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Invincible
Little Lady

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Chapter 1: Academy Arc—The Grand Archival Tower

Incident Part 1

1. Finally, a Long Trip

“Finally, a long trip. I’m looking forward to it,” I said, gazing out the carriage window with hope brimming in my chest.

I was currently in my carriage and headed for the Karshana domain. Myself, Tutte, Magiluka, and the prince were on board, and Safina and Sacher were already waiting for us in the Ancient Forest.

I’d recently heard that Safina was helping out with her house to gain more experience, but I never would’ve expected Sacher to be with her— Nah, actually, it wouldn’t have surprised me to see him happily tagging along once he’d heard she was going to be training. Perhaps it was nothing for me to be surprised about.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Magiluka said. “We went to the Relirex Kingdom last year, but we got wrapped up in all sorts of things, and you couldn’t leisurely tour the place.”

“Right,” I replied. “I don’t want to be involved in any more messes.”

I felt a touch melancholic as I remembered the sad incident that’d caused my odd nickname of “Argent Holy Woman” to spread far and wide throughout the kingdom. But I managed to quickly switch gears and think about our goal for this outing.

“I didn’t expect Mr. Falgar to be so famous,” I remarked.

A few days prior, I’d been to a hot spring—ahem, an ancient ruin—and I’d met a pervert—I mean, a beefy archaeologist.

“It seems he’s been traveling around the world in search of all manner of ruins, relics, and precious items,” Magiluka explained. “He’s apparently famous

among both archaeologists and adventurers. I hadn't studied much about the field."

We'd only learned about Mr. Falgar's fame when the prince had told us at a later date. I *had* thought that he was no average guy, but I hadn't realized he was all that amazing, and I felt like we'd treated him rather rudely. Still, considering all those times we'd been in danger of seeing some...sensitive parts, I figured we and he could call it even.

Now then, why did I bring him up, you ask? Because he's related to our trip, of course. As we'd parted ways with Mr. Falgar, he'd recommended we visit a certain place called Kaiomea. Since ancient times, it'd served as a trove of learning, responsible for collecting, managing, researching, and decoding old scripts, books, stone tablets, and the like. A very educational town indeed. One theory suggested that the town was responsible for informing the world about the existence of eighth-order spells.

The reason we'd decided to visit such a superb place was to find a topic for my report; it almost brought tears to my eyes when I realized how unfitting my motives were. *It's my fault that I asked Mr. Falgar for a recommendation—I guess a world-renowned archaeologist can only recommend the cream of the crop.*

Still, you may wonder, was my embarrassing lack of a report topic the only reason we were making this trip? Well, besides taking care of my report problem, I also had hopes of completing that you-know-what objective I'd always been wanting deep down. And, well, Magiluka had been dying to visit the town too. *I do wonder why Magiluka mumbled, "I see... This is also fate..." when Mr. Falgar recommended this place?*

"Since Kaiomea is deep within the Ancient Forest and is apparently ruled by elves with whom we have no serious trade relations, our kingdom lacks substantial information about the place," the prince explained. "This seems like a great opportunity to broaden my horizons."

"I didn't expect Mr. Falgar's letter for the guide he had ties to to be addressed to Shelly," I said with a dry laugh, stopping my train of thought. "I was so surprised. It's a small world, really."

Shelly was the elf magus smith responsible for the prince's gender flip incident. And, well, we were familiar with her thanks to all the fuss that caused.

"I suppose the only issue is if nomadic Miss Shelly is still in that village," Magiluka wondered.

"Well, since Safina and Sacher are already there, we can only pray that they're keeping her tied down," I replied. "Worst case, even if she's gone, I'm sure we can ask others."

"Quite right. Unlike back then, I'm sure it's possible now. Hee hee, it's at the behest of the Argent Holy Woman, after all," Magiluka said teasingly.

"Awww, that again? Hmph! Don't be a meanie."

Magiluka giggled mischievously, so I knew that she was half joking, but I couldn't resist puffing up my cheeks and pouting. The prince watched us banter with a troubled smile while Tutte gazed at us warmly.

2. The Grand Archival Tower of Kairomea

Deep within the vast Ancient Forest, where the foliage was so dense that it was difficult to see more than a few meters in any direction, was a massive lake that looked strikingly out of place, as if a hole had been gouged out of the thick vegetation and filled with water—and above this lake was the floating island town known as Kairomea, a settlement that had been sewn into the fabric of history long before humankind had even been a bobbin on the loom.

The buildings atop its levitating foundation had all been stone-built, and the largest among these was a mountainous tower taking up half of the total landmass—although this tower wasn't tall enough to pierce the sky, it was nonetheless awe-inspiringly colossal. The tower's majestic interior comprised a central atrium, whose impressively high ceiling stretched to the tower's apex, with surrounding floor space separated into rooms. Countless documents were archived in this grand library tower; fittingly enough, the structure had been named the Grand Archival Tower by Kairomea's residents.

Kairomea's remaining land unoccupied by the tower was used for such purposes as a residential area, a town square, a shopping district, farmland, and

other necessities that enabled its inhabitants to thrive.

Thanks to the town's unique location levitating above a lake, its only connection to the outside world was through a single large bridge. The bridge safeguarded the town proper with its massive gates and a wall, and the town used it to carefully restrict which outsiders were allowed to visit. It was via this bridge that Kairomea conducted a bare minimum amount of trade exclusively with nearby elf villages—residents rarely ventured outside the Ancient Forest to interact with others, so, overall, the town was almost completely isolated from the outside world.

The residents of Kairomea were mostly elves, but their appearances were a bit different from the other elves living in the forest, as they had dark skin, white hair, and scarlet eyes. They resembled a species known as dark elves, yet Kairomeans were far more powerful than dark elves from outside the town—one notable difference lay in Kairomeans having shorter life spans, however.

It was unclear if Kairomeans were truly related to the dark elves. Why did they have a shorter life span? Was it because of their species, or were there environmental factors at play? The truth was still unknown.

As the sun started to reach its peak, Kairomean scholars were diligently trying to decode a collection of books within the great hall of the tower. Among them was a young lady sitting on a ladder in front of a bookcase, earnestly poring over a book.



She had long white hair, and she wore an adorable beret and an elegant white cape. This cape signified that she was a librarian of the Grand Archival Tower, and hers in particular implied that she had the highest rank of chief librarian. She had a bit of a childish charm to her appearance, as she looked to be fifteen or sixteen years old by human standards—an elf’s age naturally wouldn’t correspond to such an evaluation, but it was clear that she wasn’t a fully matured adult yet.

A woman approached this young lady with a weary look. “Sita, you’re reading in the middle of cleaning up the books again.”

“Ah, sis—I mean, Rachel,” Sita said while hastily closing the book she’d just been nose-deep in. “I-I just wanted to confirm a few things, is all. I’m not slacking off or anything.”

The woman called Rachel was a head taller than the petite Sita, and she looked to be a mature lady. In contrast to her bewitchingly womanly appearance, her long white ponytail swayed much like an animal wagging its tail, lending her a touch of girlish adorableness. She was also wearing a librarian’s cape like Sita, indicating she was in the same line of work—in fact, Rachel was in charge of assisting the chief librarian’s duties and guarding her.

“Hmm...” Rachel smiled impishly, clearly seeing through the young lady’s lies. “I noticed you started to read an hour ago, so I wonder if you’ve finished your checks...”

“Urgh...” Sita said, her eyes wandering. “W-Well...”

Rachel skipped the usual formalities when she spoke with the chief librarian. This was at Sita’s request, and it was thanks to the two’s background. Sita had lost her parents in an accident when she was young, and Rachel, her relative, had taken her in. To Sita, Rachel was a sisterly figure, and she didn’t want their relationship to grow distant because of their jobs, so Sita selfishly requested that Rachel continue to talk to her like they were at home.

If Sita could’ve been allowed to be especially greedy, she would’ve wanted to call Rachel “sister” during work hours, but Rachel had rejected that as bringing personal matters into work. And so, Sita reluctantly called her sister by her name.

“Heh,” Rachel chuckled. “So, what book have you been so passionately reading?”

“Oh, it’s called *The Golden Princess and the Hydra*,” Sita replied. “Shelly gifted it to me.”

“Ah, that book’s been a hot topic since last year. But why read it now?”

“Falgar gave me a letter mentioning the Argent Holy Woman, so I was tempted to reread it.”

“The Argent Holy Woman, huh...? So she really *does* exist.”

“And according to his letter, she’s coming to visit Kairomea! Ah... I wonder what kind of lady she is. I’d love to have even a glimpse of her!”

Sita excitedly showed Rachel the book before clutching it close to her chest and letting out an enchanted sigh. The chief librarian looked like a little girl indulging in her fantasies.

“All right, all right,” Rachel scolded. “Then you should work hard every day, living up to your title as chief librarian so that you don’t embarrass yourself. Come on, don’t just sit around and read. Work! Work!”

“Okay...” Like a little sister, Sita slumped her shoulders and returned the book to its place.

“Ah, by the way, is today’s unlocking in the same place?” Once she finished cleaning, she approached her older sister.

“Yep,” Rachel replied, already headed for her destination. “There are a lot of ancient texts stored in the basement archives, so many people are waiting for it to be unlocked. Good luck, Sita.”

“Ugh... I-I’ll do my best.” Sita followed close behind.

Because the Grand Archival Tower had stood for many years, numerous important books were stored there. To prevent theft and to maintain the state of the books, a few of the tower’s rooms were locked, and it was the role of the chief librarian to unlock the doors. The key used for this purpose was a legendary-class magic item and had a unique property: only the chief librarian—or, more accurately, only Sita and her ancestors—were able to use it. This was

the main reason she was chosen as the chief librarian despite her young age.

“Why, if it isn’t Rachel and Sita,” a middle-aged man said in a kind tone as Sita was deep in thought.

“Ah, Pastor Thomas,” Sita replied with a smile, halting her thoughts. “Hello.”

The man who stood in front of her wasn’t an elf, but a human. In fact, this pastor hadn’t come from Kairomea, but rather the Einholst Papacy. He’d arrived in Kairomea twenty years ago to gift the town with an extremely precious book, then he’d decided to stay to propagate his religion. Ever since, he volunteered to listen to the woes of outsiders and serve as a mediator. After he handled troublesome tasks for many years, his earnest actions had won him the trust of the residents. Sita had only been able to hear stories about the outside world and gain interest in it thanks to him, and she was grateful that he’d given her the opportunity to meet Falgar and Shelly.

“And where are you two ladies headed?” Thomas asked.

“To the basement archives,” Sita replied. “I’m challenging myself to open the ones that I haven’t been able to yet.”

“Ah, that’s wonderful to hear,” a man boorishly interjected, causing Rachel to glare at him with disdain. “If possible, I’d like you to quickly open them all up. I’ve been waiting for many years, and it’s been quite a nuisance.”

Hiding behind the pastor was a rotund middle-aged man with a mocking grin plastered on his face. He gazed at the young chief librarian.

“Gillan, you’re being unfair,” the pastor admonished. “Sita has been doing her best every day despite having nothing to guide her.”

Gillan looked away with displeasure and closed his mouth. Sita felt a bit down, thinking that he had a point, but she knew that some people, like the pastor, appreciated her efforts and would jump in to defend her. She didn’t blame herself too much. And so...

“I’ll do my best!” Sita said optimistically. She was undaunted by Gillan’s sarcastic remarks. “Wait just a bit longer, okay?”

“S-Sure,” Gillan nodded and replied awkwardly, intimidated by her sunny

disposition.

With the pastor and Gillan in tow, Sita made her way through the Grand Archival Tower and descended its spiral staircase. The basement archives had especially precious documents, and to prevent theft, only certain individuals were allowed inside. No one had any complaints with Thomas entering because he had built up so much trust over the years. Some may have disapproved of Gillan's presence, since he would cause trouble at times, but he had been a peddler selling quality products for many years now. People may have been dissatisfied with his personality, but it behooved them not to be too vocal about it.

The quiet tower became deathly silent as the group arrived at the basement archives. Encouraged by Rachel, Sita stood in front of a set of large, three-meter-tall double doors. She reached into the pochette around her waist and took out a key about ten centimeters long, the tip of which sported a complex design—upon closer inspection, one could see that the key could change shape. In fact, this single key could allow Sita to open every door in the tower.

However, this was a key that changed shape on command—even if she could use it to access one room, the same shape wouldn't necessarily allow her to unlock a separate door. The key could shift into tens of thousands of patterns, and when unlocking a door, Sita had to test out every combination without so much as a hint. Naturally, this meant she didn't know how to open all the doors in the archives.

To the right of the double doors was a metallic, circular column that stood about seventy centimeters tall. She stuck her key inside the upper area of this pillar.

"Hmm... It's not this shape," Sita mumbled. "I thought I had it, but I guess I was wrong. Hrmmm... I wonder what shape it is?"

She felt the key stop midway and wasn't able to insert it all the way through. While cocking her head to the side, she removed the key and stared at it pensively. It started to faintly glow, and the tip of the key changed shape in accordance with Sita's magic and visualization.

"Good grief, this again?" Gillan grumbled in annoyance. "Did your

predecessors not make any documents or reference sheets for their descendants?”

“I’ve considered that possibility, but I never had the opportunity to consult my father about such a thing. I’ve searched all over, and I’ve never found any guides or lists of configurations,” Sita said, not at all deterred by the man’s tone. She was deep in thought. “Besides, there aren’t enough documents about Kairomea. There’s especially nothing about how this place was built. Everyone here should know the importance of documenting the process, yet no one, not a single soul, knows how this key and these doors were created.”

“Sita, stop with the complaints for now and focus,” Rachel said.

“All right. Then how about I try this shape, which I haven’t thought much about before? Hiyah!”

As Sita chattered away, she dug up the image of a key that she had in the corner of her mind. It was a fragment from her childhood memories, but it was so foggy that she wasn’t sure if it was a part of reality.

“Ah. It went in!” she gasped.

Luckily, this door she had struggled to unlock for numerous days had been opened by a random memory she had. The key sank into the hole, and she turned it until she was greeted by a loud clack. Once Sita removed the key, the circular pillar emitted a ray of light that traveled across the floor and up the doors; with another loud clack that signaled that the lock had been undone, the massive doors slowly started to groan and open wide. Sita was completely stunned as she gazed at the scene, shocked by how surprisingly easy it was.

“I-I did it!” she squealed. “It opened! It’s open! Look! Look, Rachel!”

“Okay, okay,” Rachel said, calming her sister down. “Don’t be so excited. Sita, do you remember the shape of the key?”

“Huh? Wait! Ack! I’m about to forget! I need to write it down! Pen and paper, please!”

Once Sita removed the key, it had reverted to its default shape, completely different from the form used to unlock the doors. Sita had been overjoyed by the unexpected result, but thanks to Rachel, the young chief librarian soon

realized that she hadn't been thinking too deeply about the shape. The image she'd retained in her memories was quickly fading away, so she hastily stuck out a hand and waved it about, hoping to jot down the key shape on a piece of paper. Rachel gave a weary sigh as she handed Sita a paper and pen before heading inside the archives.

As the pastor saw Rachel leave, he glanced at Sita, who was curled up on the floor while gliding her pen across the paper with furrowed brows.

"Are you not entering, Sita?" Pastor Thomas inquired.

"Sorry, can you not talk to me right now?" Sita replied. "My mental image is fading away!"

"Pastor Thomas, since we've got the opportunity, why don't we go inside?" Gillan said with an unrefined chuckle. "We might come across something valuable." He didn't wait for a response as he quickly headed inside.

"Gillan never learns," Sita said as she finished writing. She gave a look of exhaustion as she gazed at the doors. "Only certain individuals are allowed inside the archives, so I'm sure he'll be chased out by Rachel."

"Indeed..." the pastor replied.

The two continued to stare and waited for the ill-tempered man to be chased out, but there were no signs of such a thing occurring.

"Huh? I wonder what happened..." Sita muttered quizzically.

She entered the archives with the pastor. They soon found Rachel deep inside, standing in place, while Gillan was staring beside her. The pair were facing away from Sita and had failed to notice her entrance.

"What's wrong, you two?" Sita asked.

She popped up behind Rachel's back to take a peek at what they were staring at. What greeted her was a storage box containing a single book. It was easy to tell at a glance that this was no normal book—it was enveloped in copious amounts of magical energy. It resembled a grimoire, but Sita intuited that this mysterious book was something even greater.

"I knew it..." Rachel murmured. Her voice contained a tone of shock and

elation. “It was here...”

“Rachel?” Sita asked in confusion.

“The Book of Orthoaguina...”

As Rachel mumbled to herself, even Sita couldn’t hide her astonishment. “You mean *that* legendary book? The only item the founder of Kairomea left behind?” Sita whispered. “I didn’t know that it actually existed.”

“Wonderful!” Gillan’s booming voice echoed throughout the room. “If that’s real, it’s an incredibly expensive item!”

“Ack, Gillan!” Rachel cried, snapping back to her senses. A bit too late, she proceeded to shoo him away. “Only certain individuals are allowed in here!”

Sita was left behind as she returned her attention to the book. “The book that was created when Kairomea was founded... Maybe this will provide some insight to the Grand Archival Tower’s construction and allow me to open all the doors here.”

She’d finally found a sliver of light shining into the tunnel of her hardship. As her heart swelled with hope, a question popped up in her mind. “Such a precious book was placed here for all the world to see. Why did no one talk about it? Its existence became a thing of legend. I wonder...”

Sita failed to discern an answer to her innocuous query. As it continued to bother her, she unconsciously reached out and gently touched the book. Suddenly, there was a static screech, and a massive dark shadow flashed through her mind. She swiftly took her hand away.

“Wh-What...was that?” Sita mumbled.

“Sita, what’s wrong?” Rachel called.

“Uh, nothing!” the chief librarian replied with a forced smile. She switched gears and headed back to the doors. “In any case, we must tell father about this.”

“Good grief... We’re in the middle of work. Call him the ‘clan chief’ instead of father.”

However, Sita’s hopes for an end to her struggles were soon dashed. The

following day, the basement archive doors—which only Sita should’ve been able to open—were completely ajar, and the Book of Orthoaguina had gone missing.

3. It’s Been a While

We arrived at the elf village. And, of course, no one was waiting for us with their bows drawn at the entrance. Nothing occurred—and I mean *nothing* (this is important!)—as we safely made it inside.

“Welcome, Argent Holy Woman.” Schweiz greeted us the moment we entered. “Your visit is most... Hmm... I suppose I won’t be meeting my fated beloved this time around... I was looking forward to it too.”

He’d managed to greet us formally enough, but he soon let his true colors show when he glanced around and couldn’t find what he was looking for, slumping his shoulders in disappointment. Schweiz was the chief elf of the village, and though he looked to be a diligent, handsome person, he would fall in love quite easily, attributing it all to fate. He was disappointed this time because we didn’t have any new ladies tagging along with us.

“I’m delighted to see that you appear to be doing well,” I said with a strained smile at his behavior. “But I believe I’ve requested for you to stop calling me by that nickname.”

This was an important request for me to make. I knew by experience that failing to nip these issues in the bud would only cause rumors to spread even further without my knowledge. I decided to doggedly pursue the problem so that my mental state wouldn’t crumble.

“B-But... Then what shall I call you?” Schweiz asked.

“Uh, just call me Mary like a normal person,” I replied.

“Ha ha ha! You jest!”

“No, wait, what? ‘Jest’? I’m just asking you to call me by my name!”

“I see... In other words, you must have a deep reason behind this.”

“No, wait, what? I just want to be called by my name.”

“Um...” Magiluka interjected, ending my vain attempt to reason with the elf. “May I know where Safina and Sacher are? And is Miss Shelly here as well?”

I was tempted to double down just a bit more, but I didn’t want to make others wait, so I stopped myself.

“Hmm? Oh, those two are listening to my younger sister’s selfish requests,” Schweiz replied. “They seem to be having a hard time.”

He didn’t seem particularly bothered by the segue as he glanced in the direction of his sister. He sounded a touch tired as he appeared to be recalling Shelly’s antics, then he proceeded to walk ahead, guiding us to our friends.

As we followed close behind, Schweiz made to switch topics, possibly trying to prevent us from talking about Shelly any further. “I see the divine beast isn’t with you,” he noted.

“Ah, yep,” I replied with a conniving smirk. “I’m having Snow stay at home.”

“Hmm?”

He looked at me with befuddlement, and Magiluka and the prince, equally confused about the beast’s absence, glanced at me.

“Er, well, you know...” I whispered so that only Magiluka and the prince could hear me. “It recently occurred to me that I got the dangerous-sounding nickname people keep calling me because I’m always with Snow, so I decided to leave this time without telling her.”

The two stared back at me awkwardly before averting their gaze.

“E-Er, I see...” Magiluka said. “I didn’t realize that was your plan. I thought they’d come before or after us...”

“Indeed,” Reifus added. “And if I had to pick one, I’d probably go with before...”

“Huh?” I looked at them dubiously.

“Um, my lady,” Tutte whispered. “I apologize for dampening your look of triumph, but is that not Lady Lily running toward us?”

“Huh?!” I gasped pathetically.

I turned in that direction and saw an adorable fluffy snow leopard cub running toward us energetically.

“Wh-Why are you here, Lily?” I said as I hugged the cub, unable to hide my shock.

“Because I’m heeere!” A voice I dreaded echoed in my head, and the large creature who accompanied it descended from the sky with a deafening thud.

“Ugh, Snow!” I grumbled.

“My lady, you mustn’t act unladylike,” Tutte chided me. I didn’t have it in me to keep my cool under these unexpected circumstances, however.

“Wh-Why are you here, Snow?” I asked. “I thought I kept this a secret.”

“I mean, sure, you kept it a secret from me, but you were having a blast telling everyone else about it. You thought I wouldn’t notice? Are you stupid?”

“Grrr... I was so excited about getting to go on a long trip I didn’t think things through...” I said through gritted teeth.

Snow patted my head with her soft paws as I grappled with my strategic failure. It suddenly made sense why Magiluka, the prince, and even Schweiz had all been looking at me awkwardly. The elf had asked why the divine beast wasn’t *with* me because Snow had already arrived first. *No wonder he looked confused at my nonsensical reply... This is so embarrassing...*

I gritted my teeth and inadvertently started squeezing Lily tighter, so she hastily escaped from my clutches and jumped into Magiluka’s arms. It was then that I had an idea.

“Hmm... Not bad,” I mumbled.

“You have a mischievous grin on your face,” Magiluka said. “What’s going on?”

“Oh, y’know, I just thought that if I had Lily and Snow tag along with you, you might become a holy woman too.”

“That won’t happen,” she instantly replied with a look of exasperation. “It’s not that simple.”

“Uh, well, you don’t know that! Nothing wrong with testing it out! Tag along with them during our trip.”

“Why...?”

“Come on! Pleaaase! You know the type of character I’m aiming for!” When in doubt, crying to Magiluka had become my default strategy.

“H-H-Hey! I’m holding Lady Lily. Please don’t latch on to me!” She stepped away from me while protecting Lily. I stared at her silently.

“All right, all right!” Magiluka finally relented. “Don’t give me that lonely look!”

I honestly couldn’t hold a candle to Magiluka—she always gave in to my requests, and I knew that she was too good of a friend to me. *So, whenever she’s in trouble, I’ll always be prepared to go all out and use all the powers at my disposal to save her.* I clenched my fists with renewed determination.

“I’m fine with it, but will Lady Snow be?” Magiluka asked.

“Fair question,” I replied before turning to the divine beast. “Any thoughts, Snow, Lily?”

I wasn’t sure if Lily was aware of the circumstances or if she simply didn’t care, but she gave a wide yawn within Magiluka’s arms.

“Oh, I don’t mind!” Snow said. *“I was thinking it was high time for Lily to start interacting with other people. She’s started to become a little too mischievous these days—probably because she’s been watching you all the time. As an older sister, I want her to become a little more graceful, you know? I think I can count on Magiluka for that. Unlike you, she won’t be unreasonable, and I suspect that she’ll treat me better.”*

“I’m grateful that you’re on board, but you definitely dissed me in the middle of your long monologue,” I replied.

“Yep, I sure did.”

“Usually, you’re supposed to go ‘No, you’re just imagining things!’ or something and play it off!”

“How am I supposed to know that?!”

I grabbed Snow and cuddled her fluffy body as she tried to resist and step away from me.

“Lady Mary, I’d like to change locations,” a voice called from the front. “People are starting to stare at us.”

“Ah, right. I’m sorry,” I replied. I stopped fooling around with Snow and swiftly backed off from her, then I hung my head, red-faced from embarrassment.

We walked ahead and further distanced ourselves from bystanders until we arrived at a clearing. Various weapons and wooden dummies were scattered about, so it was apparent that this was some sort of training arena. In the middle, surrounded by several elves, were Safina and Sacher. They were both armed and seemed to be sparring. A familiar elf was watching over them nearby—Shelly. *At least we know that she’s here.*

As I heaved a sigh of relief, Safina disappeared from view for a split second. She’d run at Sacher, and he could only barely keep up with her speed, just managing to raise his shield to counter her sword slash. Flames danced from Safina’s blade as she struck Sacher’s shield, and a sharp clang rang through the air as he braced himself. However, he couldn’t completely absorb the impact, so he slid back.

“Gh...” he grunted. He smiled as he brought his shield back in front of him. “I’ve gotten used to your speed, but not your raw power. That magic sword should be against the rules.”

“Hmm... This shield didn’t split in half or burst into flames,” Shelly noted analytically. “I guess I got out what I put into it! Whew, that little fox put together quite the little number.” She seemed to be lamenting the prowess of a certain magus smith who wasn’t present.

“Sister, the Arg— Ahem, Mary and her friends have arrived,” Schweiz called out.

“Oho. My, my...” Shelly said with a smile as she turned toward us. “Welcome, everyone. You’ve come at just the right time.”

“Lady Mary!” Safina shouted, dashing at us.

I could hardly believe this was the same girl who'd unleashed that fiery attack just moments before. She ran up to me excitedly, and I petted her like a dog.

"Lady Mary, you came already?" Sacher said while checking out his shield. "I'm still in the midst of making some adjustments."

"Oh? Are there any issues?" Shelly inquired with interest.

"It's much lighter and sturdier than the other materials, which is great, but it's too light, so it's easier to knock back. I'd prefer a heavier material."

"That, I can't do. Any heavier and the shield wouldn't be fit for that functionality I was so proud I could give it."

"Wow," I said. "Did you make that shield, Shelly?"

"I did. I saw Safina's sword and heard Fifi made it. It seems to be a marked improvement over her previous iterations, and seeing that quality lit a passionate competitive fire in my heart. I figured I could make a shield that would blunt her blade in no time at all, but that fox... Everything I put in front of it split down the middle or caught fire. I struggled more than I thought. Ha ha ha."

