now it's perfect. He has a refined air of gravitas and is utterly enigmatic. It really is splendid. This really is the perfect portrait!"

The detergent had worked like a charm. Aside from just cleaning away the graffiti, it'd given the glass a brilliant sheen. When she took a step back to get a look at the whole portrait, she saw it gleamed with a luster that made it seem wreathed in some luminous halo.

Looking at the portrait, which was now more beautiful than it ever had been, Mira felt quite proud of herself. There hung Danblf, in his ideal and majestic form. He truly was the kind of cool older guy that people could fall in love with. Or so Mira thought.

"Yes. He's majestic and dignified, and his exploits are known far and wide. He really is incredible."

Had Mira's friends been listening, they likely would've ignored what she said. But Emilia was a big Danblf fan, so far from ignoring such words, they fired her up. Wearing a radiant smile that surpassed mere admiration, she agreed wholeheartedly.

Mira added, "Right though?!"

***

Phil stood sulkily, looking at the two with a discontented look on his face.

Mira and Emilia were Phil's very favorite big sisters. And yet, both of them absolutely adored Wise Man Danblf. What's more, Danblf was a famed summoner and genuine hero, a man surrounded by many myths and legends. There was no blaming the two for going gaga over him.

But despite knowing this, Phil just couldn't get himself to get on board the Danblf-adoration train. The jealousy he'd felt had likely given rise to this feeling. The boy swore that one day, he would become a summoner who'd eclipse even Danblf.

Several days after resolving the graffiti incident, Mira finished teaching Emilia and Phil a bit early and headed to Lunatic Lake.

She made it there just in time for afternoon tea, arriving at Solomon's office to indulge in some of the high-end snacks that he always had on hand. Solomon greeted her with a smile and said, "Well, well, well, I've been waiting for you."

Mira immediately spun around, but there was nowhere to escape. She could already sense that Lily and Tabitha were making their way toward her from either side of the hallway.

For about a week, she'd heard a rumor that Mira's custom innerwear had been completed.

The only direction Mira could go now was back.

"Hey now, come on in."

Shooting Solomon a dirty look as he welcomed her with a smile, she flopped onto his couch and asked, "So what is it?"

Whenever Solomon had that fake smile plastered on his face, it meant that he had something bothersome to ask of Mira. But this time, what he had to discuss was a bit different from what she had expected.

"Yesterday, I got some interesting information…"

This time, he wasn't plotting anything but rather had some information he simply wanted to share. Taking out a single piece of paper from a stack of documents and standing up, Solomon approached Mira as she lay on the couch and handed it to her.

"Hrmm…what is this? Whoa!"

The reason Solomon had greeted Mira with such a big smile had been because the Empire of Nirvana had sent a notice to each nation about a martial arts tournament that they'd be hosting.

The Empire of Nirvana happened to be the second most powerful player-held nation, right behind the Kingdom of Atlantis. A

martial arts tournament hosted by a nation such as theirs was sure to become a huge event all over the continent.

"Hey, don't you think this might bear some relevance to the task you've been assigned?" Solomon continued, with a confident look on his face, referring to the fact that it was a *martial arts* tournament.

Hearing this, Mira guessed exactly what he meant.

"You're talking about Meilin, right?"

Meilin the Controlling Fist was one of the Nine Wise Men. It was fair to say that a warrior like her, constantly questing in search of powerful opponents, would find such a tournament to be the ideal venue.

This meant that, while they currently had no idea where she roamed and thus couldn't get ahold of her, they might have found the perfect lure. There was no way they could let a chance to finally get their hands on Meilin slip through their fingers.

"Well, think you can bring her back with you next time?"

"Sure thing. But we'll need to find a way of keeping her here."

With a bold smile plastered across both their faces, the two eagerly began planning how they might get their hands on Meilin.



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