She's laughing, but it looks like the light's left her eyes. I hope I'm just imagining things.

"The way I saw it, that kid had excellent talent when it came to craftsmanship, but she severely lacked imagination," Shelly said. "I must have underestimated her, thinking she'd only come up with normal items. I wonder what went wrong to convince her to create such a unique weapon."

"Well, that's because Lady Mar— Ngh!" Safina tried to happily answer the question, but I hastily covered her mouth and laughed.

"I-I wonder! Ah ha ha ha!" I said, swiftly changing subjects. "D-Do you have any points you're proud of regarding your shield?"

"Huh? Heh heh heh," Shelly chuckled with pride. "I'm glad you asked. It's not really a point as much as it is the entire shield. Sacher, answer them!"

"Aw... Why me?" he replied with reluctance.

"Wait, why are you backing off there?" I asked. "Is it a power so horrid that

you don't want to say it?"

"Well, no, not exactly..." Sacher replied.

"Then stop being coy and tell us."

This shield was something that even Shelly was proud of. I was dying to find out the shield ability that Sacher, despite his interest in weapons, was reluctant to divulge.

"It...comes back," he mumbled.

"Huh? Pardon?" I asked, acting like a certain protagonist.

"The shield. It comes back to my side if I call out to it."

"Huh. Wow, I see. And?"

"That's it."

"Huh?"

"That's it."

Upon hearing Sacher's firm response, I turned to Shelly, who was nodding with satisfaction.

"Heh heh heh." She chuckled before proudly explaining, "Even lazy shield users will be happy with this! You never have to go fetch it, and even if you forget it somewhere, you can call out and it'll come flying back!"

"Flying back?" I asked with confusion.

"Yep..." Sacher replied. He shuddered at the memory. "When I called out to it, it came hurtling back to me like a boomerang. It was fast enough to kill anyone who'd call for it. When I first saw it in action, I barely managed to dodge, and it sank into the tree behind me."

"Er... If there's an obstacle between the shield and the user, will it swerve and dodge the obstacle?" the prince asked.

"It can't maneuver so nimbly!" Shelly replied, still oddly triumphant. "It just comes straight back, pure and simple, as fast as it can toward the user. That's what this shield does! How laudable! It's totally different from a *certain* sword that only knows how to cut things down! It's totally different!"

I was at a loss for words. *Right... If the circlet incident taught me anything, it's that Shelly has no interest in making anything except unique tools with strange effects. I feel like she's headed in a completely different direction than Fifi, so there's probably not much sense in them competing...*

I proceeded to consider superior uses for the shield than defending yourself. "Isn't that more like a projectile than a shield? Why not just place the shield a distance away, put your opponent between you and it, and call out to it? I feel like it'd be effective."

"I see..." Sacher said in amazement like a light bulb had gone off over his head. "I guess I could use it like that. You're amazing, Lady Mary."

"No, that's not the purpose of this shield," Shelly objected, cutting into our conversation. "If you use it for such a boring purpose, the materials that I secretly used will be—"

"Ah, there you are! Shelly!" Roy called out, approaching us.

At first, I'd found Roy to be incredibly stubborn and wary toward me and my friends, but he'd ended up being the most normal out of all the elves that I'd met—and his reward for that was always having to clean up after Schweiz's, Shelly's, and a certain vampire's messes.

"Aw, crap... He found out already," Shelly muttered awkwardly.

Roy continued to run toward us with a fierce look on his face. A tinge of anxiety plagued my mind. *I feel like I'm about to get dragged into another troublesome mess... Am I just imagining things?*

4. The Book of Orthoaguina

Sita and Rachel went to the chief librarian's office to discuss the theft of the Book of Orthoaguina. It wasn't as though this was the first time that a book had been stolen—over the years, the library had improved management and security, but it was still difficult to completely prevent all burglary attempts. Usually, this wasn't much of a call for concern, but the situation was different this time around: only the chief librarian should've had access to the archive the thief had broken into, and the thief had stolen the extremely precious Book of Orthoaguina. Needless to say, Sita hadn't forgotten to lock the place; in fact, the doors to the room would automatically lock once it was closed.

"We just found the Book of Orthoaguina yesterday... I didn't think it'd be stolen immediately..." Sita said in disbelief.

"It happened a bit too quickly for a planned attempt," Rachel replied. "And even if it'd been planned, it means the thief knew where the book was stored."

"But if it could've been stolen at any time before I'd opened the doors, the timing is a bit odd, don't you think? Why would they choose to act only after I finally managed to unlock the archive?"

"You're right. Which means our suspects can be narrowed down to those who learned of the book's existence yesterday."

"The only people who knew were father, who I reported to yesterday, and the pastor and Gillan, who were present when I unlocked the doors."

"I don't quite understand what the clan chief would have to gain from stealing this book, but I've asked all three to come here, just in case."

"I knew I could rely on you! You're so quick to get things done!" Sita was impressed by how her sister had accurately predicted her train of thought and worked ahead.

"Did anything odd happen yesterday after our visit here?" she asked.

"Hmm... Well, a mysterious monster invaded the town, but that's about it," Rachel replied.

“Huh... A monster...? Normally, I wouldn’t give it any thought, but there’s been a whole slew of monsters showing up in town recently.”

Sita wasn’t particularly surprised by Rachel’s report—despite Kairomea being situated in the middle of a lake, it was still part of the Ancient Forest, so they were constantly plagued by the threat of monsters. It wasn’t unusual for monsters to get inside town.

However, it *was* curious that the monsters that’d popped up recently were oddly shaped and difficult to make out. What exactly were they? When the town consulted a monster expert, they replied that they’d “never seen it before” and that “it might be a new type of chimera.” The clan chief—that is, Sita’s adoptive father—was considering launching a thorough investigation if the town started having too many sightings.

“If a monster had simply invaded the town, it wouldn’t have been worth noting, but this one managed to enter the Grand Archival Tower,” Rachel explained.

“A monster entered the tower?” Sita asked in befuddlement.

“Well, I’m not too sure. Someone on patrol said they saw it. It wasn’t too strong, so they were able to slay it by themselves, and they claimed that there were no signs of it breaking in from the outside.”

“Hmm... Maybe I should leave the monster issue to father. We should focus on the book and the door.”

Sita was feeling like she and Rachel wouldn’t find their answer anytime soon as she closed her eyes and folded her arms in front of her with a groan.

“Honestly, I hardly know anything about the Book of Orthoaguina,” Sita confessed. “I’m not sure if it’d be worth anything to anyone either. When I was searching for clues to unlock the archives, I stumbled upon the name, but all I saw was that it’s an ancient book from Kairomea.”

“Yeah, I’m not too sure on the details either,” Rachel replied. “People say it was made from magic in old Kairomea in ancient times. I did a bit of research and found that it’s likely the oldest book in existence—it might contain the lost wisdom of old Kairomea.”

“Th-That’s amazing! It might even be possible to take control of the archives with something like that!”

Rachel’s sources may have been a bit dubious, but if anything she’d said *were* true, then the value of the book would skyrocket for Sita. Sita felt a strong determination to retrieve the book welling up in her chest.

“It might,” Rachel replied. “But I’ve heard that the book can only be read using a certain procedure. Apparently, it’s so difficult to decipher that amateurs shouldn’t even get near it, and in the worst case, doing it wrong could even cost you your life.”

“Huh? It’s *that* dangerous?” Sita asked. She thought back to the time when she’d first touched that precious book and a massive shadow had loomed in her mind. She shuddered and decided to avoid thinking about it any further.

“Oh, it’s only if you know nothing about it,” Rachel hastily added upon noticing her little sister’s trembles. “I’m guessing that the Book of Orthoaguina was created by elves, so I imagine if you go to the domain of the spirit tree, you can receive protection to read the book. It’s nothing too dangerous.”

“W-Well, that makes me curious, but leaving all that aside, I’m intrigued by how someone other than myself was able to open these doors,” Sita replied, feeling guilty for making her sister act so reserved and choosing to switch topics. “If others can open the archives, I’d like to know how. In fact, I’d *love* to find out.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that there *is* a method that allows one to open the doors without using you, right?”

“Huh? There is?” Sita tilted her head to one side and racked her brain. Unfortunately, no solution came to mind.

“Don’t you remember that outrageous thing you did a few years ago?” Rachel reminded her wearily.

“Ah, right. Yeah. The idea came to mind and I’d wanted to test it out—if I couldn’t open the doors from the outside, I wanted to try it from the inside. You were furious and scolded me so harshly that I cried out of fear.”

Sita felt a bit embarrassed as she recalled her past. Back then, nothing had

ever gone according to plan, and feeling psychologically cornered, she'd had the absurd idea of trying to see if she could figure anything out from the inside. She'd entered an archive that had been open since old times and locked herself inside. This was an extremely dangerous plan—had she failed to open the doors once more, she would've been trapped within the archive for eternity. Thankfully, since Sita was here and had lived to tell the tale, she'd clearly managed to open the doors.

However, it didn't seem like her experience would be able to help them narrow things down—she'd found that for some reason, *anyone* could easily open the archives from the inside. In fact, the doors had opened so effortlessly with a gentle nudge that she'd been a touch disappointed.

Incidentally, when she'd seen how furious and grief-stricken her gentle sister, Rachel, had been about what could've happened, Sita hadn't been able to hold back her tears. She'd never seen Rachel look that way before—the worry and pain on Rachel's face had been the most lasting aspect of that event in the chief librarian's mind, and she could only smile bitterly recalling the event presently.

"But I always make sure to check if anyone's left before I close up," Sita said. "I'm sure I checked before I closed the basement archives too. Plus, the fact that anyone could open the archives from the inside was a secret between us. No one else should know about it."

"Well, it's just a possibility," Rachel replied. "It doesn't mean that it's what happened this time. Like you said, there shouldn't have been anyone left within the archives."

Just then, there was a knock, and Rachel stopped talking as she headed for the door. When she opened it, she had a short exchange with a messenger. Sita thought nothing of it and continued to think about future steps to take.

"What? Gillan's missing?" Rachel gasped, catching Sita's attention.

"Correct," the messenger replied. "When we tried to visit his residence, he was gone, along with his carriage. When I asked the people at his home, they stated that he'd left by himself early in the morning. They're not sure when he'll return."

"Th-Thank you for the report. You may return to your work."

Rachel tried to maintain her composure as she sent the messenger away. Once she closed the door, Sita opened her mouth.

“Is Gillan gone? I can’t help but feel suspicious about the timing.”

“I agree, but it’s still a bit too quick to pin him as the thief,” Rachel replied. “In any case, we should wait to talk to the pastor and father first before we try to hash out the details.”

“I feel like that would be far too late—we mustn’t delay. Can you go and talk to them? I think I’ll go talk to the gatekeeper. There’s something that bothers me.”

“A-Are you sure? I’ll follow your orders, but don’t dillydally, all right? Come straight back once you finish your discussion,” Rachel said half jokingly.

“Argh, there you go again. I’m not a child, okay?” Sita puffed out her cheeks and stood up to head out.

Once the chief librarian headed out the tower and made her way to the gates, she felt tempted to wander around the town, but she managed to keep her impulses in check. When she arrived, she spoke with the gatekeeper.

“Gillan? Ah, yes, he *was* here unusually early this morning...” the gatekeeper said.

“Did you notice anything different?” Sita asked.

“Anything different? Oh yeah...he *did* look to be in a rush... As usual, he never listens to what I say, and he looked annoyed, ordering me to hurry up and let him through. What a troublesome old man.”

“I-I see... Oh, did he mention where he was headed?”

“Nah, nothing like that. But he was mumbling to himself about the spirit tree and stuff.”

As the gatekeeper recalled this morning’s encounter with the shifty peddler, Sita huffed triumphantly in her head, convinced that her instincts were correct. Gillan was beginning to look increasingly more suspicious. It might have been a coincidence he was talking about the tree, and there were no guarantees that

he was truly headed there, but she couldn't shake off her doubts.

Sita thanked the gatekeeper and left while glancing at her surroundings. If she chose to borrow a horse right now and rushed full speed ahead, she could perhaps meet with Gillan at the spirit tree. Even if she was just overthinking the situation and no one ended up being there, she'd be able to report back that her worries were unnecessary—it wasn't a bad plan. The only issue was her leaving the town.

"I'm sorry, sister," Sita apologized. "I don't think I have the time to ask for permission, so I'm gonna go with my gut on this." She bowed in the direction of the Grand Archival Tower, where Rachel currently was.

Just because Sita was the chief librarian, it didn't mean that she *couldn't* leave Kairomea. However, Rachel always became worried sick whenever her little sister left—she was so overprotective that it was almost scary. She generally refused to let Sita outside of town, and if it was a necessity, she would tag along with her.

However, no one could fault Rachel for her reaction—after all, it was when Sita's parents had gone outside town to do research all those years ago that they'd been attacked by monsters and killed. Rachel was worried that her young sister could meet the same fate.

Be that as it may, Sita wasn't keen on becoming a bird trapped in a cage, and this ritual of making a quiet apology to her sister before running off on her own was one she'd performed many times before. Rachel, perhaps acquiescing to the fact that Sita had a mind of her own, didn't try to put her sister under constant surveillance, although she wouldn't spare her a good scolding after all was said and done.

Of course, this didn't mean that Sita was allowed to leave as she pleased. In general, she wasn't allowed to, especially if she didn't have a special reason for it. In this particular case, if Sita had actually spoken to Rachel about leaving, even if she'd offered to let her sister tag along, she likely would've been shut down.

In truth, ever since Sita had heard about the legends of the Book of Orthoaguina from her sister, her heart had been filled with hope and

expectations. She was dying to read the book. She earnestly wished for a solution to all her current problems, if it were possible. Rachel had always said that Sita's biggest strength and greatest weakness were both that whenever she found a book that she was just yearning to read, she'd do whatever it took to make it happen. Sita remembered her sister's words and couldn't help but laugh about how Rachel had had her pegged.

Sita assumed that even if Gillan truly had taken the Book of Orthoaguina, his goal was to sell it off. Half the reason he would ever come to town was to buy and sell books. On the surface, his business was completely legal, but there were rumors that he was involved in selling stolen goods as well. In any case, it seemed clear that it would do no good for the book to end up in his hands.

Sita knew Gillan well enough to recognize that, if he were planning to sell the book, he would undoubtedly check its contents first. She felt there was a good chance that examining the book was his purpose for leaving town.

Everything that Sita had was circumstantial—she wasn't going on anything more than a theory, but she decided that it was best that she head to the tree.

"My goal is the domain of the spirit tree," Sita said, excited that she got to head out of town for the first time in a while. "My story is just beginning...heh heh heh."

With that, she took her first step forward.

5. A Detour

"The domain of the spirit tree, huh...?" I said, mumbling our destination as I gazed up at the sky.

We were currently in a cargo carriage as we headed deeper into the Ancient Forest. The path was so narrow that the carriage started creaking, and the unpaved roads made our ride bumpy. *But hey, this is all part of taking a vacation! May as well enjoy it.*

"That's right, Mary," Shelly, our coachman for the trip, replied. "Truthfully speaking, elves shouldn't be guiding humans to this place, but you guys are special. It's a valuable experience, is it not?" She implied that this was a journey

of great importance.

The prince, Sacher, Safina, and Tutte were sitting in the cargo carriage with me, while Magiluka was holding Lily and riding Snow as she ran alongside us. *Yep, Magiluka looks like a holy woman, no two ways about it. Totally a holy woman! The fact that I threw a tantrum and forced her to do it doesn't take away from it at all either.*

“Uh, we just want to visit Kairomea,” I said honestly as I shot Shelly a weary look. “We don’t have any business with this tree.”

“Oh, come on, don’t be so uptight,” Shelly replied with a laugh, undaunted by my glaring. “It’s just a small detour on our way to Kairomea. That’s all.”

Knowing Shelly, I doubted I could say anything to make her reconsider.

So, why were we in this situation in the first place, you ask? Well, it all started when Shelly had used a precious ore for Sacher’s shield without permission. Roy and the rest of the village had had no complaints about her making him a shield—in fact, many had praised the innovative gear. The issue was that the ore had been taken without permission, and that the numbers didn’t add up. It was clear that Shelly had taken more than she’d used.

“Trial and error is imperative when it comes to making things. I took more than I needed to account for that,” she’d claimed. But then, when the villagers had asked for the remaining ore back (since she’d already finished the shield), she laughed and dodged the question.

“I can’t believe you used all that ore experimenting,” I said with a sigh. “Is it true that you took so much ore that the excuse for using it for the shield wouldn’t cut it?”

“Er, well, I had the opportunity, so I thought I’d use some. Ha ha ha!” Shelly replied with a troubled laugh. “I didn’t think I’d become so engrossed in my work that I’d use up all of it. No one could’ve been more surprised than I was when I went to check how much ore I had left.”

“So, this whole excursion is about collecting more of that ore before anyone finds out?” Magiluka asked.

“Precisely. I’m grateful that you’re so quick to understand, Magiluka. Heh heh,

when you personally requested for me to be your guide, I thought that you guys were my lifesavers. I suppose I have to thank Falgar for all this.”

It must be said that Shelly had forgotten all about the man at first. Only when I’d given her Mr. Falgar’s letter of introduction did she go, “Ah, right, right, yeah. Him.” I guessed that Mr. Falgar had expected this to happen and reintroduced himself in the letter, but perhaps I was thinking too deeply about this.

One thing that bothered me was when Shelly was reading the letter, she went, “I see... You want *her* for that problem,” before glancing at me.

“In any case, if I could return with even a tiny bit of ore, I’ll handle the rest somehow!” Shelly said, putting her hands together. “Come on, help me out, please? You guys’ll be doing me a huge favor here.”

I hesitantly glanced at the rest of the people in the carriage.

“Well, she made this shield for me, so I’ll help her out. Seems fun too,” Sacher replied.

“Um, may I?” Safina interjected, sheepishly raising her hand. “It sounds like we’d be doing some mining, but I don’t know anything about that. Will that be okay?”

I nodded in understanding before turning to Shelly.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the elf replied with a laugh. “This won’t really require much mining expertise. We call the material an ore, but it’s just a part of the spirit tree that petrified over time. Unlike normal ores, we know exactly where to find it—we just need to head there and break off a chunk or two. Easy, right?”

It *did* sound easy, but I wasn’t sure if I could take her words at face value.

“If it’s easy to collect but the ore is precious, perhaps it’s difficult to collect very much at once,” the prince surmised.

“In that case, why does Miss Shelly seem so unconcerned about all of this when she’s used so much ore?” Magiluka asked.

We all looked at Shelly, who kept a strained smile plastered on her face while

keeping her eyes glued on the road ahead. It seemed like she was fleeing from our questioning gazes. *Hmm... So, it's easy to gather but we can't collect very much. That means there's only one kind of quest this can be...*

I immediately turned to my knowledge of games and found the answer rather quickly. "Perhaps...there's a trial of some sort?" I asked.

"Gh... I'd expect no less from you, Mary," Shelly said with a groan. She slumped her shoulders. "I guess I can't trick you, huh... W-Well, I suppose this is the guidance from God that a holy woman would receive," she reasoned bizarrely to comfort herself over her deception unraveling.

"I have no idea what you're on about, but don't think mentioning God will absolve you from your misdeeds. Also, don't call *me* a holy woman. That title would be much more fitting for that lady over there."

I pointed toward Magiluka, who was riding atop Snow. I wanted to use this trip to prove that it wasn't something special about me that'd convinced people to give me that nickname. I knew I was being annoyingly persistent, but I was going to take every chance I was given.

"If what Lady Mary is saying is true, who would be giving us this trial? And what kind of trial will it be?" Magiluka asked. She looked exhausted with me, like she wanted to chastise me for being unable to let go of the nickname.

"Well, since we're going to the domain of the spirit tree, spirits will be giving us a trial, of course! Ha ha ha!" Shelly laughed defiantly.

We all fell silent. *Spirits, huh...* The circlet and mirror incident came to mind—I really didn't have a good impression of spirits. *I have a bad feeling about this trial, but I hope I'm just overthinking it.*

"I-It's not like your lives will be at risk or anything!" Shelly hastily added. "Nothing like that has ever occurred before, so I'll guarantee that. It might be a little troublesome, I suppose..."

We remained silent, not at all encouraged by her reassurances. Anxiety continued to loom over us.

"What do you guys wanna do?" Sacher asked. "If you guys don't wanna go, I can just do it alone."

He'd never experienced too much mischief done by the spirits, so he was less skeptical about the whole situation. I found his offer unusually thoughtful.

"Wh-Whatever is the matter, Sacher?" I asked. "Did you eat something weird from the side of the road?"

"How rude!" Sacher replied. "At least make it normal food instead of something I picked up from the ground."

Ah, so that's what bothers you? I'd wanted to mess with him, but he'd gotten me! I couldn't top that.

"W-Well, since it's on the way, why don't we just tag along?" the prince suggested. "If we deem it too dangerous, I'm sorry, Shelly, but we'll have to turn around then."

I looked around the carriage and saw everyone nodding their heads.

"W-Well, if you say so, Prince Reifus..." I replied with a bit of a sigh, unable to shake off this feeling of anxiety.

And so, we all decided to head to the domain of the spirit tree before visiting Kaiomea.

"Well, here we are. The domain of the spirit tree," Shelly said.

It'd felt like the familiar forest would stretch on for eternity, but the scenery had finally started to change a bit. A massive tree, much larger than anything I'd seen in this forest, towered over the rest of the verdure. Light spilled through the gaps between its leaves, making it glimmer beautifully. I couldn't help but open my mouth in awe as I looked up at this enchanting sight.

"Heh heh heh," Shelly said. "You can't be too shocked just yet. The large tree in the center completely dwarfs this one."

"Wow... It's larger than this one?" I said in astonishment, gazing up.

I noticed Shelly smiling at me as though she was watching something wholesome. I quickly snapped my mouth shut and focused my gaze on the ground in embarrassment.

The elf chuckled before calling out to everyone behind me, "All right, now we

need to leave the carriage and head underground, so prepare yourselves.”

I heard everyone rustling around, and I went to get my own things together, but then I noticed that Tutte had already done all the work for me. With nothing left to do, I decided to step off the carriage.

“Mmm. Whew,” I said, stretching out my back. “I guess we won’t be riding the carriage for a while.”

When I stopped to listen, I heard the sounds of animals and nature. I indulged myself in the serene quietness, and luckily, I didn’t hear any ominous sounds of monsters in the mix. It was comforting.

“I know you said that we were headed underground, but I don’t see any caves nearby,” Magiluka said, glancing around as she dismounted Snow.

She released Lily from her arms, and the cub immediately started chasing after a butterfly with everything she had.

“Right. It’s not much of a cave and more like a tree hollow...” Shelly explained as she looked around. “We have to go inside a tree, and... Huh. Where was it again?”

She tilted her head to one side in confusion. *Is it all right to leave everything to her?* I stared at our guide, anxious about the future.

“Ah, Lady Lily. Please don’t wander off on your own,” Magiluka said, quickly chasing after her before she strayed from the group.

“Goodness... She’s causing Magiluka so much trouble,” I said with a sigh as I watched my friend leave. I turned toward Snow. “I wonder who she took after...”

“Well, she’s curious just like you, Mary, and you both seem to love chasing after bizarre things. She really is such a handful,” Snow said.

“Uh, no, *you’re* her family, so she takes after you,” I insisted in an attempt to refute her.

Snow sighed. “Uh, no, *I’m pretty sure her always trying to stick her nose in random affairs is all you. Soon enough, she’ll be self-destructing in spectacular fashion just like you’ve taught her to.*” She just couldn’t stop pelting me with

insults.

“Goodness, you say some funny things, don’t you, kitty?” I replied. “Perhaps I should pet you until you apologize.”

“Oho ho, please stop trying to use violence just because I hit the nail on the head. What will you do if Lily copies those unseemly tendencies of yours?”

While Snow and I giggled and tried to keep the other in check, I heard Magiluka call out to us from afar.

“Lady Shelly, I found a cave in this large tree! I feel like we can go in deeper, so perhaps this is the entrance.” Be it a coincidence or a strange twist of fate, Lily had apparently found the entrance for us.

The prince and Sacher walked over to Magiluka, and Snow and I ended our argument as I glanced at Shelly. Just as we were about to follow the two men, I noticed that the elf stood in place.

“What’s wrong, Shelly?” I asked. “It seems we’ve found the entrance.”

“I just remembered that there are multiple entrances to the hollow,” she replied. “So it’s rather odd for me to get lost or forget where the entrance was.”

“Huh?” I cocked my head to one side.

Shelly hit over her palm with her fist. “Since there only seems to be one entrance now, is this a trick by the spirits? Or maybe it’s a trial...”

I felt compelled to lodge some complaints about this sudden information, but I managed to resist the temptation and look toward Magiluka. Snow, Sacher, and the prince had joined up with her and Lily, and they were preparing to step inside the tree. Safina and Tutte were waiting near me.

“Magiluka, watch out!” I shouted.

I wasn’t sure what exactly she was supposed to be watching out for, but I instinctively felt a shiver run down my spine.

“Huh?” Magiluka stopped and turned around. A massive tree trunk shot up in front of the hollow, obscuring her, the prince, Sacher, and Snow from view before joining with the tree beside it, making it appear as though there had never been a gaping entrance there in the first place. *Did it just divide itself?!*

“Sonic—” I started to incant, rushing over to the trunk.

“Wait, Mary!” Shelly yelled, stopping me. “We can’t resist without a plan! If the spirits start sulking, it’ll become even more troublesome!”

I wasn’t too well-versed on spirits, but I could agree with her sentiment. I didn’t want to act out and create an even greater fuss. It seemed Magiluka and her group had heard Shelly’s advice and didn’t act either—we still had some time to calm ourselves down and come up with a plan.

“Hmm... They usually aren’t the ones to instigate...” Shelly said. “Maybe the spirits favor you guys, or they’re drawn to you.”

It was supposed to be a joyous occasion for one to be favored by spirits, but as I looked back on how they’d been involved in my life, I couldn’t genuinely find it in me to be especially happy. I was a little sad that I couldn’t appreciate the praise.

“Should we continue pressing forward?” Magiluka asked Shelly from behind the trunk.

“Yeah,” Shelly replied. “It’s a little winding and confusing, but you guys have a divine beast with you. I’m sure you’ll be fine...I think.”

“I see. Well, that makes me worried,” I said, sticking my hand out to my maid. “Tutte, my sword, please.”

If magic wouldn’t work, I felt like I had a chance with a sword. *Maybe they won’t mind it much.*

“My lady, please don’t use absurd logic to make this matter worse,” Tutte replied as though she had read my mind.

“I-I didn’t say anything yet. I’m surprised you knew I was using absurd logic,” I said. “Well, actually, of course you’d know, Tutte. You understand me.”

“Please don’t try to flatter me to get your sword.”

“Then how else can we overcome this predicament?! If I can’t use magic or my weapon, what can I... Oh! My fists! Great idea, me! Okay, let’s do this!”

As I thought about having to go without Magiluka, my anxiety grew more and more intense. My eyes were turning into spirals, and I was becoming

increasingly frenzied.

“We’ll be fine, Lady Mary,” Magiluka called, trying to calm me down. “I’ve got Lady Snow with me, and also Sacher and His Highness. They’ll all protect me.”

“That doesn’t sound fine at all,” I replied in a panic. I was hung up on her usage of the word “we”—unlike her maintaining her composure, I couldn’t help but let some of my true thoughts spill out. “I’m not sure Shelly and I are capable of fighting the spirits and maintaining control of this situation.”

This was an incredibly rude remark toward Shelly, but she didn’t seem to mind as she nodded in agreement.

“Please do your best by yourself, is all I can say...” Magiluka replied.

“Magilukaaa!” I whined.

“M-My lady, please calm down,” Tutte said. “Since our destination is the same, if we head down, we can surely meet with them again.”

“R-Right. That’s it! Wait for me, everyone! I’ll meet up with you guys soon!”

Tutte had managed to calm me down after I’d panicked at hearing Magiluka’s heartless(ish?) reply. My maid was a key figure in grounding me during times of psychological distress. That said, though, she surely couldn’t completely protect me from spirits. I’d initially hoped that Shelly would be able to handle it for me, but she was a bit of a troublemaker herself, so I couldn’t put my mind at ease.

As my negative thoughts spiraled out of control, I noticed that Magiluka and her team had already pressed on, and Safina and Shelly were searching for an entrance. *Argh, I’m no good. I have to join in and help out.* I tried to switch gears and hastily stepped forward to help reunite us with the rest of our group when I heard a deafening crack below my feet. I hadn’t been paying attention to the ground below and tripped over a thick root, but instead of tripping gloriously...I crushed the root into smithereens. *Crap...I screwed up.*

6. The Book’s Whereabouts

Sita looked around while she had her horse run along carefully. Judging from the marks left on the path, it was highly likely that Gillan had passed through

here. It was apparent that only one person had passed by this road recently, and this was the shortest route from Kairomea to the heart of the spirit tree's domain. Not everyone was aware of this route, and thus, only a select few utilized it.

She was eager to press on and swiftly find the culprit behind this incident, but if she caused a mess in her haste within this domain, the spirits would start bullying her. She had little choice but to remain careful.

As she proceeded farther inside the land, she sensed that something was amiss.

"This is odd..." she mumbled to herself. "I don't sense any spirits at all. It's as though they're avoiding whatever went through this path."

Spirits were fickle creatures—perhaps they just happened to be away. She wasn't certain what the cause of their absence was, but she felt a vague sense of skepticism. Something was clearly different from her prior secret visits here.

After a while, a cargo carriage slowly came into view. It bore a striking resemblance to the one that Gillan had used in the past, and Sita was sure that the man had been here. Since she couldn't see anyone around, she surmised that Gillan had gotten off the carriage and proceeded farther toward the spirit tree. She dismounted her horse to approach the massive trunk. Just then, she felt a shiver run down her spine, which caused her to quickly jump into the thickets to hide and gauge her surroundings.

"What was that feeling?" she whispered. "A monster? I-I have to be careful."

As a resident of the Ancient Forest, she was always facing danger. What's more, she was deep within the forest, and it wasn't odd to act by using one's instincts. Sita was one such person who relied on them.

She hid behind foliage and avoided the road while slowly making her way deeper into the forest. She soon came to a large clearing, and a gigantic tree solemnly stood in its center. A middle-aged man was standing nearby. Sita immediately recognized him as Gillan, and she heaved a sigh to ease her nerves...but just as she was about to call out to him, she immediately pursed her lips and ducked behind the foliage.

Three people dressed in black had silently and suddenly appeared around Gillan. When Sita saw them, she once again felt herself shudder. These mysterious people were dressed in dark hooded capes, black light armor, black clothes, and masks—the two to the sides wore black masks, and the one in the center had a uniquely shaped white mask. Only the areas around their eyes revealed their skin, but they'd even put on black face paint around their eyes to make themselves harder to make out. Sita had no idea who they were, but as they were all clad in black, she found them to be creepy. “Wh-Why are you here? Our promise was tomorrow!” Gillan cried out.

His voice echoed loudly within the deathly silent forest.

“I could say the same to you. Why are *you* here?” the person with the white mask replied. Their voice was muffled and difficult to hear, and Sita could only tell that it belonged to a man. It sounded oddly familiar, but if the voice had been changed due to the mask, she couldn't be sure.

“I-I have a-another job to tend to...” Gillan stammered. His usual bossy demeanor was nowhere to be seen, as he was clearly trying to not antagonize the masked figures. In fact, he seemed to be trembling with fear. Sita was being as silent as she could manage, hoping she could scope out the situation further.

“Another job, huh?” the masked man asked. “It looks to me like you've got the Book of Orthoaguina in your hand.”

“W-Well...” Gillan hastily tried to hide the book as he found himself unable to deny the observation. As Sita had guessed, this peddler had carried the book out, but she was now more curious about the current situation—she had no time to be proud of her deductive skills.

Indeed, Gillan sounded extremely nervous. Judging from the conversation, it was clear that both parties knew each other. They could've been friends or perhaps partners in crime, but the atmosphere made it obvious that they certainly weren't buddies.

“R-Right, I'm just checking,” Gillan said. “I wanted to check to see if this was truly *the* Book of Orthoaguina before I handed it over.”

“How dare you brazenly...” one of the figures in black began coldly. Gillan was clearly offering a different excuse than the one he'd started with.

“Now, wait a minute,” the masked man interrupted his colleague. “Checking to see if you’ve got the genuine product before selling it off is rather admirable. Undoubtedly a laudable merchant. Why don’t we have him check it right here and right now?”

Gillan and the others couldn’t hide their shock at this unexpected suggestion.

“Are you sure?” one of the figures in black asked. “That man likely wants to sell the contents of the book to others...”

“Gillan, surely you know how to open and read the book then, don’t you?” the masked man asked, paying no heed to his colleague’s words.

“O-Of course,” Gillan replied with a conniving grin. It seemed he’d eased up a little. “I’ve taken out a few forbidden books of the elves and opened them up to read before selling them. I’m sure that I can. Heh heh.”

Sita once again couldn’t hide her shock. She was aware that Gillan had been sneaking out a few books to sell, but she’d never imagined that he was secretly selling the precious forbidden books. Perhaps Gillan had stolen books numerous times in the past using similar methods, but Sita had only happened to catch him this time around.

“The forbidden books of the elves, huh...?” the masked man said pensively. In her shock, Sita had failed to hear this comment, however.

As she watched on, she saw Gillan draw a magic circle by the roots of the spirit tree and start preparing a tool. She instantly knew what he was doing—this was a ritual that could temporarily undo a lock that the elves had cast. He was so precise that it didn’t look like he was self-taught, and had instead been carefully coached by someone. Once he was done, he quickly placed the book atop the magic circle, held the special staff that he’d fashioned from the branch of the spirit tree, and started to chant a spell. The circle started to glow as magic poured out from the tree, undoing the seal on the book. It opened on its own.

“Gh... Gah...!” Gillan started to suddenly gasp. He writhed in pain as he held his head in his hands. “What is...? S-Stop... Ahhh!”

Sita had no idea what was going on, but one thing was clear: Gillan hadn’t

successfully undone the lock. It was apparent that the man was receiving some sort of effect from the tree. Did he make a mistake, then? She'd been watching from a distance, but his mannerisms had been so perfect that she would've been surprised if that were the case—he'd clearly known how to perform the ritual to open the forbidden books of the elves. If the elves had made the seal, it would've surely opened without an issue. No, rather, Sita sensed that Gillan was receiving some sort of retaliation for forcibly prying the book open.

She continued to observe from afar in astonishment as Gillan screamed. The light of the book faded, and he fell to the ground like a puppet that had its strings cut. He didn't move an inch. Everyone seemed confused, barring the man with the white mask, who approached the peddler.

"Thank you, Gillan. You saved us the work of having to check the book," the man spat mockingly, kicking Gillan as though he were in the way. "Heh heh. This is undoubtedly the book of Kairomea..."

The masked man's emotionless voice had a hint of elation as he took the book in his hands. Sita was so absorbed in the scene that'd unfolded in front of her that she failed to notice a presence behind her.

A loud whoosh cut through the air as Sita felt something graze her ear. She only just managed to dodge before turning to face her assailant. A man dressed completely in black had sneaked behind her and swung down his sword—it seemed there hadn't just been three people there. Sita hadn't discounted this possibility, of course, and she'd kept her wits about her, but the scene that just occurred had been so shocking that she'd let her guard down enough to get spotted.

"Tsk, I didn't think you'd dodge that. You're not a normal elf, are you?" the man said. "Hmm? That appearance... You're from Kairomea."

Sita wasn't sure what the man was on about, but he seemed to have realized why she was so nimble—the elves of Kairomea had different capabilities from others. Still, she had no confidence that she could get out of this mess. When she'd dodged the previous attack, she'd jumped out from the thickets and gotten in plain sight of all the black-caped figures.

"I can't let you leave here alive now that you've seen us," the man said.

Predicting this outcome, Sita desperately racked her brain for a solution out of this mess.

“Don’t!” the masked man barked loudly, causing Sita to stop dead in her tracks. “Look how she’s dressed. She’s the chief librarian of the Grand Archival Tower. Can’t you tell, you fool?”

The seemingly emotionless masked man was now roaring with anger, causing the rest of his colleagues to look hesitant.

“Capture her,” he ordered. “We can use her.”

Sita’s sliver of hope was snuffed out all too quickly. She wasn’t given much time to think as the other figures in black immediately tensed up. It sounded like her life would be spared, but she knew that she wouldn’t want to be captured after seeing how they’d treated Gillan. However, she wasn’t confident that she could flee from them. *If only there was an opening...* Sita thought.

Just then, the trees rumbled loudly in the distance, and the massive spirit tree wriggled as though in answer.

Everyone was shocked. Somebody must have tried to meddle with a spirit, or perhaps a spirit was picking on them. In any case, the trees had reacted, and the spirit tree in the middle had also squirmed in response. This caused a small earthquake, and it was more than enough to incite panic in everyone for a moment.

“Accel Boost,” Sita chanted, making herself more agile as she jumped from tree to tree. She wasn’t sure just who had caused this earthquake, but she thanked them for creating an opening.

However, her good luck wouldn’t last long. “Ugh,” she grunted as a sharp pain immediately ran through her left thigh.

The timing couldn’t have been worse—she had just tried to jump to another tree, but she hadn’t been able to secure proper footing, so she fell to the forest floor. When she landed, she felt the wind get knocked out of her for a moment, and her vision started to grow dim...only for a new pain in her thigh to immediately shock her awake. A deep gash had suddenly appeared on her upper left leg—she’d been grazed by a knife imbued with magic.

Whoever had launched the attack had managed to be so precise despite the situation they were in—it was clear to Sita they were no ordinary gang of ruffians. Increasingly convinced that she absolutely could not get caught by them, she continued to flee without sparing time to heal her wound.

She soon found a large hole in the ground. She guessed that the spirit tree's shaking from earlier had caused the soil to crumble. Upon closer inspection, she saw that the fissure was deep and likely led to a cave below.

Perhaps it was better to hide underground instead of running aboveground? Sita was unsure if this was the correct answer.

She used her elven hearing and focused the rest of her senses to attempt to determine the location of her enemies—the scolding of the masked man could be heard nearby.

“Don't injure her! Do you want to repeat the same mistake twice?!” he roared.

Sita had no idea what he was referring to, but she couldn't suppress her curiosity.

“Same mistake?” she wondered aloud.

Wrapped up in her thoughts, she'd neglected to remain careful of her footing as another stroke of misfortune hit her. The newly made hole was surrounded by unstable soil, which Sita was currently standing on—she suddenly found the ground underneath her feet to be crumbling away.

“Oh n— Ack!”

As the soil under her right foot gave way, she tried to brace herself with her left, but the pain in her thigh flared sharply and made her lose her balance. She then fell into the hole to the ground below.

7. The Spirits' Trial?

My heart thudded with anticipation as I naively hoped that the spirits would set us free, but the world was cruel and heartless. The ground started to rumble loudly as the large tree that I'd sort of crushed (just a little!) started to shake on

its own.

“My lady...” Tutte said.

“I know. Not another word. I know that this is my fault,” I replied, my pulse racing knowing I was to blame.

The tree in front of us wavered as though it’d been hit by a strong gust of wind, but it showed no signs of attacking us. I continued to stare at it cautiously.

“Whoa there! Wait just a moment!” Shelly cried out happily. “I have no idea what you did, but leave this to me! I thought something like this would happen, so I learned the language of spirits a little. Allow me to show off the fruits of my studies.”

She resembled a person who’d just learned a new language and was excited to test things out with native speakers. *Well, if this gets us out of this predicament, I’d love for her to show it off.*

“The language of the spirits...?” Safina remained wary. “Does that mean we can’t communicate with them using human language?”

“Oh, you can,” Shelly replied, still excited. “But if we speak their language, we’ll give off a better impression, and we won’t cause any needless misunderstandings.”

The elf gave us a wink as she confidently walked up to the shaking tree. *Sorry, Shelly. I’d always thought that you were just a klutz, but I guess I was totally wrong. I misjudged you completely.* As I watched her leave, I continued to shower her with backhanded compliments.

Shelly energetically approached the tree, cleared her throat, and gazed up at it. She proceeded to outstretch her arms before enunciating an odd sound. She was speaking in some kind of unknown language...and the tree stopped shaking.

“Woow!” I said, clapping in awe. “Amazing, Shelly! You’re so reliable!”

“Ha ha ha! Stop, now, you’re making me blu—” Shelly replied happily, slightly embarrassed by my praise before she immediately vanished from sight.

“Huh?!” Tutte, Safina, and I gasped simultaneously.

None of us could understand what had just occurred, and we continued to glance around in confusion.

“Lady Mary, above you!” Safina cried, pointing toward the sky.

As I looked up, I saw Shelly hanging in the air, upside down.

“Wait, what? What...happened?” I said in shock.

“How dare you say, ‘Shut up, you little twerp!’” a voice cut through the air, causing everyone to tremble.

The mysterious entity proceeded to whirl Shelly through the air like she was a propeller.

“Well, that’s odd...” Shelly managed to eke out as she spun in the air. “I... I thought I said, uh, ‘Calm down, young lady.’ Ahhh!”

Okay, so I think she just caused a needless misunderstanding. M-Maybe it was like bad grammar or something? The wrong intonation, perhaps? Maybe she didn’t realize that and spoke too confidently... Or maybe someone taught her the wrong words as a prank, and she never noticed.

In any case, it seemed like Shelly had meant no ill will, but that’s how things tended to go with Shelly—it felt like she dragged us into a worse mess.

“I just wanted to talk a little, but you destroyed my roots and even insulted me! Are you making fun of me?!”

“I’m sorry!” I apologized, immediately lowering my head as the tree spun Shelly around angrily. “You’re totally justified with your anger!”

Safina and Tutte followed suit and bowed alongside me.

“Ugh... How am I supposed to react when you apologize so quickly...? Urgh... W-Well, I also split myself without warning, so, um...” the tree said.

For whatever reason, the tree mumbled awkwardly at our reaction. I wasn’t sure if it was because they were embarrassed, but they started swinging Shelly around even faster. *Uh, Shelly’s been silent for a while. I wonder if she’s okay...*

“E-Er, we just wanted to talk,” Safina offered gingerly as Shelly continued to spin wildly through the air. “May I ask why you split yourself?”

“Um, w-well... Uh... How should I say this...” Puzzlingly, the tree faced the ground as they struggled to answer Safina’s innocuous question.

What an interesting spirit, I observed uselessly. I no longer had an iota of fear toward the tree.

“Well, it’s a little embarrassing to talk wh-when there are so many people,” the spirit confessed. “And there were even guys there. Eep!”

The spirit sounded surprisingly more maidenlike than I could have imagined. I wasn’t sure if spirits had the concept of gender—I couldn’t see them, after all, so there was nothing I could speak to on the matter—but I was able to parse that our group had been split up over a silly reason.

Again, I wasn’t sure if it was out of bashfulness or what, but the spirit continued to wave Shelly around ever faster.

“Er... I can sympathize, so will you please calm down for a bit?” I asked. “The woman you’re holding is, uh, well, not too good with words at times, and she just wanted to use the language that she’d recently learned. She’s just a klutz. Um, I mean, she’s just an idiot—sorry, actually, I just mean she’s a fool. Wait, uh, I mean...”

“My lady, I hope you can calm down as well,” Tutte chimed in.

I knew that Shelly was in something of a pinch and I wanted her to be set down, but I’d started to panic trying to find the right words to describe her.

“Your companion doesn’t seem to think highly of you...” the spirit said to Shelly, slightly taken aback.

“Ha ha ha! Mary’s just a shy girl and struggles with honesty,” Shelly answered cryptically with a nod. “But that’s what makes her cute.”

The spirit had stopped swinging Shelly around, but she was still dangling in the air upside down. A nasty part of me hoped she’d be hanging up there forever.

“Hmm... I feel an odd sense of camaraderie with you. Whatever, I’ll let you down,” the spirit replied.

As we breathed a sigh of relief, the spirit flipped Shelly right side up. However,

Shelly was still airborne, and it didn't look like she'd be released from the spirit's grasp.

"Er, so, I thought you'd set her down or something..." I said.

"Of course! I'll release her if you listen to my request—I mean, trial!" the spirit answered, wrapping a tendril around Shelly's waist and showing her off to us.

I figured we'd reach this turn of events sooner or later. I was resigned to it rather than surprised. *Yeah, I knew this would happen.*

"All right, well, I was prepared to face a trial to get the ore that we need," I replied. "The process was just hastened a bit, is all."

"Really?" Tutte started. "As best as I can tell, this was completely unnecessary—Mgh!"

"All right, let's zip that mouth, shall we?"

I was trying to be optimistic about the situation, so I silenced Tutte before she could bring me back to reality. I smiled and suppressed her chatty mouth, and she nodded hastily in agreement.

"Ahem!" the spirit said. "Very well! I shall..."

"Hi, sorry, over here!" Shelly interjected. "So, obviously, this is more like a side thing, but we came here to get some petrified wood. Can we take some with us?"

The spirit fell silent as their hostage piled on an additional request. Thinking that this may have been out of line, I gingerly watched over the two while wondering if Shelly would be getting swung in the air again.

"I find the question a bit brazen, but very well. Based on your results, I can certainly consider that reward," the spirit finally relented. They clearly sounded bothered by Shelly's words, but they decided to display some benevolence. I breathed a sigh of relief. "And so, I shall give you your trial."

"Oh, and it'd be great if you could set me down," Shelly interrupted once more.

"Shut up! Don't push your luck, blockhead!"

The spirit was no longer able to bear Shelly's incessant requests and started to violently shake her up and down. *Yeah, I can't defend her. That's her fault. I'll just hope Shelly will fall silent from being shaken...* Shelly was being flung so fast that she left an afterimage, but I offered no sympathy.

"Um... So, about that trial..." I said, trying to get the topic back on track. If the spirit didn't calm down, we'd never move forward.

"Ah, r-right," the spirit said, regaining her composure. "Very well. I shall give you your trial!"

I gulped nervously and waited to hear the details. *I'm invincible, so if I have to beat something up, I'm sure I can clear that with no problems. Safina's with me too. Worst case, if the enemy turns out to be absurdly strong, I'll fight alone. The problem then is how to fight without anyone finding out about my powers, but I'll leave that to Tutte.*

I glanced at my maid. Perhaps reading my mind, she gave a small nod. *I'm so glad that she's such an excellent maid... Okay, I've got nothing to fear, then! Come at me! I'll be your opponent, and I'll take on whatever you throw at me!* Feeling victorious before the battle had even begun, I waited for the spirit to talk once more.

"Listen well! I'd like to hear your tales of romance that'll make my heart flutter!" the spirit finished with a tone of excitement.

Okay, you win! Uncle! Uncle! I internally screamed. My feelings of certain victory crumbled away with the wind.

8. The Enemy's Name Is...

It'd been thirteen years since I'd been born as the daughter of Duke Regalia. God had been overly kind and had provided me with an invincible body. Amid the numerous enemies and hardships I'd faced, I was undoubtedly now facing the largest trial of my life.

The name of this enemy? Girl talk.

It wasn't as though I had zero interest in romance. But, well, y'know...I kinda hadn't had any opportunities. I'd lost my chance to explore love.

Oh, wait, no, I've got an excuse! As the daughter of a duke, I wasn't allowed to explore romantic relationships so easily. Yeah...that's it. I think.

Okay, so, the more excuses I make, the sadder I get. Why is that, I wonder...

"Sooo? Who wants to start?" the spirit said eagerly. "I'm fine with whoever. Let's start our battle! ♪"

"Battle, huh?" I said, unsure if this was a fight at all. In fact, I was tempted to end this by losing the so-called battle by default.

"My lady, why are you staring at me?" Tutte asked.

"Um, well, do you have any stories to..." I started, placing a sliver of hope in her.

"None at all," she replied with a smile, dashing my expectations in a millisecond. "I'm currently by your side at all times to take care of you, so I've got my hands full— I mean, I'm already happy."



“Uh, Tutte, I feel like I just heard something that I can’t let slide...”

“You must be imagining things. And do you have any stories, my lad—”

“Nope.” I could only smile back at her after braving her sass and having my own question turned back on me.

“Whaaat? You guys’ve got nothing?” the spirit moaned. “You’re all so young, but you’re talking like shriveled old prunes.”

Gaaah! I wasn’t surprised by the spirit’s reaction, but I was terrified to hear it. Their sharp words stabbed my heart mercilessly. *Th-This must be what getting hurt feels like... I feel like I’ve been subjected to a lot of psychological attacks recently. Or am I just imagining things?*

Tutte, on the other hand, seemed completely unfazed despite being in the same situation as me. *How does she do it? I want her mind of steel. I’m so envious.*

“Okay, well, what about you? You, the girl with chestnut-colored hair,” the spirit said, losing interest in me and Tutte.

“U-Uh, me?” Safina stammered. “E-Er... I don’t... Wait, no, I must be of use to Lady Mary...”

She didn’t completely deny her relationships and tried to encourage herself to speak.

“Ooh? What’s this I hear? You sound embarrassed! Sooo cute! ♪” the spirit squealed. “If you’ve got something, tell me! Tell me!”

“Wait, Safina, you’ve got something?” I asked, knowing that I was being a tad rude.

“Well, uh, I mean...” Safina said. “If I have any ties with the opposite sex, I suppose it’s the fiancé that I had in my first year...”

“Stop. Is there love or romance in that story?”

“Umm... N-No...”

Knowing that we were useless, Safina had forced herself to talk about her own experience with the opposite sex, but I didn’t need to hear the details

about this one. Talking about going out with that *cretin* was just digging up an old wound for her. I tried to calm her down—I didn't want to push her.

I'm such a good-for-nothing person. I even made Safina go this far for me.

I actually did have a secret weapon, after all—memories from my previous life. *Er, well, I had zero romance in my previous life too, but y'know...* I had no experience in this field at all, but I'd read and seen enough manga, anime, and movies to know a thing or two about it. *I feel like this is cheating, but I can't back down now.*

"Um, I don't have any of my own stories, but could I talk about my friend's friend's friend?" I inquired. This wasn't from personal experience, but stories from my previous life. I hoped this would fly despite having to dance around the trial's conditions a bit.

"Your friend's friend's friend?" the spirit asked dubiously. They didn't seem too excited by this, but allowed it anyway. "Fine, go on then. Speak."

"Ahem... As I said, this is about my friend's friend's friend. She belonged to a certain high school's basketball team..."

"Ahem, ahem," Tutte coughed, interrupting my scene-setting.

I stopped talking and turned to my maid. "Are you okay?"

"Ah, I am indeed. I apologize for interrupting you, my lady."

"Hey, what's a high school? And what's basketball?" the spirit asked quizzically.

As the blood drained from my face, I finally knew why Tutte had cut me off. I internally thanked her as my thoughts became a mess.

"I'm not too well-versed in everyday life, so I've got a lot to learn," the spirit said.

"Oh, don't worry about it," I hastily said. "Forget all that. It wasn't much and I planned on telling a different story anyway. Forget it, please."

"Huh? You sure? I'm still a little curious, but if you say so..."

Whoops, that was a close one. I was almost about to portray a school

romance from contemporary Japanese society in this world. I probably need something more fantasy-esque.

“Uh, so my other story is...about a corporate drone, a young lady who got into an accident and reinca—” I started.

“Ahem! Ahem!” Tutte coughed again, stopping me from continuing my story.

“Corporate drone lady? Reinca-what now?” the spirit asked.

I was tempted to slap myself in the face because of my stupid remarks. “N-N-Nothing!” I stammered. “I thought about it, but that wasn’t a romantic story either. Whoops, teehee! Silly me! Ah ha ha ha!”

I felt like continuing my yammering would only cause me to dig my own grave even further, so I began straining to laugh it all off as an act of surrender. In my head, I was breaking out in a cold sweat. *Ugh... I tried to adjust some words around to fit this world, but my tiny vocabulary is making it too difficult!*

“Ugh... We’ve got three good-for-nothing maidens, don’t we...” Shelly grumbled in disappointment.

“I-If you’re gonna complain, why don’t *you* give us a story or two?!” I demanded, trying to swiftly change topics.

“Hey, I’m the hostage. My hands are tied, literally.”

“Ugh, who cares,” the spirit said. “I don’t care who talks anymore. This has just been disappointment after disappointment.”

“Huh?” Shelly replied. She thought her excuse was plenty to abstain from romantic talk, but the spirit seemed to have been fed up by it all.

As an elf, Shelly had a long life span, so she undoubtedly had far more life experience than I did. It wouldn’t have been unusual if she’d had a romantic tale or two within her long life, and she was a magus smith who journeyed around the world to boot. She surely must’ve interacted with numerous people in various nations, and I was sure that she had something to offer.

I shot Shelly a hopeful gaze. Who could blame me? *An elf’s romance? I’d love to hear about it.* But she’d frozen in place.

“Come on, out with it!” The spirit egged her on. “I wanna hear some stories!



“Right,” I agreed. “You’re more mature than us, and you’ve lived a long life. I’m sure you’ve got some experience in romance.”

“Ha ha ha! How naive, dear spirit and Mary!” Shelly laughed with pride. “Just because I’ve got a long life span, it doesn’t mean I’ve experienced romance. In fact, precisely because I can live a long life, I’ve become quite unemotional when it comes to feelings of love.”

“Uh, so that means...” the spirit asked gingerly.

“In terms of romantic stories...” I continued.

“I’ve got none!” Shelly replied firmly with a smile that was almost refreshing. “I looove making stuff and wandering around the world!”

None of us said a word. A breeze blew through the trees as a deafening silence filled the area.

“Ummm... I’m sorry,” the spirit finally said.

Aaaagh! This is the toughest blow yet of this year! I hadn’t taken any physical damage, but I couldn’t help but groan internally while clutching my chest.

“Th-This is tough...” I gasped. “I didn’t expect that receiving an apology was tougher than getting a complaint.”

What was tough about it, you may ask? You see, there’s nothing more painful than the one giving the test suddenly acting reserved and apologetic. And it wasn’t even a person, but a spirit—a species that valued observing interesting situations above all else and enjoyed playing pranks on others.

“As I thought, love is rare and very precious,” the spirit said. “I suppose that’s why its sweet nectar is so very enticing.”

“Nectar?” I asked. Still, I couldn’t help but agree. “Well, hearing someone else’s romantic stories is exciting and interesting, so I can see why one would want to listen in.”

“Totally! All right! Since we’ve both got some admiration toward love, why don’t we talk about it? Come on! Over here! Come, come! ♪”

It sounded like they'd taken a liking to me. As the tree started to shake and welcome me by its side, the nearby foliage started to gently part and create enough of a path for a person to walk through. Since the spirit wanted me to come closer, I assumed that walking down this path would allow me to reach its actual body...or something.

"Hey now, let go of meeEEee!" Shelly's voice echoed throughout the area with a Doppler effect. She was passed along the nearby trees and disappeared deeper inside the forest.

"Seems like it'd be safe for us to chase her down," Safina said.

"A-Agreed," I replied. "But I feel like this spirit wants to talk with me until morning or something. I wonder if we'll be okay..." I admitted, letting Safina hear my true feelings.

"We're not in a rush or anything, my lady," Tutte answered, trying to offer me a hand. "I don't think it's too much of a problem. And if we decline the invitation here, I fear that the spirit might throw a tantrum or start sulking and bullying us. Harm may befall Lady Magiluka and her group."

I nodded. "You're right. All right, let's do this."

I took the path ahead with Tutte and Safina following behind me.

Thanks to the shortcut, we got to the tree much quicker than I'd predicted, but I soon stopped in place. There were guests before us—people clad in black like stereotypical villains who I felt like I'd seen before.

Upon closer inspection, I soon realized that my feeling wasn't off—I'd seen at least one of them before. Of course, it could've been anyone beneath all those black clothes, but I would never forget the unique mask that the man in the center of the group was wearing. Indeed, I'd recently run into it. During the magic mirror incident, when I'd stayed at the academy, a man wearing a very similar mask had sneaked in during the middle of the night and tried to attack me.

"Hey, I think that's the person who insulted me by saying my chest is an iron plate," I observed. "The mask looks eerily similar."

“My lady, I believe the more pressing matter is that he attacked you,” Tutte said, noticing that I bore a petty grudge against this person.

Safina had stepped away from the main road to be with Shelly. While Shelly was being dangled in the air, waved around, and unreasonably passed around by the trees, she’d seemed completely fine, but the moment she was released in a clearing and had set foot on the ground, she was in a horrid state that I could hardly describe. She was currently having her back rubbed by Safina. *Yeah, it’s not like we’re spread out because we’re vigilant or anything...*

“I didn’t see her nearby,” a person in black reported to the masked man. They didn’t seem to notice our presence as we remained hidden. “It looks like she fell underground or fled. What shall we do?”

Who are they talking about? While I still couldn’t completely grasp the situation, one thing was clear: it was best to remain hidden until they left. We obviously didn’t want to get caught by them.

“Very well. I shall search for that girl,” the masked man replied. “You lot take care of the rest and quickly retreat. Make it seem like Gillan was attacked by a monster before *you-know-who* arrives.”

“Yessir,” the person in black replied. “Also, it looks like he was acting alone, and he managed to sneak out with an egg. We poured our magical energy into it, so we believe it’ll hatch soon. From there, it’s a matter of whether it’ll take care of him...”

Without saying anything else, the masked man took a few others with him and left. I wasn’t sure if I could just let them leave, but it didn’t seem wise to stick my nose into this affair without fully comprehending the situation. I held my breath, trying to scope out the situation for a few moments more. Just then...

“Hey! You guys!” the spirit scolded. “I’m gonna have some girl talk with some girlyies! You guys are in the way. Go away, shoo!”

The voice came out of nowhere as it tried to shoo the remaining two people in black away. *Y-You idiot! You’re implying that they’re not the only people here!* Fearing that the spirit’s words gave us away, I ducked even lower and hid my presence.

“H-Hey, the spirit said something,” one of the people in black said.

“Who cares,” the other replied. “If you give them even an ounce of attention, they’ll chase you around and pepper you with annoying questions.”

They paid no attention to the spirit’s words as they stayed there and continued their work. From their conversation, I could parse that this wasn’t their first rodeo against spirits. Suddenly, the nearby trees started to rustle as though a powerful gust was blowing through. Just as I was about to leave, I heard a furious roar.

“I said, ‘Get the hell outta heeere!’ You damn blockheads!” the spirit bellowed.

The ground started to shake like the spirit’s rage made manifest, and the trees started to rustle. A long, branchlike tendril shot out like a whip and attacked the people in black. *The spirit seems to be a good person at heart, but maybe a bit short-tempered and selfish.*

“Damn!” a person in black grunted. “They’re not usually this hostile. What’s going on today?”

“It said that it wanted to talk with someone,” the other said. “Maybe someone sent a spirit to go after us.”

Nope, wrong. I have no such intentions. That spirit just got pissed off on their own accord. The duo continued to dodge the attacks as they remained vigilant of their surroundings. I continued to hide.

“Huh?” Shelly asked. “Looks like something surprising started while I was getting my head back on straight. Were you guys here first? It looks like you made the spirit angry. Heh heh, you can’t do that! That’ll do you no good.”

Nice timing! Not! Don’t just thoughtlessly join this mysterious situation and start goading them! Also, Miss Elf, didn’t you piss off the spirit from the get-go too? I was incredibly shocked and I had a lot of things that I wanted to say, but I managed to get by with gaping like a fish while I stared at her.

“Sh-Shelly, you mustn’t come out now!” Safina frantically whispered behind the confident elf.

I suppose it'd be cruel to say Safina should've been responsible for keeping Shelly in check...

"A-An elf?! I knew it! You must be the one who forced the spirit to attack us!" one of the people in black shouted.

Honestly, I'd seen this coming from a mile away. Anyone who understood the relationship between elves and spirits could put two and two together—an unnecessary misunderstanding was thus born. I could only gaze up at the sky in despair.

"I wonder why she runs headfirst into danger..." I muttered.

"Perhaps you can ask yourself the same question," my maid whispered from behind me.

Unable to refute her words, I pinched her adorable cheeks with both hands and stretched them. "Is this the naughty mouth that speaks too much? Is this the mouth that keeps hurting my feelings?"

"Ow... My lady... It hurts..." Tutte said.

"Could it be? Are you friends with the elf from earlier? Ugh... Reinforcements came quicker than I expected," a person in black said.

"What shall we do?" asked the other, glancing in a certain direction. "If another elf is already here, that might mean..."

Ever vigilant, I followed the person in black's gaze and found a middle-aged man lying on the ground, not moving an inch. Suddenly, his bag started to bulge and quickly expand before it ripped, unable to handle the size of the item inside. A grotesque mass of flesh slowly emerged.

"Wh-What is that?" I asked.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from this hideous entity. It was an orb bearing a striking resemblance to a monster's egg I'd seen in a movie somewhere. It looked to be around twenty centimeters wide, and it was growing.

Luckily, thanks to Shelly's impactful entrance, no one had noticed us yet. Unfortunately, the two beings in black were so distracted by Shelly and Safina that they failed to notice the middle-aged man's bag ripping apart. *Maybe I*

should leave the people to Shelly and Safina. If that egg-like thing starts looking dangerous, I'll reduce it to ashes immediately.

"I'd like to sneak around, but if I move now, they'll find me," I mumbled.

"Hey, what are you guys doing?" the spirit's voice echoed out of nowhere.

"Stop, you idi— Mmph!"

In my shock, I raised my voice, but Tutte immediately clasped her hand over my mouth from behind, muffling my voice. Once I calmed down, I took her hand away and whispered to a nearby tree.

"Don't talk to us right now. We'll get caught!" I said.

Truthfully, I had no idea where the spirit was, and I wasn't sure if I was speaking to the right tree, but I much rather preferred to speak to the wrong object than to a lonely, empty space.

"Don't worry," the spirit assured us. "You guys like to whisper and gossip, right? I do too, so I won't let them hear us."

"I appreciate that," I replied, though I didn't quite know how the spirit's powers worked.

I once again looked toward the people in black. Indeed, the spirit's voice didn't seem to reach them, as they were still wary of Shelly.

"I want to get behind that group without them noticing, but I'm worried about the sounds we'll make in the brush, and I can't find a path that'll keep us hidden," I explained. "We can't move."

"Hmm... So I'm guessing you want to do something to those rude people," the spirit said. "Sounds like fun. I'm in! I'll help you out. ♪"

With that, the trees and the brush moved to the side, creating a small path to my destination. The grass, which hadn't seemed tall enough to keep us hidden, started to grow taller as though to shield us from view. *I-Is this the power of the spirit tree? They sound a little childish, but their powers are amazing.* In awe, I went on all fours and crawled forward.

As I shuffled forward, my skirt accidentally brushed against some grass. I started to panic, but the greenery didn't move one bit, nor did it make a sound.

I couldn't hide my astonishment. "I appreciate it," I whispered.

"My lady, I know that this sounds sudden, but do be careful," Tutte said behind me, offering me her scathing criticism.

I puffed out my cheeks in complaint. "Look, I'm no good at stealth games, okay? Getting caught and brute-forcing my way through is my own personal brand of justice, all right?"

"I don't quite understand what you're on about, but I can tell that it's nothing to be proud of."

All the while, I knew that I was likely making quite a bit of noise, but the trees and the grass cooperated in blocking all the sounds out.

While we were arguing, one of the people in black proposed a cliché idea. "Now that we've been seen, I guess we've gotta eliminate you."

They unsheathed their weapons. Safina immediately reacted, placing her hand over her katana and stepping in front of Shelly. Our opponents didn't seem used to combat, so I guessed that Safina wouldn't struggle against them. She maintained her composure—she'd noticed that we were up to something, so she was trying to keep their attention on her.

"Safina's become so reliable," I whispered.

"My lady, why do you sound like her parent?" Tutte inquired.

"Parent? Come on, at least make me her older sister or something."

The difference in tension between us and Safina was crystal clear, but I decided not to focus on that for now.

"Heh, resistance is futile. We've already got *that*," a person in black said proudly, pointing to the lump of flesh. The mass had grown to the size of an adult in the fetal position. As Shelly and Safina widened their eyes in shock, an arm equipped with razor sharp claws poked out of the inchoate clump.

"Gugaaah!"

The organism shrieked an odd cry as its true form manifested. I'd never seen a monster like it before—it resembled a lizard, but it had six legs that were jointed like an arachnid's. The one thing I could say for sure was that it was

bizarrely and awkwardly shaped...a lot like the chimera that I'd fought against in the past.

I'd never seen a monster undergo such a rapid growth spurt before—what had been an egg that fit inside a bag mere moments earlier had suddenly become a massive, two-meter-long monster. I figured it must have to grow old and decrepit as quickly as it'd aged into this full-fledged form.

In any case, my next course of action was clear.

"Heh heh heh," a person in black cackled. "Are you surprised? Now..."

"Quintuple Sonic Blade! Cut it into shreds!" I shouted.

A loud swoosh filled the air as my magic mercilessly made mincemeat of the monster, interrupting it right as it was about to roar climactically.

"Huh?" The people in black let out a pathetic gasp as they froze in place, clearly not understanding what had just occurred.

"Bwa ha ha!" The spirit laughed, unable to hold it in. Their voice echoed throughout the area. "Look at them! They look like stunned fish! So funny! ♪"

"Damn it! They're borrowing the spirit's power! How troublesome..." one of them said, snapping back to their senses.

Safina wasn't one to let this opportunity slip by. She was the only one who'd maintained her composure, and she closed the gap between her foes. They managed to unsheathe their daggers and guard against her swift swings, but they hadn't expected her blade to be enveloped by fire.

"Argh! What is this weapon?!" one of them screamed. The flames ran up their dagger and transferred onto their arm, and they hastily stepped away to try to put the fire out.

One of the remaining people in black tried to join the fray, but I wasn't going to let that happen. "Earth Wall!" I chanted.

"Argh!"

The moment the other person in black tried to step forward, a wall of dirt suddenly appeared in front of them. They let out a cry as they ran into it. Safina and I had been in several battles together, and we were able to use our

teamwork without communicating with each other.

“Gah! I underestimated these kids! I didn’t expect them to get a spirit on their side! Damn it!” our enemy cried. I thought that they’d try to launch another attack, but they took out a smoke ball, obscuring their surroundings.

“Ugh!” Safina grunted.

Just as the smoke was about to envelop her, she stepped forward and unsheathed her sword in the air. Using her wind magic, she managed to dispel the smoke in a flash by slashing her katana horizontally. Unfortunately, our enemies had already managed to sneakily escape.

“They’re good at retreating,” Shelly said wearily, though she’d done nothing but watch on. “Clearly pros. Since we don’t know what they’re up to, it’s best not to give chase.”

“A-Agreed...” I said, not quite happy that she was the one taking charge now.

It was then that the realization hit me. Instead of walking over to Safina and Shelly, I stayed hidden in the brush.

“My lady? Is something the matter?” Tutte asked, looking over to me worriedly.

“Tutte, I did it! This is it!” I cried.

“Pardon?” she asked.

“Those people in black! I didn’t cause any unnecessary misunderstandings with them! In fact, they practically didn’t notice me! But I wasn’t totally useless either! I was helpful to everyone and still managed to fade into the background! Yippee! This is what I was waiting for! This is what I’ve been wanting!” I pumped my fist, sensing new possibilities for my future.

“I’m happy for you,” Tutte muttered. “I think this is what’s known as ‘pulling the strings’ though...”

In my elation, I failed to take notice of her quip.

9. A Holy Woman?

As she felt droplets of water slide down her cheeks, Sita let out a groan and slowly opened her eyes. A rocky ceiling entered her view. It took some time for her to realize she'd been knocked out while facing up, and she glanced around at her surroundings.

"Ah, you're awake," a boy's voice called out from nearby.

Sita snapped awake, shaking off her grogginess as she instinctively rolled in the opposite direction of the voice to look up and confirm its owner.

"Wow. If you're still that agile, I'm sure you're fine. Imagine my surprise when Lily found you dangling in the air ensnared by a ton of ivy," the boy said with a carefree smile. He didn't seem at all cautious of her.

The boy looked to be a human about thirteen to fourteen years old. His gear implied that he was a warrior. Judging from his comment, Sita was able to infer that she'd fallen underground but had luckily gotten entangled in ivy, sparing her from any major injuries. A person named Lily had found her, and this boy had saved her from her predicament. Sita noticed that the wound on her thigh had also been tended to.

"Oh, I learned that from the academy, but I wasn't able to do it well. Does it still hurt?" the boy asked.

His casual demeanor convinced Sita to let her guard down and converse normally. "Huh? Oh, no, I'm fine. Thank you very much for saving me. I'm Sita. And you are?"

"Sacher. If you wanna offer your thanks, give them to the cub who found you."

The boy pointed his thumb toward a small cat that was currently busy chasing down a bug crawling on the ground. Upon closer inspection, Sita noticed that this cat was an adorable snow leopard cub. She was shocked by the immense amount of magical energy emanating from this baby—Lily clearly had far more mana than a normal animal. Sita sensed that this cub was special.

"Th-Thank you, um, Miss? Mister? Lily..." Sita stammered, giving a troubled glance at the boy.

"I've been told that she's a girl," Sacher replied nonchalantly.

Lily, possibly realizing that her name had been called, stopped chasing the bug and looked at Sita. However, Lily immediately glanced elsewhere, causing Sita to follow her gaze.

“Seems like she’s awake,” another boy said, emerging from the dark cave and stepping into the light spilling from the ceiling. With his dazzling blond locks, this elegant boy looked more like a refined noble than the warrior-like Sacher. He turned around and called behind him, “Lady Magiluka, she’s awake.”

After a few loud thuds, Sita inhaled sharply in surprise, her heart pounding with nervousness, as a large snow leopard stepped into the sliver of light. Sita wasn’t intimidated by the beast’s size—rather, she was stunned by the amount of mana and the air of divinity surrounding it. She instantly knew that she was facing a divine beast.

Perhaps the most shocking bit was the girl sitting atop this leopard’s back.

A divine beast and a girl—they bore a striking resemblance to the tale Sita had read quite recently. She could hardly tear her eyes away from them. “The Argent...Holy Woman,” she murmured softly.

No one heard her gasps of surprise and awe, and there was no reply. Sita soon noticed that the girl had blonde hair, snapping her back to reality. Was this really the girl of legends? Perhaps it was, and the rumors had just exaggerated certain features of her. Her appearance wasn’t necessarily set in stone either—even if the lady of legends had been a factual account, the way she looked could’ve changed. Perhaps the “Argent” part of the name referred to the snow leopard’s white fur.

In any case, one thing was clear: a girl was sitting atop a divine beast. A stern and sacred divine beast surely wouldn’t let any old person climb atop their back. Sita assumed that the girl seated on top must be no normal person, but rather one chosen by the gods. (As a matter of fact, Snow didn’t particularly have any rules or policies about who could climb on top of her.)

As Sita locked eyes with this regal lady, she offered a gentle smile. Sita immediately started to tidy herself up, unable to suppress her loud heartbeats.

“I’m glad to see you doing well,” the blonde girl said. “I apologize for not being by your side when you awoke, as I was patrolling the area. Has Sacher

said anything rude to you?”

“Hey, what do you mean by that?” Sacher asked. “If anyone’s being rude, it’s you making that comment!”

“You communicate with men and women the same. While men may not mind your mannerisms, women might find it rude. You’d do well to remember that.”

“Th-Th-There weren’t any problems, ma’am,” Sita hastily cut in to prevent them from escalating their argument. “M-My name is Sita. I don’t know how to thank you for saving me.” She assumed that the lady in front of her was the Argent Holy Woman, so she tried her best to speak politely and avoid seeming rude.

“Please, feel free to relax,” the lady replied, attempting to calm Sita down. “It would be fine by me if you treated me like you’re older than I am.” She seemed used to this situation.

Sita felt embarrassed at how nervous she was acting. She took a deep breath to ease her nerves, but unfortunately, she remained as skittish as ever. “U-Um, are you the Argent Holy Woman people always talk about?!” she asked.

Though Sita had assumed that the legends were mere fantasies, she had cultivated a sense of admiration toward the Argent Holy Woman. There was no way she could keep calm in this situation—moreover, she could hardly hide her excitement.

Magiluka hadn’t expected to be asked such a question during her initial encounter with this stranger, so she sat there in astonishment.

“Ahem,” Magiluka said, clearing her throat. As everyone but Sita stood in frozen silence, the noble decided to introduce herself. “I’m not someone worthy of such a title. Please simply call me Magiluka. This is Sir Reifus, this is Lady Snow, the divine beast, and the cub over there is Lady Lily.”

Sita wondered if she was misunderstanding for a moment, but she realized that the people here weren’t confused by what she said—it was more like they were wondering why she knew that name. Her recognizing this only deepened her misunderstanding about Magiluka, considering she was all too familiar with how the Argent Holy Woman from the stories was desperate to conceal her

true identity. It seemed Mary's theory that any girl could be mistaken for the Argent Holy Woman so long as they stood next to Snow was being proved in a most unexpected fashion.

"Sita, please pardon the rude question, but may I ask how you ended up in such a wretched state?" Reifus inquired, squeezing himself into the conversation to move it along.

Sita knew that this question would be asked sooner or later, and she answered it truthfully. "Ack, that's right! I'm being chased down!" she cried.

She'd been so distracted by her meeting with the Argent Holy Woman—not to mention all the other unusual circumstances—that she'd forgotten about her situation.

"Chased? By who?" Sacher asked.

"I don't know. But it sounded like they knew me..."

She'd integrated into their group so naturally that Sita realized a bit too late that she'd dragged innocent bystanders into danger.

"I-I'm sorry," Sita stammered, trying to leave their side. "Now that I think about it, you guys will be in danger if you stay with me. I-I'd like to thank you for saving me, but I'll do that at a later date."

She walked away, but the trio followed her for some reason.

"I see," Magiluka replied. "I knew it was a good call to step away from where we found you. Still, I agree that we don't have time to talk at leisure here."

"Right," Reifus added. "We've been waiting for Lady Mary, but it seems like we can't reunite anytime soon. Perhaps it's best for us to go to them."

"But we don't know the way. Should we follow Sita?" Sacher suggested.

"U-Um, did you all hear what I said...?" Sita asked.

"Yes, of course," Magiluka replied with a smile. "Now then... Lady Lily, let's go."

The cub, who'd been exploring her surroundings, turned toward the lady and jogged over to her before jumping into her lap. She rode atop the back of a

divine beast, and the divine beast cub looked so attached to her. Only then did Sita intuit the reason behind Magiluka's actions: *It's because she's the Argent Holy Woman...*

In Sita's eyes, Magiluka seemed to be the personification of justice, acting without hesitation and never abandoning a person in need. Her admiration toward Magiluka only grew.

Believing it'd be boorish to express any more dissent, Sita thanked the group and continued to walk on.

"Do you know where you're headed, Sita?" Sacher called from behind.

"Enough to get aboveground and leave this forest," Sita casually replied from the front. "Ah, it might be a bit too late to ask this, but why are you three here?"

Feeling reassured that she was no longer alone, Sita now had enough mental leeway to worry about others.

"We'd asked an elf friend to guide us to Kairomea, but certain circumstances demanded we mine ore from the spirit tree," Magiluka replied.

Sita was surprised to hear the mention of her species. "An elf friend?"

"That's right. She's a lady who goes by the name Shelly."

"Huh? Are you referring to the vagabond magus smith who's a huge troublemaker wherever she goes? *That* Shelly?"

"Y-Yes, I believe that's who we're referring to. Is she an acquaintance of yours?" Magiluka replied awkwardly to Sita's description.

"Well, I *do* know her. I'm indebted to her, though it's mostly for unfortunate reasons..."

Shelly had provided Sita with information on the outside world and a book about the legendary Argent Holy Woman, who'd become an object of her admiration...but the smile Sita put on while mentioning Shelly was one she'd forced out, as in reality, the first things she associated with her were certain irksome matters.

She'd been stunned to hear Shelly's name, but she'd been all the more

astonished to learn that the group was headed for Kairomea. *Falgar's letter told me that the Argent Holy Woman was headed there...then, lo and behold, I just so happened to find a group headed to town.* Sita was practically convinced that she knew the identity of the Argent Holy Woman, and could barely contain her elation and excitement. She was tempted to ask a few questions, but she knew that they were hiding their identities, so she fought against her impulses.

"I can take you to Kairomea," Sita offered, proudly puffing out her chest. "I'm actually the chief librarian of the Grand Archival Tower."

Her plan was to reveal her identity first to make them less wary of her. The trio trailing behind looked at her as she dropped this bombshell.

"Why is the chief librarian of Kairomea...*here*?" Sacher asked, pointing out the obvious.

Sita couldn't tell them about the scandal that had just occurred. As the person in charge, she wasn't able to proudly declare that a book had been stolen under her nose. She gave a strained laugh.

"Ah ha ha... This is a bit embarrassing to admit, but we're in a spot of trouble, and I came here to investigate. But then I ran into some suspicious people..."

"Please stop right there, Sita," Magiluka suddenly ordered. Everyone fell silent.

"Wh-What's wrong? We've still got a bit to go until we reach aboveground," Sita asked.

She stared back at Magiluka in surprise, but the lady had a solemn expression while staring straight ahead. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that the divine beast below her was growling while crouching low. Sita turned ahead once more, wondering if there was anything in front of her, but she sensed nothing at all.

"Come on out!" Magiluka yelled. "I know you're hiding there!"

As her voice echoed in the cave, something wavered within the darkness.

"This is the only route to reach aboveground... We were lying in wait, but it seems you've got a keen nose." A creepy white mask slowly came into view

while the man behind it spoke in a calm tone.

Sita hadn't sensed them at all. If she'd been all alone, she was sure that she would've been captured. She stared back at Magiluka and the divine beast, impressed by their skills. Only a holy woman could be so closely bonded with her divine beast and sense that something was amiss.

In truth, unlike Mary, Magiluka couldn't converse with Snow at all. Lily and Snow had been the first to sense danger, and Magiluka, who'd been nearby, had simply realized how cautious the beasts had seemed. She was used to seeing Mary and Snow converse—or rather, used to seeing Mary talk to herself—so she had heard what Snow was like. In short, Magiluka had simply learned to make keen observations.

So, Magiluka had called out to the darkness out of consideration for Sita's current situation. It was a literal shot in the dark, but if she'd somehow been wrong, she could simply chalk it up to a misunderstanding—there was nothing to lose. In fact, she'd hoped that she *had* been reading too deep into things.

"You guys must be the ones chasing Sita around," Sacher accused, putting up his shield and stepping forward.

"This wasn't part of our initial plans, but it would've happened sooner or later," the masked man replied.

This was a vague response, but Sita took it to mean that they'd been lying in wait for quite a while. She shuddered.

"Wh-Who are you guys?!" she asked.

"Let's see... I suppose you can call us the ones who wish to return Kairomea back to its former glory," the masked man answered.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The man seemed to offer some information, yet really gave away nothing at all. Sita cocked her head to one side quizzically, but she spotted the book he had in his hand and decided to act first.

"Whatever!" Sita cried. "Give back the Book of Orthoaguina!"

"This?" the masked man asked. "This will be useful for our goals, so I can't do

that. We'll finally be able to proceed to our next step, you see. In any case, there's no need for you to worry about the book when you'll be coming along with us!"

He threw a knife at the group, but Sacher, cautious as ever, managed to block it with ease. In the next moment, more people in black emerged from the darkness and pounced on them.

Sita had thought that the masked man was being quite the chatterbox, but it'd apparently just been a ploy to have everyone's attention focused on him. She realized their current objective wasn't to capture her—they were planning to kill Magiluka and her friends first. However, Magiluka and her group had sensed this situation and didn't seem too surprised.

"Thought so!" Sacher yelled. He stayed with the group and calmly used his sword and shield to guard himself against his assailants. "Magiluka, you can take care of yourself! You've got Snow with you, after all!"

"I know that, but you don't have to phrase it that way," Magiluka replied.

"Now, now, you two. Let's focus on the matter at hand," Reifus said. He supported Sacher with his blade and magic.

Magiluka sat on Snow's back as the tag team fought back the people in black with little effort. The group's movements and banter made it seem like they weren't going all out. Sita had felt guilty for dragging everyone into danger, but upon seeing how everyone was used to combat, she changed her tune. *It's no surprise the Argent Holy Woman's knights are so strong...* Sita had no doubt that the two men had accompanied the Argent Holy Woman and had solved a myriad of cases with her, sticking by her side through thick and thin. Her fantasizing had become a runaway train no one could brake.

The people in black retreated, shocked that their surprise attack had failed so miserably.

"Huh... I remember now," the masked man said while glaring. "I thought I recognized you, blonde girl. You're the sidekick of that so-called magical girl!"

"Agh!" Magiluka groaned.

For whatever reason, Magiluka pressed her hand against her chest as though

she'd taken physical damage. The two men beside her didn't look worried as they gave strained smiles.

"A-Are you all right, Magiluka? What's wrong?" Sita asked worriedly.

"I-I'm fine..." Magiluka gasped, facing the ground. "Well, not really, but there's nothing to worry about."

Magiluka had been completely unfazed until now, but her ears had turned red. *What's going on?* Sita thought. *What's a magical girl? Is that another nickname of the Argent Holy Woman?* She knew that now was not the time, but her interest was piqued in spite of herself. She was dying to ask more questions, but she kept it in check.

"Which means...that blond boy over there must be the prince of the Kingdom of Aldia..." the masked man said. "I didn't think you'd chase us all the way here. I thought we'd escaped successfully, but I suppose things didn't go as smoothly as I'd hoped."

"Wait, Prince Reifus?!" Sita shrieked, her nervousness completely dissipating as she glanced at the blond boy. "Whaaat?! A prince?!"

A Kairomean like Sita wasn't familiar with the monarchy of humans. She wasn't sure just how important kings and princes were, but she held a sense of admiration toward them since they appeared in her stories. She knew they were special. *He's a prince, right? Like, the guys who arrive riding on white horses?*

Here Sita had a beautiful holy woman who could speak with divine beasts before her, and said holy woman was flanked by a prince to protect her. Indeed, to Sita, it felt like a scene straight out of a fairy tale.

"Hmm, so where does that leave Sacher?" Sita wondered.

"Huh? What are you on about?" Sacher replied wearily.

"I-I'm sorry. Did I say that out loud?" Sita realized she'd unconsciously voiced her thoughts. It was a bad habit of hers borne from her always active imagination.

The people in black couldn't hide their confusion as Sita and the group she

was with indulged in lighthearted banter. Neither party could take the next step forward.

“Gh... A prince...” the masked man said. “To think you’d try to foil our plans time and time again... What a troublesome foe.”

“What are you all doing there?!” a woman’s voice echoed in the cave.

As everyone glanced in the direction of the voice, an elf appeared from the route that led aboveground.

“Oh, Rachel!” Sita said with relief.

“Tch, outta time. C’mon, let’s split,” the masked man said with frustration. They swiftly vanished before Rachel could approach Sita.

Once the group reached Rachel, they introduced themselves and explained their circumstances before they all headed aboveground.

“I see...” Rachel said after listening to their story. She gave a deep bow. “First, I’d like to apologize for the trouble that our mischievous chief librarian caused.”

“Oh, not at all,” Magiluka replied. “We’re also very grateful to be led outside. We thought we’d be able to quickly reunite with the rest of our group, but our efforts were in vain. We would’ve had a lot of trouble finding an exit ourselves.”

Rachel gazed at Magiluka and the leopards she had with her. Rachel figured both animals were divine beasts. The large snow leopard, Snow, never left Magiluka’s side—as though it were protecting her—and the smaller one, Lily, seemed relaxed and not at all bothered to be cradled in Magiluka’s arms.

“Sita, could Magiluka possibly be...” Rachel started, whispering in her sister’s ear.

“Shhh,” Sita replied, placing an index finger over her lips. “Don’t say anything more, Rachel. Keep it a secret. She denied her identity, so it’s clear she wants to hide it.”

(Of course, unbeknownst to both Kairomeans, Snow was simply glued to Magiluka’s side so Mary wouldn’t nag her later—their misunderstanding was rather justified.)

After Rachel took the hint, Sita turned toward the group. “So, Magiluka, what will you all do now? We can guide you to Kairomea—actually, we’d love to, as a token of gratitude.”

It seemed like some sort of fate that they’d crossed paths, and Sita didn’t want to end their meeting here.

“About that...” Magiluka said apologetically. “As we stated earlier, we’ve strayed off from the rest of our group, and we don’t know what she’d do—I mean, I’d be worried sick if we don’t meet up with her soon.”

Sita was left with some questions after hearing that explanation, but she decided to let them slide. Just as she was thinking about her next course of action, a voice broke the silence.

“Ohhh! Found you guys! ♪ Yoo hoo! Do you guys have a Magiluka among you?”

Magiluka and her group glanced around cautiously, but Sita assured them that they were simply being spoken to by a spirit. They breathed a sigh of relief and let their guards down.

“Hello? I’m asking a question here!” the spirit asked. Spirits were infamous for their quick temper.

“Ah, right, yes,” Sita replied hastily. “Magiluka is right over there.”

Questionably, Sita found herself thinking *That’s the Argent Holy Woman for you* after hearing the spirit personally request Magiluka, but she made sure not to vocalize her thoughts this time. She was decidedly convinced Magiluka was the very same person she’d read so much about—and believing as much did explain away many of the bizarre circumstances.

“Um, I’m Magiluka. Do you need anything from me?”

“I don’t *need* you, per se...” the spirit replied. “I was just asked to check in with you. Mary and I are gonna pull an all-nighter chatting. What do you guys wanna do?”

Sita internally sent her thoughts and prayers. She thought back to the time when she’d joyfully accepted a spirit’s invitation and ended up staying awake

two nights in a row. She felt very bad for this Mary person, but she decided she should throw her Argent Holy Woman a lifeline.

“Magiluka, I advise you to decline this invitation,” Sita advised.

“But I must meet with Lady Mary,” Magiluka replied predictably.

“The more people there are, the more difficult it’ll be to escape from the spirit’s grasp,” Sita explained. “Isn’t that right, Rachel?”

“Yeah...” Rachel answered. “When I came to fetch Sita, I was also forced to join the conversation, then more people came searching for us... It was endless. The more people there are, the longer it’ll take. If you truly care about your friends, the best course of action is to make the group as small as possible for now.”

Magiluka couldn’t refute Rachel’s convincing words.

“Dear spirit, we’d like to take these people to Kairomea...” Sita said gingerly, hoping she wouldn’t earn the spirit’s ire.

“Gotcha,” the spirit replied. “You guys have got plans of your own, yeah? Okey dokey, I’ll be sure to tell her. Later! ♪”

Mysteriously, the spirit sounded completely uninterested and let the group leave, disappearing like the wind—not that anyone could see it, of course.

The entire group stood in stunned silence at the surprising turn of events.

“U-Um, I guess things are moving along, but what shall we do?” Sita asked Magiluka. Even she hadn’t expected the spirit to give up so easily. “Should we at least try to tell them that we didn’t mean what we said?”

“No, I don’t think that’s necessary,” the prince replied. “I think she’ll be fine. It’d be worse if we entered the mix and made everything more complicated. I suppose the other remaining consideration is the ore, but I think we can leave that to them too. If we were to go mining, we’d inevitably run into the spirit.”

“Agreed,” Sacher added. “We’re just throwing all the responsibility onto Lady Mary, but I’m sure she can handle it.”

Sita was a bit curious about this Lady Mary. This puzzling woman seemed to have earned quite a bit of trust from the two boys.

“I don’t deny that, but she also has to deal with Shelly...” Magiluka cut in awkwardly.

The group fell silent, and Sita found herself unable to offer any words of assurance. Though worry plagued their minds, they knew that staying here would do them no good, so they decided to head for Kairomea. Sita continued to internally offer her apologies to Mary, a girl she’d never met.

10. And That’s How the Day Ended

“We’ve got the ore,” Safina called out to me. “Do you think this will be enough?”

“I wonder,” I replied. “We don’t want to take too much and make the spirit angry, so we should stop while we’re ahead.”

Only our voices echoed within the quiet cave. We’d received permission from the spirit, so we’d once more headed underground in the afternoon to gather some ore. We were just about to call it a day.

Wait, this is weird... We arrived at the forest in the afternoon. How can it still be afternoon? The answer was simple: an entire day had passed, so it was currently the afternoon of the following day.

I’d been worried about Magiluka and her group, so I’d had the spirit check up on her, but I was told that they’d decided to head to Kairomea. The spirit hadn’t told me any other details, so I’d been left unsure what was going on with them—but if they’d safely headed to the town, it wasn’t a problem. All that’d remained was for us to meet them there.

The next issue became how quickly we could leave this place. In the end, we’d pulled an all-nighter. *To think I worked so hard last night... I listened to the spirit rant, I made sure to keep up with the conversation, and I did my best to be emotionally supportive so we’d be let out quickly. Then Shelly insisted she couldn’t put up with this unless she got drunk, and she turned the whole thing into chaos...*

Needless to say, we hadn’t brought any alcohol, so she should’ve been out of luck, but then the spirit explained that many people had offered it to the tree—

after the spirit brought out some liquor they'd received, it'd been all over for us. I'd lacked the know-how to confirm it, but Shelly had happily shouted that there were some expensive and rare liquors in the mix. She'd of course proceeded to partake in them and get absolutely wasted.

We'd started by talking about our romantic fantasies, but it'd soon devolved into rants about how guys had no taste and how hard certain ladies would try to catch guys' attention. Eventually, our talk had culminated in cursing out normies who were enjoying their lives—and yes, I was the one who'd taught them the word “normies.”

The spirit had gotten caught up in Shelly's drunk excitement, which had caused the forest to rustle every now and then—I could only imagine how much of a nuisance it must have been to the rest of the environment having the ground quake every so often. Despite how sleepy I'd been, it'd been clear to me it would've been a mistake not to stay awake, so I'd nervously watched on.

At least we made a good memory... Actually, scratch that, I don't think I'll ever want to look back on this. It was then that I remembered hearing about the time a certain vampire had gotten totally plastered—I now had an inkling Shelly may have had something to do with that.

I realized it'd actually been a blessing in disguise that we hadn't been able to regroup with Magiluka. The spirit had eventually started to badger us for new people whose stories we could drink to—they'd basically become a bothersome drunk, and if we'd had anyone else around, I felt sure our “party” would've gone on even longer.

In any case, the chaos was behind us, and we were now diligently gathering some ore within the quiet forest. *This peace is so great.*

We were given tools handmade by Shelly to gather the ore. Each of us had a stake and a hammer that fit our hands snugly, and Safina was expertly clanging away with hers, mining the ore we needed. What? Why was I not hammering away, you ask? Because I might completely crush the tools, of course. Yes, I know this is nothing to be proud of. I'm sorry.

My circumstances aside, we managed to fulfill our initial goal, so all's well that ends well. While we weren't sure just how much ore we needed and had to

confirm that with our elf, we were unable to do so at the moment. As you might've guessed, Shelly was currently out of commission, suffering from a horrible hangover. *She reaps what she sows, I suppose...* There was nothing for me to do but leave her in Tutte's capable hands—alcohol seemed truly terrifying.

"We should head to Kairomea too once Shelly feels better," I said.

"You're right," Safina replied. "I wonder who this elf was who guided Magiluka and her group there."

"I'm a bit worried about that myself...but I think asking the spirit to relay a message for us was already enough out of line as is."

We finished cleaning up and began making our way back to Tutte and the spirit tree.

"About that thing..." the spirit started suddenly.

"Whoa, you scared me," I said with a jolt.

You'd think I would've been used to a voice speaking to me out of nowhere by now, but if I let my guard down, I'd get easily startled. Safina jolted as well, likely not used to it either—she'd almost dropped the tools in her arms and panicked for a split moment.

"Remember the guys who tried to attack you? Well, a similar group tried to attack that Magiluka girl too," the spirit informed us, unfazed by our reactions.

That was naturally shocking news to us. "Wait, that's the first I'm hearing of this," I said. "Are Magiluka and the others okay?"

"I mean, I think so? They didn't look severely wounded or anything," the spirit replied.

"Those guys didn't seem to be aiming for us," Safina said. "It feels more like they were trying to silence us because we stumbled on something we shouldn't have seen."

"Well, about that..." I said. "I'm familiar with one of the people we saw. I think he was involved in the chimera incident."

"Chimera... Ah, when your fakes were running around? I wasn't able to help

then, so I'm not caught up on the details yet."

"No, Safina. I'm talking about the *chimera* incident. This is important—make sure to refrain from calling it anything else."

"Ah, yes, of course. The chimera incident."

Safina immediately corrected herself to enable my selfish whims. *She's such a good girl...*

"Oho? What's that about? Sounds interesting," the spirit said.

"Come on, enough chatter," I said. "Let's go back to Tutte."

I didn't want the spirit's interest piqued, so I quickly tried to guide our group back to my maid.

Once we returned, we found that Shelly had already recovered and gone to do some investigating of her own.

"Are you all right already, Shelly?" I asked.

"Ha ha ha!" she laughed proudly. "Don't you look down on us elves! All it took was sipping the tea that our predecessors made precisely for these occasions, and I recovered in a jiffy!"

Aren't you the no-good elf who was down for the count just moments before?

"I wish you'd drunk that before you forced us to do the mining, then!" I complained. "Actually, why didn't you use that back when you were rolling on the ground and suffering?"

"Ha ha ha! Don't you look down on us elves! I'd just completely forgotten about it until now! When Tutte said that she wished she had some medicine for me, it jogged my memory!"

Now, hold on, that's got nothing to do with elves! Don't drag all the other elves down to your level!

"In any case, while I was searching for the ingredients for my drink, I was also looking into something that'd bothered me," Shelly said.

"What bothered you?" I asked.

"It's about the old man who was near the monster that tried to attack us..."

she explained awkwardly.

“Wh-What about it?” I was getting nervous.

After Shelly had gone to check on the unconscious man lying on the floor yesterday, she hadn’t allowed us to go near him. She’d said we’d reached the scene too late to help him, but that he hadn’t had any external injuries on him. If Shelly had gone to check on him again, it was likely she’d discovered some sort of important information. I gulped nervously and waited for the news.

“Upon closer inspection, I realized he was an acquaintance of mine,” the elf finally said. “I’d never interacted with him much, and he’d always pissed me off, so I’d completely forgotten about him until now. Phew, I feel a lot better now that I figured that out!”

“Huh? Er, okay. And?” I asked.

“That’s it.”

I fell silent. *I mean, I guess it’s shocking if you run across your acquaintance’s corpse, but that’s all you have to say about him after thinking about it all day? That’s pretty sad.* That said, since it was Shelly we were talking about, I found it oddly less shocking.

“Ah, right, I think his name’s Gillan,” Shelly hastily added, seeming a bit frantic at my silent reaction. “He was a merchant in Kairomea.”

I stopped giving her an accusatory glare as she offered some useful information.

“Kairomea, huh...?” Safina said. “It’s an interesting coincidence he’s coming from the place we’re headed. Why do you think a Kairomean merchant was out here, and how did he end up getting involved with those black robes?”

“This might seem a bit cliché, but I’m guessing he saw something that he shouldn’t have and those guys silenced him,” I answered.

“Tsk, ts, ts,” the spirit clicked their theoretical tongue, then added confidently, “You guys are naive. Laughably so. I doubt it’s anything that tropey. No... That man, Gillan, must’ve carried a forbidden book out of Kairomea, failed to read it correctly, and lost his life as a result. You guys must’ve just happened

to stumble upon the scene as that happened. That's my guess, anyway."

"Wow, that's a detailed guess," I said in awe. I didn't have a shred of doubt about the spirit's conjecture and gave them an approving round of applause. "I'd expect no less from a spirit. It's as though you were there."

"My lady, perhaps the spirit *was* there and watched the scene unfold," Tutte said.

"Wait, seriously?"

"Whoops! ♪ You found me out!" the spirit replied without an ounce of remorse.

If the spirit had been in front of me, I would've undoubtedly puffed out my reddening cheeks and jabbed their chest. I wondered if I should do that to a nearby tree, but I stopped myself, thinking that I would look like a weirdo punching a tree. *And if I pulverized the tree, awkward wouldn't even begin to describe it...* As I pouted, Tutte consoled me.

"Um, just to confirm, are you familiar with that monster?" Safina asked. "Does it live in this forest, perhaps? I've only recently begun entering the Ancient Forest, so I'm not too knowledgeable just yet."

Her family was deeply associated with the Ancient Forest, so I couldn't blame her for wanting more information.

"I've never seen anything like it. It seemed to completely ignore the laws of nature," the spirit replied. "Just looking at it makes me—I don't know—shudder, I guess."

"Just to add on, as a resident of this forest, I've never seen a monster like that before," Shelly chimed in.

I expected as much. Spirits, much less elves, were unfamiliar with that horrific organism. Yet the spirit couldn't be absolutely confident in their words; the Ancient Forest was vast, and they didn't keep watch over the entire area. According to their claims, the domain of the spirit tree was the length of the roots of the massive tree they inhabited.

The spirit used the roots to gather information about the area and hold

conversations. In addition, they had the power to control the foliage that grew within their domain. It honestly seemed overpowered... But the spirit wasn't keen on causing any trouble, so they'd spent their days bored out of their mind. *I-I'm so envious of that life... I want to live a leisurely life too, you know! I really do!*

In any case, that mysterious group had used their rare monster egg, which the spirit had never seen before in their life, without any hesitation. Perhaps the egg wasn't so rare after all.

Everything thus far led me to believe that the organism was likely a chimera. I'd been involved with a chimera or two, after all—and if that masked man had been the rude guy I was familiar with, I could hardly say I was an unrelated third party to this whole event.

"We just happened to get unlucky bumping into them like this. I'd figured we shouldn't butt in carelessly, but maybe we don't really have that option... Ugh..." I groaned.

Dear God... I just wanted to investigate their group on the side. An innocent side mission, you know? Why has it turned out this way? You may have forgotten, but I came to Kairomea in search of a research topic for my graduation—now here I was getting involved in a suspicious incident. It really bummed me out.

"Don't worry, my lady," Tutte assured me. "Remember, you said this time around you'd focus on pulling the—I mean, fading into the background. We'll just be sneaking around, right?"

"Hmm? R-Right," I replied. "We'll just sneak around. Be a little sneaky."

Tutte had managed to cheer me up, although I *was* briefly hung up on considering what she was about to say first.

"Well, whether we investigate the black robes or not, our destination seems to be Kairomea," Shelly said, trying to wrap things up. "I guess we should go ahead and join the rest."

"Whaaat?" the spirit whined. "Are you gonna leave me already? I'm so envious. I wanna go on an adventure too! I wanna see the outside world!"

It might have been more normal to have been fed up with the spirit's incessant complaints, but personally, I felt my heart ache at their plight. Although the spirit tree was a vital entity within their domain, they could do as they liked within its reaches, and the people around them revered them greatly...they couldn't move. Their whole world was defined by the length of their roots. They felt frustrated about being anchored to one place—they wanted to see the world outside. I knew how they felt all too well, considering it was my most burning desire in my old world memories. So, before I knew it, I found myself asking them...

"Then why don't you come with us?"

The spirit didn't seem to expect this offer. The wavering tree froze in place, and silence descended over our nook of the forest.

"Huh? What's wrong? Did I say something weird?" I asked.

"No," the spirit replied. "I just didn't expect that response. Hmm, I see... Go with you, huh...?"

Did I say something that surprising? I glanced around and saw Shelly staring at me wide-eyed. Safina and Tutte were gazing at me with admiration and awe, as though they were impressed with me. I felt a touch embarrassed and gave a sheepish laugh.

"But how?" the spirit asked, evidently making their resolve.

"Huh?" I replied pathetically.

"How can I move from here? You're not telling this large tree to just uproot herself and move, are you?"

"Uh, I thought you'd do the trope, you know? The spirit tree glows and a beautiful little girl appears from the light—that kind of thing."

"What kind of trope is that? I can't do that."

I guess I watched too much anime and read too much manga. Not once did I assume she wouldn't be able to, so I froze in place with a "Huh? You can't?" I had no idea where to go from here.

"Oh, I see. I get it now," Shelly said knowingly.

“Huh? What?” I asked.

“I’d expect no less from you, Mary. Beautiful little girl aside, all we need is an alternative vessel for her, no?”

“Huh? I-I guess so.”

I didn’t quite understand what she was getting at, but I gave her a nod anyway. Safina cocked her head to one side.

“The spirit tree can control the foliage in her domain as though the plants are her limbs, can’t she?” Shelly asked. “In other words, they’re like her clones. If we bring one along, her feelings can be shared through the plant, allowing her to see the world. The main body can’t tag along with you guys, though.”

Safina still seemed a bit confused, but I gave a discreet nod of agreement, finally understanding what she was getting at.

“I see,” the spirit said. The trees started to rustle from her joy. “I just need to flip my way of thinking. I think that could work. I won’t know until I try, but it’s worth a shot. Let’s see... It should be something I have deep ties to... Okay, take the spirit tree’s sapling.”

“Wait, no,” Shelly replied. “That’s way too precious. And too big.”

I could only stare at them converse in awe. Safina nodded in agreement, and as I cocked my head to one side, she told me that a sapling was about as large as an adult.

“Yeah, that’s too big for us to carry around,” I said. “Is there anything smaller?”

“Oh, what about a flower?” Safina suggested.

“Flowers wilt pretty quickly...” the spirit replied. “Even I can’t do anything with a plant that’s dead.”

Things weren’t as easy as I’d thought.

“If I were the one doing this, I’d want something smaller than a person that could move on its own,” I muttered. “But I guess there isn’t anything that convenient lying around.”

“Oooh!” the spirit shouted as though it remembered something. “I might have something, actually! Give me a minute!”

And with that, the tree fell silent. We quietly waited for a few minutes until she returned. The nearby brush rustled around.

“Hello, darlings! Sorry for the wait!” a voice suddenly said.

“Whoaaa!” I cried.



I screamed at the sight of a mysterious entity running toward me from between the grass.

What was it? A subspecies of a mandrake, of course.

One of these things had deeply traumatized me in the past. After I gave a shriek, I hid behind Tutte and hissed at the spirit like a cat.

“What’s wrong with Mary?” Shelly asked in befuddlement.

“My lady had quite the unfortunate experience with mandrakes,” Tutte answered for me. “It was partly her fault, to be fair...”

As always, Tutte had spoken a few words too many, but I was too busy establishing dominance over the mandrake to say a word.

“What’s wrong, Mary? Isn’t this exactly to your specifications? See? Lookie! ♪” the spirit said.

“Hisssss! Shoo! Don’t come here!” I cried.

My efforts were in vain, as the spirit continued to chase me around. *Is she doing this on purpose?!*

I kept fleeing while trying to fight back. *Ugh, no way! I’m gonna carry this thing around on my journey? Isn’t something off about this, God?! When does the beautiful little spirit girl come in?! Tell me this is a lie!*

11. At Kairomea

After the incident within the spirit tree’s domain, Sita managed to safely make it back to Kairomea. She gave Magiluka and her group a warm welcome, and she set them up with an inn that she liked—she’d decided to take good care of her new guests. They’d rescued her, after all, and since they were in Kairomea, she wanted them to enjoy their stay... However, she would’ve been lying if she’d said that her kindness wasn’t partly due to the admiration she held toward the holy woman.

Sita went a step beyond to ensure that Magiluka and her group could relax during their stay in town. She introduced them to her father—the clan chief—

and to Pastor Thomas. Before either of the men could react to Magiluka and Snow, Sita made it clear to them that Magiluka denied the fact that she was the Argent Holy Woman and that they should not pursue the topic any further. Naturally, this kind of forward-thinking consideration didn't work in Sita's favor, as it just made the clan chief more aware of the concept than ever before.

Still, this was no time for celebration. The Book of Orthoaguina was still missing, and it'd been stolen by a group of mysterious people. Their goals were no mystery—the masked man had claimed that they wanted to return Kairomea to its former glory. This implied that they were likely former Kairomean residents, and that in mind, the clan chief, Rachel, the pastor, and Magiluka's group engaged in a small discussion.

Why were the pastor and Magiluka and her friends involved? The pastor was present because of his relation to Gillan. As for the latter group, Sita had seen the masked man's reaction to Magiluka and the prince—it'd sounded to her like they had some sort of ties to the enigmatic organization who took the book.

Sita was a bit hesitant to drag Magiluka's group deeper into Kairomean affairs, but they seemed more than willing to lend a hand. She decided to keep it a secret that her respect and admiration toward the Argent Holy Woman were continuing to grow.

The prince and Magiluka took seats for the discussion, and Sacher stood on guard behind them. He remained standing so that he could react to anything at a moment's notice. Magiluka joked that the matters they were about to discuss would sound like nonsensical gibberish to Sacher, and it would create more problems if he listened in—Sacher snapped back to silence her, then the prince stepped in to quell the duo's bickering. Sita, with her rose-colored glasses firmly affixed to her face, couldn't help but wonder if this was appropriate for fairy-tale heroes of such stature.

In any case, the meeting commenced, with Sita kicking things off despite her feeling oddly nervous over Magiluka's presence. "U-Um, so fath— Ahem, I mean, clan chief, what were the fruits of your esteemed investigation?" she asked stumbingly. The Kairomeans looked at her quizzically.

"I went to Gillan's residence with the pastor," the chief replied calmly,

pushing the discussion along. “His house was in quite the state of disarray—I’m unsure if he deliberately made a mess of it or if he had to leave it as such in his haste to depart. It might take some time to find any leads that tie to the case among all the debris.”

“Indeed. And not a single party connected to these matters is available to be questioned,” the pastor added.

“Kind sirs, in your infinite wisdom, do you think it may perhaps be the work of those black robes?” Sita inquired. “If you would permit me to say so, the timing of it all seems far too convenient, although it is just my humble opinion...”

“Sita, relax,” Rachel said from behind. Sita wasn’t used to speaking in formal settings. “You’re speaking so awfully polite that it sounds awkward.”

The chief librarian glanced at Magiluka, who was gently smiling as though she was watching something wholesome. Sita cleared her throat to mask her embarrassment.

“That group, huh...” the clan chief said, folding his arms in front of him.

Sita refused to embarrass herself any further and spoke more casually. “Do you know them, father?”

“A little. I’m not sure if it’d be more accurate to call them a group or an organization, but there have been rumors about them since I was a child. We weren’t even sure if they actually existed, but when your father, the previous chief librarian, took charge, their existence became all too apparent.”

“They claimed that they wanted to restore Kaiomea to its former glory,” Reifus said. “How is the Kaiomea of today different from its past? Was it not always flourishing with knowledge and curiosity, providing the world with the wisdom of various magic orders and discerning the laws of nature?”

From an outsider looking in, nothing seemed to have changed. *The scenery and our policies haven’t changed. What has changed is us, the residents of Kaiomea*, Sita thought, expressing her regret at her own powerlessness.

Just as Sita was unable to manage the entirety of the Grand Archival Tower, the residents were unable to announce new discoveries, theories, and other ideas to the world. They’d been able to do so in the past, but now they couldn’t

—that was all there was to it. Sita decided to use herself as an example to express her thoughts to the prince.

“I see... The knowledge and technology of the past has been lost,” Reifus said. “Pardon me if I sound presumptuous, but why did this happen? I’m certain that you understand the importance of recording history.”

“That, I can’t say,” the clan chief said, crossing his arms and groaning while tilting his head to one side. “The way I see it, it’s as though they decided to discard the past one day. That’s the only way I can describe it.”

“Does that mean the black robes are simply trying to retrieve history that’s been lost? It doesn’t sound like something they’d need to be so secretive about.”

“Hmm, well, I don’t disagree, but perhaps they have their reasons that require them to sneak around.”

“Now, now, why don’t we leave that organization’s thoughts aside for now?” the pastor suggested before turning to Sita. “We should focus on what we *do* know for certain. As a librarian, you must retrieve the book that has been stolen. Is that not so, Sita?”

Sita was focused on thinking about the past, and she didn’t respond.

“Sita?” Rachel whispered in her ear.

“Huh? Uh, erm, um, y-yes. What is it?” Sita quickly stammered, snapping out of her daze.

“Our immediate goal is to take back that stolen book, isn’t it?” the pastor repeated.

Sita had been hung up on what the prince had said: history that’s been lost. She’d heard that phrase in the past. It was a long time ago, when Sita still hadn’t known her left from her right, back when she was a very young child. Her late biological father, the previous chief librarian, had uttered the exact same words to her.

“We must not retrieve history that has been lost,” he’d said. *“We must use our own powers to pave the path for our future.”*

Even Sita wasn't sure why she was remembering her late father—and yet, the memory seemed to have dropped a heavy weight on her heart. It was as though she was being pointed in the direction that she was supposed to walk.

“Right,” Sita said. “We must take back the Book of Orthoaguina first! The other issues can be dealt with later!”

“Then I suppose we must chase after Regresh to monitor their movements,” Rachel said, pushing the discussion along. “We need to investigate where they took that book.”

“Regresh?”

“Huh? Oh, that's the name of that mysterious group. I heard from my father—I mean, the clan chief—that that's what they were called in the past.”

Upon hearing Rachel's quick explanation, Sita turned toward the clan chief, who was nodding his head in agreement.

“Regresh...” the prince mumbled. “I didn't think the ones who made a fuss in our academy had ties to Kairomea...”

Sita was interested to hear more about what the prince was referring to, so he told her that they had deep ties to chimeras. This explanation omitted the part about magical girls, which the masked man had mentioned before, but Sita assumed that it was related to the Argent Holy Woman and was best kept hidden.

“Chimeras...” the clan chief said with a grimace. “We were just discussing how the mysterious monsters that were rampaging throughout our town could've been chimeras. Sounds like Regresh is related to this as well...”

“Um, I'll be switching topics for a moment, but it sounds like His Highness and his group didn't come to Kairomea to chase after this...Regresh. Am I right?” the pastor inquired.

“Correct,” the prince replied awkwardly. “We came here for our studies—or it was our initial goal, anyway. I hadn't expected us to run into this mess.”

He glanced at Magiluka beside him, who closed her eyes and coughed while maintaining her composure. It was then that Sita realized that their visit hadn't

been suggested by the prince, but by someone else. She assumed that this had been the Argent Holy Woman's idea, and her imagination continued to build upon itself. The pastor, possibly having thoughts of his own about the prince's reply, was silent for a moment before he smiled to signal his understanding.

Once those gathered finished discussing their future goals and shared their information, they all decided to adjourn the meeting for the time being. As everyone left, Sita stood up and jogged over to Magiluka's group.

"Thank you for listening to our selfish request and attending this meeting," she said. "What will you do now, Your Highness?"

"Well, for now, I think we'll wait for the rest of our group to catch up with us," the prince replied. "It'd be great if we could stay at that inn you introduced us to for a while."

To an outsider looking in, it may have seemed as though Sita was trying to keep tabs on their movements, but she was simply asking questions out of genuine curiosity. The prince had likely sensed that, hence his relaxed reply.

"Oh, you can stay for as long as you like," Sita said. "You can stay for several months, if you wish. We'll cover the fees, so don't worry about that at all."

It was then that she realized that she'd gotten a bit carried away and given them an overly generous offer. She sneakily glanced at Rachel, who silently gave her approval while looking at a document. Sita guessed that the paper was in regards to the budget, and internally expressed her gratitude toward her sister.

"I don't think we'll impose on you for that long, but we deeply appreciate your kindness," the prince replied.

"But this is Lady Mary we're talking about," Sacher chimed in. "It wouldn't be odd if she took a detour."

"Quite right," Magiluka added knowingly.

Once again, they referred to this "Lady Mary" person—Sita couldn't suppress her interest in this woman.

12. Another Detour

“I didn’t know that the world was so vast and beautiful,” observed the suspicious dwarf in awe. As this shifty person glanced around curiously, taking in panoramic views of the forest and trees, she hid her body using a hood and a cape.

I should’ve been moved to watch the joy of discovery of this being, once forever trapped in an enclosed space and now finally seeing the outside world, but...

“I’m sorry to ruin the moment, but could you not wander off on your own?” I asked. “We’ve totally abandoned the road, and now I’ve got no idea where we are.”

The “dwarf” in a small cape and hood was the mandrake subspecies that the spirit tree was controlling (quite the mouthful, isn’t it?), and she had dragged us around for the entire day. At first, I’d been able to empathize with her feelings and had been happy for her, but once Shelly had let slip that she was starting to get lost within the forest, I decided to coldly stop her from wandering around.

“Don’t worry,” the spirit assured with a giggle. “Even if we get lost, I can continue to live.”

“That’s good for you, but *we’ll* be the ones in trouble,” I said wearily.

She was wearing a cape and a hood as a disguise because we didn’t want to create a fuss by having a mandrake wandering around on its own. It wasn’t like I would turn into a cat and hiss at the mandrake if I saw it unprepared. Nothing like that at all. I think.

“Well, we’ve completely veered off the path that I’m familiar with, but it’s not like we’re headed in the opposite direction of Kairomea,” the elf laughed, optimistic despite it all. “We’re sort of getting closer, so we should be fine.”

At this point, I was ready to just say screw it and not give a damn about the consequences. I decided from now on I’d be enjoying myself—might as well! *It’s not like I’m running from reality or anything. I swear!*

“Arghhh! Fine, I’ll just enjoy the ride, then!” I groaned. “But I’m bored of this view—it’s all the same. I’d love to see something that’d make me gasp with

surprise,” I requested selfishly.

“What kind of sight would that be?” Safina inquired quizzically.

“Uh, like, a touristy spot! Or a ruin emanating an air of ancient divinity. Anything like that?”

I’d just had an unfortunate encounter with a ruin and a certain vampire, but I never learned from my mistakes. *No, this is a do-over! I just want another shot at a ruin!*

“Oh dear, you and your selfish requests again,” the spirit said cutely, scolding me. “You have to be considerate of the people around you, Mary, dear. Be a good girl now, okay? ☆”

I couldn’t believe my ears; the person who’d been dragging everyone around until now dared to scold me.

“Let me go, Tutte!” I said through clenched teeth, my hands balled into fists as I tried to approach the mandrake. “This is my dying wish. I *have* to punch some sense into her. I *have* to do this!”

Tutte immediately put me in a nelson hold. I could’ve easily shaken free from her, but I never would have been able to forgive myself if I’d hurt my maid, so I didn’t offer much resistance.

“My, oh my. No need to throw a tantrum because people won’t give in to your wishes, child,” the spirit said, misunderstanding this situation as me throwing a fit. “Don’t worry, wittle Mary, I’ll treat you. I’ll be a good older sister and ask around for you.”

I didn’t want to throw a genuine fit and prove her theory, so I lowered my raised fist. Above all, I was a little curious about what the spirit had to offer—I hadn’t expected my complaining to be taken at face value, but she sounded like she was willing to actually find me something.

“Ask? Who?” I inquired.

“The trees gathered around here, of course,” the spirit replied. “Who else can I talk to?” Our resident mandrake dwarf sighed wearily at me.

Huh? My common sense doesn’t include speaking to trees. That’s anything but

normal. Since pouting, throwing a tantrum, and expressing my anger all seemed to work against me and I didn't want to cause any more trouble, I decided to remain quiet. Meanwhile, the spirit jumped to and fro, talking to nearby trees. Then, a few minutes later...

"Oh? What was that, punk?" the spirit said ominously. "Who do you think I am? You'll regret it if you continue to mock me." She waved us over. "*I'm* benevolent, so I won't get easily angered even if you insult me and treat me like a country bumpkin...but these young'uns here are hot-blooded. I can't guarantee your safety if you piss 'em off."

Uh, what? Did we become this hooligan's underlings at some point? I-I must be imagining things, right? Mhm.

"This one loves to slice things up," the spirit said. "Y'see that katana thing over there? That's right, you'll be cut in two. Oh, sure, she'll stop if I tell her to, but that chick over there? No dice. One kick from *her*, and you'll be in pieces. Can't stop that berserker from runnin' wild, I'll tell ya! In fact, she's *dying* to crush something as we speak!"

"Objection!" I cried out. I wasn't sure what she was on about, but her description of me sounded way too heartless. "Why are you making me sound way colder and crueller than Safina?!"

The spirit chose to ignore me as Shelly tried to calm me down. "Now, now, Mary. This might be how negotiations work in the plant world. We should stay quiet and let her do her thing."

"You hear that?" the spirit continued. "She's just about to blow! If that elf beside her hadn't kept her in check, she'd be crushing all the greenery in sight! I won't be able to stop her then. No shot. Whaddya wanna do? Don't you wanna live in peace?"

I continued to voice my protests, but the spirit always found a way to use it to her advantage. To prevent my reputation from deteriorating any further, I suppressed my reactions to the insults with a frustrated growl.

"My lady, now it *really* does look like you're about to blow up, and you're angrily trying to hold yourself back," Tutte advised me.

I had no idea what to do at this point. Instead of reacting, I decided to turn completely expressionless.

“That’s right. Good kid,” the spirit said to the plants she was intimidating. “As long as you’re obedient and honest with me, I won’t let them rough you up.”

It seemed like the talk had progressed, but I didn’t want to know what had been the deciding factor. I tried to remain completely zen.

“Mhm, some juicy info, huh?” the spirit said. “Uh-huh, a hidden spot pretty close by? An ancient ruin, huh? There’s been people visiting the area every now and then, so you think it’s pretty popular with people? Interesting. Okay.”

“Um, just to make sure... Is there a vampire there?” I asked.

The ruin didn’t seem that popular, so I just had to check. Tutte and I understood why I’d ask that, but everyone else looked completely befuddled.

“Hmm? No, apparently not. No vampires,” the spirit replied. She didn’t seem at all interested in my query and didn’t pursue the subject further as she jogged ahead to her destination.

“What shall we do, Lady Mary?” Safina asked worriedly.

“Well, since we’ve got the opportunity, why don’t we go take a look?” I suggested. “It might be a good story to tell Magiluka. You’re fine with that, right, Shelly?”

“Sure, I don’t mind,” the elf replied. “I didn’t know that there was a ruin around here, so I’m a bit curious myself. It’d be great if we could find something cool.”

And so, we chose to follow the spirit through the dense foliage to the ruin. It blended in with its surroundings so well, I surely would’ve passed right by it had I not known what we were looking for. None of its structures were eye-catching, and its weathered, dilapidated buildings were a far cry from what I’d envisioned.

“It looks to be quite old... I can see why people would miss it,” Shelly said excitedly, eager to start her investigation.

“You wanted to see something *this* boring, Mary?” the spirit asked.

“Uh, well, you know, I’d expected buildings and statues that had more of a historical feel to them...” I replied awkwardly. I had no idea how to handle this.

“Falgar would’ve happily looked into this, but this is outside my area of expertise,” Shelly said, placing a hand on a man-made structure. “I don’t know where we are, but I hope we can find something interesting.”

“Please don’t expect anything like that from a ruin,” I replied. I was worried by her excitement. “That kind of thought usually leads to no good.”

“Hey, Mary and co! Come here, quick!” the spirit said, calling to us while jumping up and down in the middle of a clearing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, following her with Tutte and Safina in tow. “Did you find something?”

“Sure did! Can you three start jumping here too?”

The three of us exchanged a glance at the spirit’s excited request. We didn’t want her to start sulking or throwing a tantrum, so we did as instructed. Nothing happened, so I jumped even higher. Safina and Tutte followed suit.

“And what will this do?” I asked.

“The floor will give way! ♪” the spirit replied brightly.

“Huh?!” the three of us gasped while jumping...but nothing was happening

“Tch, it’s not working,” the spirit said, clicking her nonexistent tongue in annoyance. “I thought it’d collapse from the weight of you three. You guys seem heavy enough.”

“Don’t call us heavy!” I scolded her. I couldn’t let such a rude remark slide. “We’re ladies, you know!” In the process, I’d forgotten to call her out on her attempt to trick us.

We’d stopped jumping up and down the moment she told us the truth, but...

“What are you guys doing? Let me join in!” Shelly called out to us. She’d just finished investigating a pillar, so she valiantly jumped down from quite a height before landing by our side. That was the push the ground needed to falter—a loud crack rang through the air as soon as she’d touched down.

“Tutte!” I yelled, immediately clutching my maid close to me and leaping to the side.

In my peripheral vision, I noticed Safina reacting just in time too, skillfully jumping out of harm’s way. Meanwhile, the spirit and Shelly weren’t so dexterous, and they plunged into the depths below. *Well, yeah. They reap what they sow.* Despite my thoughts, I quickly ran up to the hole and peered inside out of worry. It wasn’t too deep—Shelly had gotten a few scratches on her bottom, but that was all.

“Why did I fall into the hole?!” the spirit said, throwing a fit like a child. She rolled on the ground while flailing her limbs in the air. “I went through all that trouble to secretly ask where the most brittle area was! Arghhh!”

I didn’t need to ask to know whom she’d gained this intel from, and I was glad that I hadn’t been dragged into such a stupid affair as I glanced at the trees around me.

I continued to look down from the top of the pit. The two were clearly in a man-made corridor, and it wasn’t weathered away like the structures aboveground, still clearly retaining a constructed shape.

“Do you think it’s the underground version of the ruin that we found above?” I asked.

“Ow...” Shelly said, rubbing her butt while glancing around. “Seems that way... Wait, what’s that?” She seemed to have found something.

“What’s what?”

“There looks to be some symbols engraved on this wall... I feel like I’ve seen it before. Hmm... Where was this from? Kairomea, maybe?”

Shelly stared at the wall while cocking her head to one side. She’d always been the forgetful type, so I wasn’t too surprised.

After Safina and I made our way down the hole, I saw we were in the middle of a single long corridor that had no turns in sight. I guessed that there was an opening that would lead aboveground.

“All right, let’s go over there,” the spirit said. “I smell something fishy.” She

proceeded to walk forward, but I slowed down. Safina noticed my hesitance and voiced some concerns of her own.

“Will this be okay?” Safina pondered. “I’m nervous about what the spirit said.”

Despite Safina’s worries, I would’ve been lying if I’d said I wasn’t curious about what was in store for us...

“Whoa!” the spirit cried. “What *is* this?! It looks so weird!”

As I placed my curiosity and anxiety on a scale, my curiosity won out.

“I’m worried about the spirit, and I can’t leave her alone,” I reasoned. “I guess there’s nothing else we can do. Let’s follow her. We’ve got no other choice.”

Such was my justification to chase after the spirit. Safina and Tutte had likely sensed my excitement as they exchanged looks, but they said nothing more and followed behind me.

“So? What is...it?” I asked, my voice rising an octave and trailing off as I stepped into the room where the spirit was.

It looked to be a research facility that had conducted some suspicious experiments in the past—it was nothing like the structure we’d seen aboveground.

I feel like I’ve seen this before... Ah, I remember now! This is similar to the basement of the fort ruins when I chased after Magiluka during the chimera incident!

As I was lost in my thoughts, Shelly was commenting her observations behind me. “Th-There are quite a few very intriguing magic items,” she said. “Does this ruin prove that civilization here was pretty advanced?” She sounded amazed by this place.

It was then that I realized the possibility of the equipment from the fort ruins having been transferred here—in other words, we may have been staring at the remnants of the fort ruins.

As though to prove my theory, I started to notice some of the enshrined equipment looked out of place. Someone had brought items from a different

place and stored them here. *That aside, the biggest problem now is...*

“Did we...perhaps stumble upon something we shouldn’t have?” I asked.

“Is that so?” Safina replied cluelessly. I couldn’t blame her—she didn’t know much about the chimera incident.

Shelly’s eyes were twinkling with delight as she closely inspected the magic items—a passionate fire had been lit in our resident magus smith, as she was eager to apply her craftsmanship knowledge. She hadn’t been listening to me at all as she called for Safina to assist her.

Luckily, the place looked abandoned, and there hadn’t been any reaction despite how loud we were being. *Should we let ourselves get carried away and continue investigating, or should we leave and pretend like we never saw anything?* I was once again mentally weighing my options on a scale.

“Hey, Mary,” the spirit said. “This seems fishy. Why don’t we look into it a little?”

I stopped internally agonizing over my decision for a moment to address the spirit whispering into my ear like a devil on my shoulder. “I’m currently leaning toward leaving this area,” I informed her. “I don’t need your input.”

“Oh, I see. I see how it is. What an attitude! Sure, okay,” the spirit replied exaggeratedly. “Then why don’t I remove my robe? It’s just *sooo* hot, you know? Sweltering!” She was trying to threaten me!

Do you even have the capacity to feel heat? Still, I wasn’t planning on reliving my trauma, and it was clear that our bickering would continue and keep us from getting anything done if I didn’t acquiesce.

Ultimately, my mental health would have suffered too much if the spirit made good on her taunting, so I only had one choice to make. I gave a deep sigh while sluggishly following behind her.

“So, what? Here? It just looks like a normal wall to me,” I said.

“Yep, it smells fishy,” the spirit replied.

“Does it? I smell nothing weird.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. You don’t get it, do you? It’s just a figure of speech. I’m a plant,

remember? Of course I'll sneak in some metaphors relating to nature. Besides, I'm only controlling this vegetable. It's not like I can *actually* smell anything, you absolute stupid, idiotic moron. ☆”

“May I punch her?” I asked, unable to take these insults. Before I was able to raise my fist, Tutte stood behind me and stopped my violent impulses. I wanted permission, but apparently, it wasn't granted.

“Come on, stop saying dumb stuff and get to work,” the spirit said. “Push, or pull, or do something! Even an idiot like you can do that, can't you?”

This spirit really does talk a bit too much... I mentally grumbled at her behavior, and I wondered if she had any idea how I thought about her.

Suddenly, I had a flash of mischievous ingenuity. I wanted to push this wall as much as I could, and if nothing happened, I was tempted to tease her about it. *I mean, who could blame me? Can anyone really blame me for wanting to taunt her a little? It's not my fault if I push the wall harder than one would expect. Yeah, it's not my responsibility at all!*

And as I did just that...

There was a dull crack, as though something had shattered. A neat crevice formed in the wall about the size of a pair of double doors and fell to the ground. *I-I-It's not my fault! I can't believe the wall gave way just because a petite, fragile girl like me pushed it a little too hard... I'm sure that it was brittle and was about to crumble anyway! It was already half broken! I'm sure of it! I-It has to be! Please make it so!* My mind became a muddled mess as I desperately made excuses for what I'd just done.

13. The Detour Ends Here

A heavy, deafening rumble shortly followed after I pushed the stone wall. Safina and Shelly, who were busy doing something else, heard the noise and rushed over to me.

“Wh-What happened, Lady Mary?” Safina asked worriedly.

“U-Uh, well, the spirit said that this area was suspicious, so I just pushed it a teensy, weensy bit,” I stammered, making an excuse. “A teeny, tiny push. Then,

lo and behold, the wall gave way.”

“This place is pretty old, after all,” Shelly said. “The stone could’ve been brittle. The ground also crumbled beneath our feet, so we should be careful.”

I was sweating buckets and tried to innocently laugh it off—I was thanking Shelly in my head for backing me up.

“R-Right, exactly!” I said. “It was just so frail! We should be careful, really.”

I latched on and decided to go with the flow. It *did* feel like I’d broken some kind of lock, but I decided to chalk that up to my imagination. Tutte, who’d seen the whole scene unfold, didn’t say a thing as she smiled along with me. The spirit, for her part, had no interest in my strength and was instead curious about the new path that had been revealed. She was glancing around at the entrance.

“Spirit, it seems like we’ve got a new place to explore,” I said, ushering her inside to end this conversation. “Come on, let’s go in. Come now.”

“H-Hey! Hey! Stop, don’t push me!” the spirit wailed.

We stepped through the hole and walked down the corridor inside for a few meters before we came to a wide clearing. I’d hoped for some kind of building, but there was nothing to be seen. It was completely empty, but on closer inspection, I noticed something caked onto some parts of the floor.

I used light magic to illuminate my surroundings, and the substance on the floor started to glisten. Eggs that looked like squishy chunks of flesh dotted the ground. If I were to have compared them to my memories from Earth, I would’ve said they looked akin to alien eggs you’d see in movies and anime—it was pretty gross catching a glimpse of them all over the ground.

“My, oh my...” Shelly said.

She was the first to express her interest as we all stood there unsure of how to react. As she slipped between us, she entered the room and approached the egg-like masses.

“Is this an egg of some sort?” she wondered. “How interesting. Maybe I’ll take some to take back home for some research.”

“We shouldn’t become egg thieves,” I said, trying to stop her dangerous train of thought. “We’ll get in trouble if their parents are nearby.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t take all of them—just some! They won’t know.”

She gave me an unconcerned look...but in the next moment, I saw something move behind her, and the glimmer of cold steel...

“Shelly!” I cried out.

Just then, Safina jumped forward with her sword unsheathed, swinging her blade down on the arm of Shelly’s assailant. It seemed like Safina had been wary from the start and vigilant the entire time. *Safina’s awesome! She’s way more reliable than empty-headed little old me!* As I was in awe of her quick reflexes, the flames from her katana lit up the dark room, giving us a full view of the attacker—a monster just like the one I’d shredded up when I was at the spirit tree.

“Wait, that monster originated from this place?!” I said in surprise.

All the while, Safina unleashed a barrage of attacks on the flinching monster. It had tried to launch a surprise attack on us, but it roared with rage when it realized that it’d been hurt instead. The monster used its unwounded arm to swipe at Safina with its sharp claws. I noticed that its sliced arm was already beginning to regenerate. *Impressive healing abilities... I feel like I saw something similar back at the fort ruins.*

I thought that this monster would be a tricky foe, but Safina had already prepared her next spell as she unsheathed her katana once more. In an instant, the monster’s entire body was covered with slashes, and the moment she sheathed her blade, it’d been sliced into little bits, much like what I’d done with my magic at the spirit tree.

Safina’s sword-drawing techniques combined with the magic sword Fifi had forged turned out to be a far more formidable pair than I’d imagined. I was once again surprised by Safina’s skills as I watched her expertly wield her blade. I decided not to focus on the fact that I may have been the reason she’d adopted both this weapon and this fighting style.

“Are you all right, Shelly?” Safina said with an exhale. She remained wary of

her surroundings.

“Yeah. Thank you, Safina,” Shelly replied before she gave another carefree response. “I didn’t think we’d meet that monster again. Is this some sort of fate?”

“I sure hope not,” I said.

We continued on cautiously, as the roars of the monsters could be heard from deeper within the ruin. Monsters that hatched from eggs and then grew at a rapid pace were beyond anything we’d ever seen or learned about before.

As we ventured deeper within, we encountered a large hunk of flesh about three meters long. Its entire body convulsed and pulsated as numerous grotesque eyeballs on its body glanced around and stared at us. Since it lacked limbs, I assumed that it couldn’t move on its own.

“That must be the mother’s womb,” the spirit said. “It looks like she noticed our presence and is incubating these eggs.”

“Ugh... Is she angry because we trespassed?” I asked.

“No, she seems happy that food has appeared in front of her. Don’t worry, we’re being welcomed.”

“That doesn’t make me happy at all!”

“But it looks like that womb can’t do anything on its own. I’m surprised she was able to survive the harshness of nature despite her frailty. I’d love to know her secret.”

“I feel like now isn’t the time to be worried about something like that.” I turned to Safina, who was keeping guard behind us. “Safina! Take everyone and evacuate outside!”

“But what about you, Lady Mary?” Safina asked.

“If that womb can’t move, I’ll just use my area of effect magic and destroy this whole place. Evacuate the area so no one gets hurt!”

“Understood!”

Monsters were continuing to pop out of the eggs. Worst case, I’d be stuck in

an endless loop fighting an unlimited number of monsters, so I thought it would be best if I used a higher-order spell to decimate this entire area.

Safina agreed with my decision and leaped into action. Once I saw everyone leave the room, I took a deep breath and confirmed my targets.

I was up against a womb of impressive size, which was helpless on its own, and one or two monsters guarding her. I could've certainly handled them with the help of Safina, but we were up against mysterious entities. I wasn't sure what would happen, and it was better to be safe than sorry. Of course, what this meant was that if the monsters ever did anything unexpected, my weak sauce mental fortitude would cause me to panic and screw everything up.

I hate having to acknowledge I'm easily frightened! It's embarrassing!

I smiled through the emotional pain as I gazed back at my enemies. And, what do you know, the one or two monsters had already multiplied to about ten. I was shocked by their reproductive abilities. *If you find one, there's many lurking somewhere...* Predictably, I started to panic.

"Buuut! This is why I had everyone evacuate just in case! I won't sweat the small stuff!" I shouted triumphantly, buying everyone more time to flee as well as helping myself calm down. "I'm sorry, but I won't show you any mercy as I—"

The monsters took my shouting as their cue and pounced on me.

"V-Vermilion Nova!" I chanted.

I was unsure what to take care of first, so I unleashed a massive fireball at the horde of monsters to try to burn everything to a crisp. A sea of flames filled the closed space. *You can call me merciless, but this was within my calculations. It's okay.*

What I *didn't* expect was for the light of the fire to reveal a large magic item connected to the large chunk of flesh. Once said item was ignited, there was a small explosion, and the surrounding walls started to crack and crumble.

I noticed the words "Flammable! Keep away from fire!" written on the magic item. *No way. That can't be. This is an ancient ruin. H-How would I be able to read anything written here?* I chuckled and shook my head, wondering if my eyes were deceiving me, but a large explosion suddenly rang out as though to

shove reality down my throat.

“O-Oooh no! Oh my god! C-Crap! This is bad! Magic items were *not* supposed to be part of the equation!” I cried.

Even someone as dense as I was understood that the ruin would soon crumble to dust. I hastily headed for the exit I’d opened earlier and ran outside.

A few minutes later, I managed to safely make it out and meet up with everyone as a deafening rumble echoed behind me.

“Whew, that was a close one,” I said with a sigh. I gazed at the exit that I’d just escaped from.

“Are you all right, my lady? How did you mess up this time?” Tutte asked.

I couldn’t let that slide. “Uh, don’t you mean ‘What happened?’ or something?”

“Are you saying that it’s the monsters’ fault that the place has crumbled to the ground?”

“No, I messed up. I’m sorry,” I replied apologetically. “I hadn’t expected the womb to be connected to a magic item.”

“I see... So, there was a device that caused the place to explode,” Shelly said, holding an egg and some meat in her hand that she’d taken as a sample. “Man-made, then... How *very* interesting. Since I managed to snag some specimens, I’ll probably ask a friend of mine to look into this when we get to Kairomea.”

Shelly was all smiles. She looked like a mad scientist to me, and I shuddered. *At the end of the day, Shelly’s a magus smith. I guess she’s interested in artificial beings like these. I just hope that this won’t take her down a weird path.*

“Well, a lot of stuff happened, but now that it’s all over, I have to say I enjoyed the heart-pounding thrills,” the spirit said. “I guess this must be what an adventure is like. I wonder what journeys the future holds for me. Hey, where should we go next, hmm?”

I’d taken a step away from Shelly and her grinning to breathe a sigh of relief that the danger had passed, so seeing the excited spirit made my head start to

hurt.

“No more detours!” I said. “We’re going straight to Kairomea. That’s that. C’mon, gang, let’s head to town!” I grabbed the spirit in the midst of her jumping around and forcibly dragged the group toward our destination.

“Mary, you’re going the opposite way,” Shelly informed me.

I guess I was never able to pull myself together in the end. I turned on my heels, my face red from embarrassment.

Chapter 2: Academy Arc—The Grand Archival Tower Incident Part 2

1. We're Finally Here

"Wow, is *that* Kairomea?" I said in awe. "What a huge tower!"

The town was floating over the middle of a massive lake, and a stone bridge connected it with the rest of the forest. Even from this distance, I could see the enormous Grand Archival Tower that stood in the middle.

"H-Huh..." the spirit said in amazement—then she quickly added, "It *is* big, but my tree is much bigger."

"Why does that matter?" I asked.

"Well, y'know, in that neck of the Ancient Forest, I took pride in being one of the two biggest trees. That's something I can't concede."

"Oh, so woods really do have necks? Figured it was just a thing people say..."

Despite my snarky retort, it was my genuine hope that she'd come to understand the world was vast and full of unknowns. I hoped she'd change her mindset eventually.

"Hey! We're done with the checks, so let's head inside!" Shelly called to us. She'd been doing something at the gates and returned to our side while gesturing us to approach her.

We passed through the towering gates and set foot into the city.

"Now then," I said, a bit excited as I glanced around at all the unfamiliar sights. "It's great that we're here, but I wonder where Magiluka and the others are..."

"I've been told that they're at an inn," Shelly said, walking ahead to guide us. "Let's head there first."

I obediently followed her, and because she'd visited Kairomea several times in the past, she was familiar with its geography and we didn't get lost (well, actually, we got lost a little, and she had to ask for directions).

In any case...we safely made it to the inn and managed to reunite with Sacher. However, I noticed that he was in a rush, and a wave of anxiety washed over me.

"Sorry for the wait, Sacher. I'm glad we managed to meet," I said.

"Hmm? That voice... Is that you, Lady Mary? Why're you wearing a hood?" Sacher replied, tilting his head to one side.

I gave a mischievous chuckle and lifted the hood from my head. As I was talking with the spirit, I'd discussed our important, extremely difficult mission—to not stand out. Since I wasn't skilled at sneaking around, I'd dug through my memories that I had from movies and anime as references, but I'd realized that these characters were only successful at acting sneaky because even the viewer wasn't aware of what was occurring. I'd only understood that I knew the result without the process, so I was left without a solution.

"Since your appearance is so striking, why don't you try hiding it like me?" the spirit had advised. Until then, I'd had no idea how to hide my identity, so I hastily came to the conclusion that concealing my face might work. And so, the two of us had decided to wear a hood and walk around. Once we did so, I'd be lying if I said that my mischievous streak hadn't reared its head and I was tempted to fool around a little.

"Well, I wanted to try something out," I replied to Sacher. "What do you think? I don't stand out, do I?"

"Well, if you try taking a look around, you might find you're the only one who's... No, never mind," Sacher said.

I wasn't sure what to make of his reaction, but I was happy to leave things there and decided to push our conversation along. "By the way, you seem to be in a rush. Did anything happen?"

"Oh, right! We've got trouble, Lady Mary. Magiluka is, um..."

Worry filled my heart. "Wh-What about her? And I don't see Prince Reifus

anywhere either!”

“J-Just head to the Grand Archival Tower! I’ll take you there!”

Sacher seemed aware that he was terrible with explanations, so he must’ve thought it’d be better for me to see with my own eyes. We all rushed toward the tower.

Several minutes later, I reached the corner of the tower.

“M-Magilukaaa!” I yelled, my voice echoing back.

“That voice... O-Oh my, Lady Mary. You’ve arrived,” Magiluka said.

“Magiluka, wh-wh-wh-what happened?! Are you okay?!” I gasped.

She was sitting on a chair in front of me and reading a book—at least, that was my educated guess, considering she was surrounded by a mountain of books and I couldn’t see her. She’d had to poke her head out from between the gaps to greet me, and that’s when I’d noticed that she had dark circles under her eyes.

“Things were fine at first...but she just kept reading more and more books, and she’s yet to leave the tower,” the prince said, explaining the situation in Magiluka’s stead as he stood nearby.

Yeah, I knew this would happen. I knew it. But I didn’t think it’d get this bad...

“I’d been planning on only reading the books that’d been recommended to me until you arrived, but before I knew it, I lost to my own curiosities,” Magiluka confessed. She pushed some books aside and staggered over to me as she smiled weakly. “I’ve just been reading away all this time.”

I realized that this girl and her adorable mannerisms had been doing research for my sake. How could I possibly nag her for it?

I left Magiluka to Tutte and forced her to return to the inn. I also thanked Snow, who was curled up in a ball and had been watching over her.

“W-Well, I promised to look after her,” Snow said. “I never expected her to be such a bookworm. Honestly, I was shocked. But after I saw that Lily was

interested in a few of the books and Magiluka was reading them to her, I couldn't stop her."

Snow looked a little embarrassed. I was tempted to tease her by fluffing her fur, but I didn't want to stand out, so I kept myself in check. To continue making Magiluka seem like a holy woman, I asked Snow and Lily to stay by her side. *Since we were whispering, I doubt anyone heard us. Yep, this plan is going perfectly.* Just then, I noticed someone glancing my way. There was a little elf girl I'd never seen before standing beside the prince. His Highness introduced us.

The girl was called Sita, and she'd been attacked in the domain of the spirit tree. The prince and co had saved her, and upon finding out that they were headed for Kairomea, she'd guided them here. I also learned that she was a high-ranking official—the chief librarian of the Grand Archival Tower. I hastily removed my hood and spoke to her in a more polite fashion, but she didn't seem to mind at all and gave me a friendly smile.

I noticed that she drew in her breath and looked at me with surprise when I removed my hood. *Is it so weird that a girl like me is under this hood? Why did she look so shocked?*

When I introduced myself, she replied with, "S-So you're the Lady Mary everyone's been talking about. I'm happy to finally meet you." I wasn't sure what rumors had been swirling around about me, but I didn't want to shower her with questions on our initial encounter, so I smiled and let it slide. I wasn't sure if I made the right call.

In any case, we all decided to sit down to share and organize the information that we had. As a side note, Shelly seemed to be acquaintances with Sita, and the "connection" that the former had mentioned earlier was apparently referring to her. It's a vast yet small world after all.

Once we finished telling Sita what we knew, she seemed to have come to an understanding.

"I see..." she mused. "I didn't think that Gillan had an egg on him... I knew that he was the one who carried out the book, but now I feel like I sort of know how he was able to do it."

“The Book of Orthoaguina, was it? Regresh has it now, don’t they? How was it stolen from an archive that could’ve never been opened?” Shelly asked, voicing my exact thoughts.

“I don’t have any proof, but I’m guessing that he was carrying one of those eggs around and he managed to leave it in there in the blink of an eye. When the egg finally hatched, the monster escaped from the inside, allowing him to reenter the archives and steal the book. This could also explain why there’d apparently only been one monster found within the tower. Once you can get a clear view of what happened, you can tell it’s nothing more than a silly trick. I doubt Regresh expected Gillan to be so thoughtless about things, though, and that lack of judgment ended up exposing some of their plan.”

“Wait, a monster escaped from the inside?” I asked.

Sita gasped and awkwardly grimaced as though she’d let out a secret. “Um, you can actually easily open the archival rooms from the inside. Keep that a secret, okay?” She placed an index finger over her lips.

People familiar with the current state of the Grand Archival Tower would’ve surely grasped the situation from everything she’d said, but I was still as confused as ever. However, now didn’t seem to be the time to ask more questions, so I simply nodded.

“And Shelly, about that egg,” Sita said. “Could I hand it over to someone who’s been looking into the monsters that’ve been attacking our city? I imagine it will be the same species.”

“Sure thing,” Shelly agreed. “I was going to give it to an expert anyway, so it saves me the trouble.”

“I’m impressed you were able to gather such an item at such impeccable timing.”

“Well, that’s thanks to Ma— I mean, the spirit tree,” Shelly said. She’d almost let my name slip, but she hastily corrected herself. “I wasn’t planning on this. It’s all just a happy little coincidence. In fact, I’m surprised that you’re also investigating this.”

“Hmm...”

Heh heh heh. That's right. Just in case, I've had them promise to not use my name. I feel like Sita glanced at me for a second, but I'm just imagining things.

"A-And where's Rachel?" Shelly said, switching topics. "I don't see her around."

"She's doing some research about Regresh," Sita replied. "They've apparently been in this town for quite a while, so she said it wouldn't be too difficult to find traces of them."

I once again tilted my head at an unfamiliar name, so Prince Reifus, who was seated next to me, quickly caught me up to speed about Rachel.

It seemed like Kairomea had been involved in quite the fuss. We'd arrived at the town with unbelievable timing, and I felt like I'd get dragged into resolving this mess. I tried searching for a way to sneak around without getting caught.

"I don't get what's going on, but it sounds like something exciting and thrilling is about to happen! ♪" the spirit said happily on Safina's lap. "Hey, Mary, what are we gonna do? Tell me!" I had no idea why she sounded so elated.

Incidentally, the spirit wasn't atop Safina's lap because Safina wanted to hug her—no, we wanted to prevent her from running around and creating a fuss. *Heh. Obviously, I can't restrain her! I'd end up unconsciously throwing her around and intimidating her, after all!* I was trying my best to convince myself my severe aversion to the mandrake subspecies was something to be proud of.

"Settle down, you," I told the spirit. "We're not familiar with this town, so butting in will only cause trouble for everyone. We just need to quietly return to the inn and lend our help if they need it. I think that's good enough."

"Awww..." the spirit whined. She seemed more than eager to stick her nose into this incident. "We came all this way, though. How boring."

"And I'm just fine with that." I glanced around the room and locked eyes with Sita. "Is anything the matter?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, no... You just seem awfully friendly with the spirit tree, so I was just a bit shocked," the chief librarian replied. "Maybe... Ack, no, nothing. Never mind."

“Y-You sure?”

It was clear that Sita had been about to let something slip but had hastily stopped herself.

Once we’d all finished talking and were free to disperse, I stood up to return to the inn. I placed the hood over my head.

“I’ll be heading over to give this to an expert,” Shelly said. “You guys can do as you please.”

When did she become so diligent about getting work done? She’d barely had a moment of rest, yet she was quickly making her way out of the tower.

“I think I’ll stay here a bit more,” the prince said. “I was in the middle of reading a book.”

“If you’re staying, I suppose we shall too,” I said.

After breathing a sigh of relief at the talks ending, I scanned the room full of books. I wasn’t as curious as Magiluka, but I was definitely intrigued about what the books might contain. I felt compelled to give some of them a read, and my heart was filled with hope that whatever I was looking for might be hidden in these pages, just waiting for me to discover it. I was eager to take a look around—but...

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the prince replied. “You’ve just arrived in this town, so why don’t you retire to the inn and rest for a while?”

“He’s right,” Sacher added. “I’ll be guarding the prince, so you all should head to the inn.”

Contrary to my desires, I was encouraged to leave by the two boys, so I reluctantly heeded their recommendation. As I did, I failed to notice something very important: neither Tutte nor Magiluka were beside me. In other words, there was no one to stop me from my antics...

2. We Were Supposed to Return to the Inn...

I stood in the depths of an unfamiliar alleyway. “Did I get carried away and walk too far? How do we get back from here?”

Simply put, I'd activated one of my special skills: getting lost.

It'd all started when I was headed back for the inn. Since it'd seemed like the perfect opportunity for some sightseeing, I'd decided to take a small tour of the town while I was on my way. Usually, if I were to get carried away, Tutte and Magiluka would be there to stop me and remind me I'd lost sight of my original goal, but no one was there to snap me back to reality this time—so, without anyone to stop me, I wandered around to my heart's content, letting curiosity guide me.

Safina, who approved of every action I made, would obviously never have considered stopping me, so before I knew it, the three of us had wandered into a deserted alleyway.

Where are we?

"What's wrong, Lady Mary?" Safina asked quizzically, noticing that I'd stopped in my tracks. "Does something seem wrong?"

"Yeah," the spirit replied in my stead. "Ever since we arrived here, people around us have been glancing our way." She glanced around dubiously.

It finally hit me that the sparsely populated town was wary of us. *I mean, a pair of strangers wearing hoods does look suspicious, and I can see how that would raise alarms if we were adults...but we're kids. Come on...*

It was clear we'd strayed too far from our inn and that we should end our little detour and head back. *If we can make it back, that is...*

"Hmm... We should probably head back," I suggested.

"Agreed," Safina replied.

"S-Safina, do you know where the inn is from here?"

"Um, this is a bit embarrassing to admit, but I'm not certain which direction it's in," she replied sheepishly. "I know the way once we make it to the main street, so I suggest we prioritize that."

I hugged her approvingly and started petting her relentlessly.



“U-Um, er, Lady Mary?” Safina asked.

“You’re wonderful, Safina. I’d love to have your sense of direction.”

It was then that a man’s voice called out to us from a distance away. “Hey! What are you guys up to?”

Safina immediately turned vigilant and turned toward the voice. A man wearing a hood similar to the spirit’s and mine was glancing around as he stood in front of us. He didn’t look like an insolent fool who wanted to attack us.

“Weren’t you just told at the meeting?” the man asked, his voice a hushed whisper. “The employees of the Grand Archival Tower are sniffing around for information about Regresh, so we should lay low with the recruiting for a while.”

“Huh? Regresh? Meeting?” I asked in surprise.

“What, you new? No wonder you guys are looking around here. Look, we recruited around this part of town so frequently that people grew wary of us, so we switched spots. Make sense?”

I wasn’t sure what the hooded man was on about, but it sounded like he assumed that the spirit and I were newcomers. Perhaps he was good at heart or liked to take care of others—he’d apparently called out to us out of worry.

What he said cleared up why people seemed so cautious of us. *I wonder what this guy and his group were doing to put people so on edge.* I also managed to gather that while this information had nothing to do with me, the friend that I’d made just moments ago was dying to gain this intel.

And so, I discreetly gestured behind my back, signaling for Safina to walk away. She understood immediately and swiftly left. She must’ve looked like an innocent lady who was caught by our aggressive recruiting, and the hooded man watched her leave and didn’t do anything more.

“Well, be careful, all right?” he said with a sigh. “Don’t cause a fuss. Unlike those radicals, we want to settle this peacefully.”

I was still completely in the dark, so I didn’t provide a response. Still, I managed to nod my head in an attempt at conversation. The problem now was

the spirit—she seemed even more clueless than me as she continued to tilt her head to one side bemusedly.

“I’d like to attend a meeting to hear some details,” I quickly said. I didn’t want to spend too much time on this discussion so that the spirit couldn’t say something weird and reveal our identities. I just wanted to extract as much intel as I could and bounce.

“Hmm, we should still be gathered under the usual bridge,” the man said. “In any case, don’t stand out, got it?”

And with that, he left. Safina quietly returned to our side.

“I see... Is this what you were waiting for, Lady Mary?” Safina asked in approval.

“Not sure what you’re referring to, but probably not,” I replied, reflexively denying her claims. “Don’t misunderstand, okay?”

“What shall we do? Should we chase after him?”

“No, I think he was just a grunt, so I don’t think we could extract any other info from him. I think we should head under the bridge. He said they’re still gathered, which means we might not have much time to spare.”

“Bridge, huh...?” The spirit pondered the idea aloud. “The only bridge that comes to mind is the large one serving as the entrance to this town from the outside world. This is starting to get fun!” she said, jumping up and down enthusiastically.

“There’s no fun to be had here. Listen, we’re just going to confirm a few things. Don’t go wandering off on your own, got it?” I scolded her before switching gears. “All right, then let’s follow the spirit’s suggestion and head to the large bridge.”

After I took a few steps forward, I stopped myself and turned to Safina. “Um, am I headed in the right direction?”

“Er, I think you’re going the opposite way,” she replied gingerly.

It seemed like I was as good at getting lost as ever. If I hadn’t stopped myself, I was sure that Safina would’ve let me walk around as I pleased. *Whew, that*

was close. I was about to make the same mistake.

With Safina leading the way, we managed to make it safely to the entrance of Kairomea, where its massive bridge stood.

“It’s nice that we’re here and all, but I can only see a lake under the bridge,” the spirit said. Not giving a care about etiquette, she stood on the rails of the bridge and looked around.

I expected a small island or two to be floating below the bridge, but no dice. The bridge is completely above water.

“I guess things aren’t so simple,” I said. “Thank goodness I didn’t proudly go to Sita with this information. Confirmation is important.”

“Do you think we were fed false information?” Safina asked.

“No, I don’t think there was any sense in doing that back there. So, we’re either at the wrong place or we’ve missed something.”

If we *were* in the wrong location, it would have been inadvisable for a person with an awful sense of direction like myself to continue wandering around. It may have been wiser to immediately consult Sita about the information we’d gathered—if we were overlooking something, I couldn’t possibly have imagined where else we should start and what we might’ve missed.

While the three of us tried to think of a solution...

“Hey! Kid on the railing! It’s dangerous, so get down from there right now!”

...another man yelled at us. I recognized him as the guard we’d met when we’d walked through the gates.

“Who’re you calling a kid?!” the spirit roared back angrily. “From my point of view, all of you guys are kids!”

“Huh?”

“Ah, I’m so sorry,” I said. “She’s just trying to act a bit mature for her age. You know how kids are. I’ll be sure to keep watch so that she won’t fall.”

I tried to quell the argument and reassure the kind guard who was worried for

our well-being.

“Well, I don’t want her to fall, of course, but there’s also been a large bird monster flying around these parts,” the guard said. “While the odds are low, you might get attacked.”

“A bird monster... I see,” I replied. “Why are the odds low?”

“The monster’s an herbivore that mostly feeds on fruits and plants. That is to say, its primary diet is magical plants, so it won’t attack us to eat...but every now and then, it’ll try to steal any plants we might be holding.”

“Magical plants, I see... Wait, what? Magical plants?”

“That’s right.”

It was then I snapped back to reality and turned to the spirit. “This is bad! Get off the—”

Immediately, I saw a gigantic bird monster approach us. It happened so fast it felt like watching someone flip through a slide show—the monster flew toward the spirit, who was proudly standing on the rails, in the first frame; scooped her up in the next; and flew off with her in the third.

We all froze in stunned silence for a moment, needing time to process what had just happened.

“Heeey! What the *hell* do you think you’re doing, you dumb dodo!” the spirit’s voice echoed in the air.

I finally managed to regain my senses and scream, “Ahhh! Spirit!” I ran as fast as I could toward the bird as it quickly flew away.

Safina followed my lead and ran behind me. “Wh-What shall we do, Lady Mary?!” she asked.

“The bird moves too fast for me to use my magic!” I cried back. “Worst case, I might hit the spirit!”

“Then allow me! I’ll leave the rest to you!”

“Huh?”

“Accel Boost!”

Safina chanted her spell and ran past me. I blinked rapidly, unable to believe my eyes. She went full speed ahead along the bridge, closing the gap between her and the monster. A large stone pillar towered in front of her, but she started running up it.

“M-Miss Safina?” I stammered. I doubted my eyes for a split moment as I stared in awe. All the while, Safina reached the top of the pillar before leaping off it toward the bird monster. There was a flash of steel engulfed in magic that would only touch the bird. The attack wasn’t fatal, but it *was* enough for the creature to lose its balance out of shock, causing it to drop the spirit.

I was about to give a round of applause at the expert swordsmanship that I just witnessed, but then I realized what was happening. *Safina’s gonna fall into the water!*

Though she’d managed to close the gap between the bird and herself, she’d thrown herself above the lake to do it. The only place she’d be landing was into the water. It was then that I finally understood her parting words.

All right, then! Leave the rest to me! I’ll catch you, Safina! I jumped from the bridge. “Levitation!” I chanted.

I caught Safina in my arms and used floating magic to keep us in the air. I was proud of myself for this superb teamwork, and looked down at Safina confidently. She blinked at me in surprise.

“Th-Thank you, Lady Mary,” she managed to say.

“No, I should be the one thanking you,” I replied heroically.

“Um, and where’s the spirit?”

“Whoops...”

I’d been so busy indulging myself in successfully catching Safina that I’d completely forgotten about everything else. I heard a loud splash below me.

“Heeey! You ignored me!” the spirit complained vigorously.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I first gently led Safina back to the bridge, then I returned under the bridge to collect the spirit. I felt an odd sense of déjà vu when I saw her swimming toward me with impeccable form. *Is it because she’s*

a mandrake? Or because she's a plant? Well, whatever. I shook my head free from my thoughts and approached the spirit. She saw me approach and stopped swimming.

"Mary... You've got some nerve to completely ignore me," she grumbled.

"I'm sorry. I was too busy worrying about Safina, so I forgot— I mean, you slipped my mind," I replied.

"Why did you even bother correcting yourself?!"

The spirit was angry that I'd basically implied the same thing twice, and it was clear that I'd chosen my words poorly. She balled her mandrake appendages into fists and continued to throw a tantrum while I tried to calm her down.

Eventually, I grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, like one would a cat, and dragged her out of the water. Just as I did so, much like a cat, she stopped thrashing about and froze in place.

"Wh-What's wrong? Why'd you get all quiet?" I asked.

"I only noticed once I got closer to it, but when I look at the space under the bridge, I feel weird," the spirit replied. "I can smell something fishy."

Smell? Ah, she must mean mana. She proceeded to point toward a corner of one of the giant arches that was touching the water, and I looked toward where she directed her tendril. I noticed part of the stone structure wavering and flickering ever so slightly. *I see... So, that's what the person from earlier meant. No wonder it's difficult to find.*

"Safina!" I called, peeking out from under the bridge. "I found something suspicious, so I'm gonna go check it out. Can you wait here?"

As she looked down at us, I continued to hold the spirit by the scruff of her neck and float toward my destination. I wasn't sure if it was a coincidence or on purpose, but a stone jutted out by the shimmering air, creating a small footing for us to land on. When I touched the distortion, the stone wall disappeared in an instant, revealing a door behind it.

"Uh, Mary, what did you just do?" the spirit asked in astonishment.

"Oh, I used my Arcane Hand," I explained cryptically. Past experience told me

that if I hesitated here, the spirit would gleefully try to pry further, so I decided to remain firm in my excuses.

“Your Arcane Hand?” she asked.

“That’s right,” I replied.

“I see...”

“I bet. Keep it a secret from everyone else, all right?”

“Okay...”

Thanks to my persistence, she stopped asking any more questions.

I opened the door and peered inside. The room was of a simple design and dimly lit; it looked like it’d been used for storage in the past. *Darn, so it’s just a room... Not. If that was all, there’d be no reason to hide it.* I knew that there was something here, so I placed the spirit on the ground and stepped inside to investigate.

“It’s dark, but it reeks of danger. Smells fishy,” the spirit said, excitedly entering the room with me.

“I’ll illuminate the area, so don’t start running off on your own. Nothing good happens when you act by yourself,” I said.

“How rude. Who do you think I— Eep!”

Just as I lit up the room with my light magic, the spirit, who’d been turning toward me, completely vanished from sight. Only then did I see that there was a hole in the middle of the room that she’d been too busy facing me to notice—naturally, she fell inside it. *Arghhh! I just wanted to investigate a little and leave the rest to Sita! This spirit! How long will she continue to drag me around?!*

I placed my head in my hands, but unable to simply abandon the spirit, I jumped in and began my descent.

3. I Haven’t Been Dragged In...Yet

“Man... It would’ve been perfect if that fall had planted you in the ground,” I said.

“How dare you! How about you worry whether I’m all right instead?!” the spirit spat at my scathing remark.

As I descended, I saw that she’d landed perfectly flat on the ground, as though she’d intended to give it a little smooch.

“You look fine to me,” I said with an exhausted sigh. “Come on, let’s go back. This is just gonna get more bothersome if we stick our noses into it any further.”

I tried to take us back up and out, but the spirit had thoughts of her own and started running deeper inside the area.

“What are you thinking?” she said. “We haven’t confirmed whether or not Regresh meets here at all. We can’t just leave without finding out.”

“Oh, come on,” I said. “Look how shady this area is. I’m pretty sure we’ve got the right place.”

“You don’t know that! Maybe we just happened to find the hideout of a different organization! You’re the one who’d get embarrassed if that were the case, you know.”

The spirit suddenly sounded rather responsible, so I knew there was a catch. “I see—you’ve got a point,” I replied. “So, what are you *actually* thinking?”

“We’ve come this far!” the spirit whined. “Heading back without doing anything would be so boring— Uh, I mean...!”

She’s so stupid—I mean, honest—that she’s already spilled the beans, huh?

“Gh... You and your silver tongue!” the spirit said. “You’re a frightful child, Mary!”

“I’m more frightened by the fact that I didn’t even need to do anything.”

I wasn’t sure just how serious she was, but as we continued to walk along, I had to acknowledge she had a point. I decided to go along with her antics since I was left with no other choice.

The rocky walls of the underside chamber were fortified with wood, and the corridor was long like a coal mine. I’d expected the lengthy hall to continue on like so, but thanks perhaps to a stroke of luck, we eventually discovered a wall

of neat stone brick that'd been torn apart and led deeper inside the area.

I carefully checked inside this entrance before proceeding forward, and therein was a massive ruin-like room. The engraved patterns on the wall resembled the etchings of the underground ruin we'd visited before we'd come to Kairomea. *They must have ties to Kairomea too.*

However, though this place didn't have any weird devices, it did have numerous rectangular boxes lining the walls. *These seem like stone coffins... Yeah, no doubt about it, these are caskets.* Some of them had their lids askew—they'd likely been pillaged by someone. I didn't have the courage to peek inside them, so I decided to act like I hadn't noticed.

"This must be a former underground cemetery..." I murmured. "Or maybe it's still used to this day."

"The elves I know are returned to the soil with the intent of reuniting them with the forest," the spirit replied. "Oh, but maybe Kairomean elves practice a different ritual."

I don't know much about elves, so their burial practices may well differ. Kairomean elves are said to have shorter life spans when compared to other elves, but to humans like us, they still live for a fairly long time. If this entire underside chamber is used as a cemetery, I wonder how many people must be interred here. I was a little bothered by what the spirit had said and became lost in my thoughts...but once I saw a spot of light in the darkness, I held my breath and focused on it.

"What's going on? Why are the employees of the Grand Archival Tower wary of us and on the hunt?" I heard a man saying from where the light emanated. I tried to listen in as I slowly approached.

"It's because they think Regresh stole the Book of Orthoaguina," a muffled voice replied. I wasn't sure who it belonged to, but it sounded like a woman.

When I sneaked up on the spot of light, I found out why the voice sounded so muffled: it seemed to have come from a woman wearing a black mask. The mask, which glistened in the room's light, contrasted with her white hood and cape, and she was otherwise dressed in white from head to toe as well. Several adults and kids, all wearing white robes of their own, were gathered in the

room with her, and they had all centered their attention on her with their backs to the hole I was peeking in from. No one noticed me because they were too busy listening to the conversation. *She's wearing a different color, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out that she must somehow be related to the other masked guy I met before.*

"The Book of Orthoaguina was stolen...? No, that book was finally found," the man said.

"Quite so," the woman replied. "I heard that the chief librarian succeeded in opening that archive, which led to them finding it. Gillan likely stole it that night."

"But how? No, we should figure that out later. He's not related to us, so how did we start shouldering the blame for his theft?"

"Because the ones who stole that book from Gillan and are in possession of it are the ones in black. And worst of all, they even tried to kidnap the chief librarian..."

"Grr... Those radicals. They weren't satisfied with just the book and even went after the chief librarian? Why do they always cause such a stir?" the man said irritably.

Sounds like this organization doesn't have as much solidarity as I expected. I guess it's the typical feud between radicals and moderates. The guy who told us about this place also didn't seem to like radicals, so I'm guessing he's one of the moderates.

Now that we knew a bit more about Regresh, I was ready to pack it up and leave so that I could report back to Sita. *Good going, me! I haven't screwed anything up yet! Now, if only I can return to Safina...* I cheered to myself and quietly left the meeting behind me...or so I'd thought.

Suddenly, men in black flooded in through the two entrances connecting to this room, hemming the spirit and me in between them.

"My, my. I didn't hear about a meeting today. What were you lot discussing? Pray tell," the masked man said, emerging from the men in black surrounding the area. His voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“Why are *you* here?” the masked woman demanded in shock.

“Heh. Your plan was to leak the location of our base to the Grand Archival Tower staff, hope that I was arrested, and return the book, was it not? Unfortunately for you, the location you guys are aware of isn’t our base. I’m sure they’ll arrive here soon—we left clues to guide them here.”

“What?!”

The masked man spoke with glee. *Ohhh crap! Nooo! We’re definitely getting dragged into this, aren’t we?!* I blended in with the panicking crowd as I started to panic in a different sort of way.

“If that’s true, then why did you show up?” the woman demanded. “Surely you’re not here to kindly notify us of the impending danger.”

“Quite perceptive. Well, you see, now that we’ve got the Book of Orthoaguina, we have no need for scholars such as yourselves...so I figured it was high time we had you exit the stage,” the masked man replied. Right on cue, the black robes unsheathed their weapons. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll be sure to tell the Grand Archival Tower staff that the cornered Regresh members decided to kill themselves, or perhaps that they killed each other due to some internal strife. I’ll handle the excuses one way or another, and then the Book of Orthoaguina will be lost to them forever. You don’t have to worry about a thing, so do die in peace.”

“How thoughtless! The chief librarian knows of your existence. If you’re not among the dead, surely she won’t assume that our organization has been wiped out.”

“They’ve only seen my masked form. I can simply place my mask over one of your subordinates and fool them easily. They’re quite dull, you understand.”

Only the masked man laughed amid the tense atmosphere. All the while, I was trying to accurately determine the locations of the men surrounding us.

“Heh heh,” the masked man chuckled. “You may be good at what you do, but surely you can’t fight alone while protecting everyone—just as we planned for! Well, the chief librarian must’ve received our information by now. I’m sure she’ll be here soon, not knowing that she’s about to walk into her own

kidnapping.”

“You bastard!” the woman roared furiously, finally losing her cool.

As though that was their signal, the men in black pounced, and the masked man laughed loudly.

“Air Bullet Gatling!” I shouted. I knew where each of them was standing, so I attacked them all at once.

The four in black were all assaulted by bullets of air that sent them careening before they were even able to process what had just happened. Quick as a flash, they were all knocked out of commission.

“Huh?” The masked man’s laughing suddenly faded away. His gaze focused on me standing in the back of the room. The rest of the crowd turned toward me, clearing a path between the masked man and myself.

“Wh-Who the hell are you?!” the man demanded. He didn’t know who I was concealed under my hood, and his earlier triumphant cackling was clearly long gone.

“Oh? You threw a knife at me without a second thought the first time we met. Not in the mood for such a warm welcome this time?” I said with a smirk. He could only see my mouth beneath my hood.

“Knife? Th-Then you must be...” the man stammered in a low voice, clearly alert.

I removed my hood to reveal myself.

“Y-You’re that crazy magical girl!” the man shouted.

“Ack!” I gasped. I hadn’t expected to take psychological damage here...

4. Recapturing the Book

Moments before Mary took a blow to her psyche, Sita had stepped outside the Grand Archival Tower. A man who was supposedly Rachel’s underling reported to her with intel, claiming that he’d apparently found the meeting place of Regresh.

Sita was in awe at how unexpectedly quickly things were progressing, and she was impressed by her sister. She immediately made her way to meet up with her allies and go to retrieve the Book of Orthoaguina—and as she was moving through the town’s central street, she saw a certain blonde-haired girl with a divine beast and a dark-haired maid by the inn.

“Magiluka, are you sure you don’t need to rest?” Sita asked.

Magiluka turned around upon hearing her voice and approached her while looking rather restless.

“Sita, are Lady Mary and her group still at the tower?” Magiluka asked.

“His Highness and Sacher are still there. I believe Mary took Safina and headed for the inn.” It was then that realization set in and she understood why Magiluka was anxious. “C-Could it be that they haven’t shown up at the inn?”

“I knew it—they decided to go off and do their own thing on the way back to the inn. This is bad, isn’t it, Tutte?” Magiluka was able to regain her composure due to having an inkling of Mary’s behavior, and she turned toward Tutte to see how she felt.

“I agree,” Tutte whispered back. “Lady Safina will likely not raise any objections toward my lady’s actions, so I’m sure my lady strung her along all too thoroughly...”

Sita wasn’t able to hear what the two ladies were whispering about, but she could tell Mary was a difficult person to handle. She thought back to their first encounter and how struck she’d been by Mary’s beautiful, silky silver hair under her hood—she’d truly been the spitting image of the Argent Holy Woman, and every movement she’d made was eye-catching. Sita smiled uncomfortably thinking about how taken in she’d been. When Mary had had her hood on, she’d seemed like she was talking to the divine beast, and to Sita’s great surprise, not only had Mary convinced the spirit tree to leave her domain, she and the spirit had been remarkably friendly with each other...yet now this extraordinary lady had failed to return to the inn and gone missing with Safina?

“This is horrible!” Sita said quickly out of worry. “Maybe they got caught up in something that’s preventing them from coming back! We have to find them.”

“I agree. She might be poking her nose into something beyond our wildest expectations, so we must search for her,” Magiluka said. It sounded like she was worried for Mary in a different sort of way.

In any case, Sita had no time to consider Magiluka’s comment. She immediately switched gears, putting the search for Regresh on the back burner and prioritizing the search for Mary.

After the ladies reached the gates, the guards soon elucidated the whereabouts of Mary and Safina. Magiluka walked down the large bridge and found Safina, just as the guards had reported.

“Safina!” Magiluka called out.

“Magiluka! Sita!”

After the group met up, Safina quickly reported on the events that had occurred until now. It soon became clear that Mary had obtained information regarding Regresh’s hideout and had found the entrance to it as well. Because it was all hearsay, Mary had entered by herself to confirm if there was any truth to the rumors.

Sita had been told by an earlier report that the hideout was apparently under the remnants of a dilapidated bridge, but she’d never expected it to be so close by. What’s more, Mary had apparently found an alternative entrance—Sita was astonished by Mary’s efficiency, and she even felt a hint of fear at her abilities. Mary’s speedy inferences and her tendency to act behind the scenes was awfully reminiscent of the Ice-Blooded Witch.

In *The Golden Princess* tale, the Argent Holy Woman received a revelation from God and secretly worked to guide everyone. Sita had gasped with awe when she’d read of the Argent Holy Woman’s exploits, but she’d never taken it seriously knowing it was a story. She never would’ve guessed that there was someone in reality who acted exactly like the person in the stories, to her great shock.

“Something might’ve happened considering she’s still in there,” Magiluka said, snapping the elf back to her senses. “Why don’t we go investigate?”

Sita nodded and used floating magic to fly underneath the bridge. To her

surprise, she found a door. She'd been living here for years and never noticed it —her awe toward Mary's astute observations only grew. The door was small, so the divine beast decided to stay back with Tutte while Sita, Magiluka, and Safina chose to enter.

Sita ended up following the same path as Mary, descending to the basement before heading deeper inside. She saw Mary facing a masked man and couldn't suppress her scream.

"Mary!" Sita shouted, attracting the room's attention.

"Impossible!" the masked man gasped. "They arrived here way too quickly! And why did they show up from that entrance? They should be coming toward us from the opposite way..."

"Si— Chief Librarian! Why would you come from that direction?! Only a chosen few should know about that door!" the masked woman yelled in shock.

The two masked people swiftly turned toward Mary, assuming that she was the cause of it all.

"Sita! Regresh is divided into two factions, and they're fighting!" Mary shouted, quickly clarifying the situation.

It honestly looks like she's just trying to turn everyone's attention toward me, but I must be imagining things, Sita thought.

"G-Got it!" she stammered. "Wait, what? Factions?!"

"I'm guessing the sides are those who are for and against the masked man's conduct," Magiluka surmised, dispelling Sita's confusion. "They must be in the middle of a skirmish...and since only the masked man is displaying animosity toward Lady Mary, I assume everyone here who supports him has already been taken down."

"I see... So, you're saying that the masked man currently has no allies."

As Sita was trying to grasp the situation, the masked man glanced at her, then Magiluka in front of her, and lastly at Mary.

"Those two again..." he muttered. "I didn't think these girls would screw up my plan. Is Aldia pulling the strings? Or is it the prince? Even contacting the

home nation...”

Sita had no idea what he was on about, but she knew that he was alone and her reason to be here was to help Mary out. She guessed that the trembling masked woman was likely not an enemy—for a moment, she wondered how she came to that conclusion at a glance. In any case, it was clear the other trembling people in the room weren’t suited for combat.

This was the perfect opportunity for Sita—truly an act of divine providence. “I don’t get what’s going on, but this is perfect! Give me back the Book of Orthoaguina!” she demanded.

“Hmph, this thing?” the man replied, slowly regaining his cool. He took the book out from his pocket and showed it off, his voice filled with scorn. “And what will you do with it, Miss Chief Librarian? Do you even know what this is?”

“Huh? It’s the only book that remains of old Kairomea. With it, I might be able to unlock the doors of the Grand Archival Tower! I’ve been agonizing over it for so long,” Sita answered honestly, a bit surprised by his questions.

“The keys to the Grand Archival Tower? Good grief... You don’t get it. You don’t get it all! You don’t understand the value of this book—I suppose you really *didn’t* hear anything from your father.”

He sighed while slumping his shoulders with disappointment. Sita was so shocked to hear the mention of her father that she didn’t feel any anger.

“‘Old Kairomea,’ you say?” the man continued. “Hah! What a joke. There *was* no wisdom in ancient Kairomea! For everything this place is now, it owes to Orthoaguina!”

The chief librarian was unable to ask further questions about her father as she stood in stunned silence. “Orthoaguina is the name of a person?” she inquired.

“That’s right,” he replied. “I lacked the mana and knowledge to view the book for more than a fleeting moment, but I’m certain they wrote it.”

“A glimpse? Gillan failed, so how were you able to...?”

“That’s because of his mistaken belief the book was written by an elf from ancient Kairomea. Heh heh heh. It’s the opposite, you see. To ensure that elves

won't be able to read it, this book has a trap that activates if you try to pry it open with elven rituals!"

"It's designed to keep elves out?"

Sita was so stunned that she almost forgot to breathe. While she was unsure if this was the truth, she was unable to let these comments slide as a resident of Kairomea—that is to say, she was so swept up in the masked man's words, she failed to notice why he was suddenly divulging so much information.

The first one to realize his ploy was the masked woman. "Sita! Don't lend your ear to his words! He's just trying to buy time! Hurry and retrieve the book!" she cried, cutting off the exchange.

"Huh? O-Okay!"

For some odd reason, Sita didn't question the woman's words and tried to act. The woman reminded her of her sister, though the muffled voice made it difficult to say for certain it really was Rachel.

"Tch, you blabbermouth. No matter, I was able to buy time until it hatched!" The man threw a large inflated object in front of Sita.

"Hey, that's an egg from that ruin," Mary said.

"Heh heh heh," he chuckled triumphantly. "I didn't expect to use this on you guys, but—" Suddenly, he cut himself off. "Wh-What? At the ruin, you say?" he asked dubiously.

The bulging egg grew and started to hatch as a familiar oddly shaped monster emerged.

"It was *you* guys who were behind the monster commotion in our town!" Sita shouted accusingly. "Were you carrying these eggs out of the womb?"

"How do you know about the womb?" the man replied in shock. "D-Did you guys actually find our real base?"

"It seems like you don't know yet. Mary here destroyed the ruin and the womb. Too bad for you."

"You *destroyed* it?! Impossible! How were you able to open the door?! Though it was a bit degraded, it uses similar magic to the tower's archive doors!

And only I have the key to open it!” The man couldn’t hide his astonishment.

“Wait, seriously? Huh? How did you open it, then?”

The two turned toward Mary, who shifted her gaze and stared into the distance.

“M-Maybe you forgot to lock it or something,” Mary stammered, unable to speak firmly. “I-I just pushed on the doors a little, and, like...it opened. Just like that. Yeah...”

I mean, it could be possible, Sita thought, choosing to believe Mary’s excuse.

“Sita!” the masked woman scolded. “Focus on what’s in front of you!”

“Huh?”

Sita had been too busy paying attention to the masked man’s panic and Mary’s suspicious reply to notice that the monster had grown in the blink of an eye. She’d heard rumors about how absurdly swift the creatures could grow, but she’d never seen it for herself before. This wasn’t the work of nature—Sita nervously drew in a sharp breath.

When Sita glanced back at the masked woman, she was already guiding her followers out to safety. At this rate, she would flee, but Sita didn’t feel at all pressured to chase after her—Sita’s priority was to defeat the monster in front of her and retrieve the book from the masked man. *Should we all focus on the monster and then chase after the man, or should we split into two groups and round both of them up?* she wondered to herself.

“Safina and I will take care of the monster! Sita, you and Magiluka take the book back from him!” Mary ordered.

“Gh... I didn’t think you guys would split up into teams...” the masked man groaned softly.

He’d been slowly inching away from the monster, likely trying to use it as a shield so that he could escape. That being the case, Mary’s quick decision-making was correct. She knew what he was up to and had taken charge.

Wanting to respond to Mary’s expectations, Sita glanced back at Magiluka behind her. Even if she wasn’t able to manage to take the book back, the least

she could do was to ensure the man couldn't leave while Mary and Safina took down the monster.

"Safina, let's defeat that thing quickly before it can completely mature!" Mary called.

"Right! I'll use my item!" Safina replied.

"Heh, you underestimate us," the man crowed with a chuckle. "This chimera is the culmination of all our research—it's stronger than anything we've ever made! Two little girls can't possibly stand a chance. Heh heh heh!" It was clear he was proud of his creation.

Sita remembered hearing that some of the monsters were difficult to defeat with one or two people, while others reported easily taking down monsters they found. This rapid life cycle was likely the reason for these varied accounts of the creatures' power. If that was the case, no matter how strong the monster was, it was best to kill it slowly. However, that would only give ample time for the man to escape. *No wonder he seems so self-assured.*

"Here we go!" Mary shouted. "Nine Blade..."

"Cross!" Safina joined in, finishing the chant together.

Everyone except Magiluka watched on as Mary and Safina did the impossible—they took down the monster instantaneously. As sharp metallic sounds whizzed through the air, the monster was cut into pieces.

"I-Impossible!" the man cried. "This even happened at the fort! Just who are you guys?!"

While the masked man and Sita froze in astonishment, Magiluka had predicted this outcome. She calmly launched an attack of her own.

"Freeze Arrow!"

The defenseless man clicked his tongue and instinctively dodged to avoid a fatal wound—however, because the attack was perfectly timed, he couldn't dodge it entirely, so an icy arrow scratched his body and caused him to lose his balance.

"Gh, no!" he gasped.

“Sita!” Magiluka shouted.

Sita unsheathed her blade and leaped toward the man. With a flash of cold steel, Sita thought she’d be able to land the final blow on her foe...but the man wouldn’t go down without a fight. He swiftly used his arm to defend himself against her attack, splattering bright red blood through the air and sending the book flying out of his hand.

“How dare you! I won’t go down to pissants like you!” the man roared furiously.

Because he was enraged that his plans had been foiled, his composure had completely faded, and he stepped back while protecting his wounded arm. Sita remained wary of the man as she went to pick up the book.

Just then, her vision blurred, and for a split second, she felt like she’d been transported into a different realm. When she slowly looked up, a massive, looming shadow gazed down at her...exactly like she’d seen when she’d first touched the book. This mysterious shadow made her shiver and tremble—she felt like it’d swallow her whole.

“Sita!” The muffled voice of the masked woman snapped her back to reality.

How long was I out for? Sita saw the masked man and woman crossing blades right in front of her. The man had likely seen his chance and wanted to steal the book back even if it meant injuring Sita, and the woman had jumped forward to block him.

“Thank goodness...” the woman said once Sita regained her composure. “Be careful so that you won’t get pulled in by the book.”

“O-Okay,” Sita replied.

The man leaped back from the masked woman as numerous footsteps thudded behind him. It was clear that his comrades had arrived. Sita had arrived through the back entrance thanks to Mary, so she wasn’t privy to the details of the masked man’s plan, but she was supposed to have been kidnapped by the ones waiting out front—now they’d finally arrived to offer their aid.

“Where have you fools been?!” the masked man barked angrily. “You miserable oafs!” Once the veneer of his composure had been stripped away, he

was merely a man who would lash out at his comrades.

“I won’t let you escape!” Sita declared, trying to step forward.

“Wait, Sita,” Magiluka said, stopping her.

When Sita turned to Magiluka, she was calmly shaking her head. It was then that Sita realized that she herself had lost her cool. She exhaled and confirmed her situation. The people in black were gone, and even the masked woman had vanished. She’d been unable to capture a single Regresh member, but that wasn’t their goal. Since she’d managed to recover the stolen book, she should’ve considered this outcome a success.

Sita gingerly gazed at the book in her hand, but the vision of shadow she’d seen wasn’t returning. *What was that?*

In any case, Sita was able to successfully recapture this book thanks to Mary, who’d crushed the masked man’s plans again and again. She glanced around, wanting to thank Mary for her actions, but the lady in question had quickly donned her hood and appeared to be trying to leave discreetly. *It looks like she’s trying to sneak away, but I must be imagining things. I’m sure she’s acting with another plan in mind.*

Is it actually Mary who’s the Argent Holy Woman in the tales? No...if the divine beast serves Magiluka, maybe Mary is someone who guides the Argent Holy Woman without appearing in the story.

Either way, Sita knew that Mary was trying to operate from behind the curtains. *I’ll do what I can for her!* With renewed determination, Sita bowed her head toward Mary, then she watched her exit the room.

5. The True Goal Is Far Away

“Hey, why’re you trying to run?” the spirit asked.

“I-I’m not running!” I insisted. “Since it’s all over, I just wanted to return to the inn.”

“Then why don’t you just return with everyone?”

“La la la! Can’t hear you! La la la!”

I wasn't sure what all had happened, but I'd only had a few moments to breathe a sigh of relief before I had to skedaddle. I couldn't help but think that this whole fiasco happened because I had to go and snoop by myself without reporting back.

Above all, there was one thing that I would've really struggled to explain: why the ruin had gone up in flames. I felt like I'd risk accidentally revealing my secret, so I decided to run—I mean, retreat—I mean, retire—to the inn. I wanted to discuss a few things with Magiluka and Tutte first.

I was making my way out through the back route the masked woman had escaped through earlier and saw someone standing there—a dignified young elf woman. She was wearing similar garb to Sita, and she had her white hair tied up in a ponytail. She was apparently surprised to see me, so she was on guard. I got the feeling she wasn't on her way here, but rather it was like she was already here doing something...but my first order of business was to avoid any unnecessary skirmishes, so I didn't make anything out of it. Since she was wearing the same outfit as Sita, I guessed that she was somehow related to her.

“U-Um, I'm no one suspicious,” I said, raising my hands in surrender. “My name is Mary, and I come from the Kingdom of Aldia. Um, I'm friends with Sita...”

I tried to say whatever came to mind to facilitate peace, but I trailed off awkwardly. When I glanced beside me, the spirit had also raised her hands in surrender.

“I-I've got nothing to do with this child,” the spirit said, betraying me. “She dragged me out here.”

“Hey! Stop making me sound like the villain!” I shot back. “Besides, if you didn't act so rashly...”

The woman breathed a sigh of relief, her nerves seemingly now at ease. “Ah, I-I see. S-So you're Mary. You've arrived in this town.”

Why did she seem so confused for a moment? I wondered. It looked like she was a little puzzled because I didn't act the way she expected...

“I apologize for my belated introduction,” the woman continued. “My name is

Rachel. I serve as the aide of the chief librarian, Sita. I'm pleased to meet you." After so politely introducing herself, she started running toward the direction I'd come from.

She must be worried about Sita. I shouldn't stop her. And so, this series of events that had begun with me wanting to tour the town ended up with me fooling around, getting lost, and investigating the shadowy organization du jour as a token of apology. I realized that I'd stuck my nose into this mess far more than I'd anticipated as this incident drew to a close.

At the inn, Magiluka, Tutte, and I held a meeting to exchange information—or, to be more precise, a meeting to discern how deeply I'd screwed up this time.

The next day, I headed to the Grand Archival Tower. My actual goal was still to find a topic for my report in Kairomea, and perhaps some documents useful for my personal needs if possible. The city wanted to hear a few details about yesterday's incident from me, but Shelly had already provided them everything I knew. Since I wasn't able to give any new information, the questioning ended rather quickly. *Magiluka and I braced ourselves, wondering if Sita would ask questions, but she didn't. I'm half surprised, half relieved.*

I didn't want to leave Kairomea without accomplishing anything, so I decided to focus on my report. However, there were so many books that I didn't know where to start. "Hmm, maybe I'll look into magic," I said. The shelves were lined with books both new and old, and I felt overwhelmed by the intensity emanating from them.

"I knew you'd say that, so I had my eyes on a few choice reads," Magiluka said, approaching me with her arms filled with several books.

"Thanks, Magiluka. You really are a huge help."

I tried to happily hug her, but she dodged my embrace and pushed the books on me. I noticed that her face was beet red from embarrassment. *My, my, how adorable...*

I sat on the nearest chair and cracked open the books to read, but they were

all difficult to understand. The small letters that were crammed into the pages made my eyes hurt. *More than half of these words are difficult-to-understand technical terms... I can't retain any of this.* To make an analogy in terms of my previous world, I felt like a middle schooler who knew nothing about the topic trying to understand a research paper intended for college students.

"Uh, Miss Magiluka," I said. "I feel like a dull student like me cannot possibly understand anything this difficult."

"I thought you might be able to, Lady Mary," Magiluka replied. "Can you not?"

"Of course I can't!"

"But there might be something you're looking for within these books."

"Am I looking for something so difficult and complicated?"

"At the very least, it's far beyond what I'm capable of."

I fell silent, knowing that I may have been trying to bite off more than I could chew. I tried to read once more, but as I'd thought, I couldn't retain or understand any of the information.

"Debuffing yourself *sounds* easy, but I guess it's unexpectedly difficult," I muttered.

"Besides that, normally, no one ever thinks of trying to seal themselves up," Magiluka said.

"You're starting to sound like Fifi..."

"What's this about seals?" a voice said behind me.

"Eep!" I shrieked, hastily closing my book.

When I turned around, I saw a familiar pair of elves.

"O-O-Oh, it's just Sita and Rachel," I mumbled.

"S-Sorry, I didn't think you'd be so shocked," Sita said. "Ah, could it be that you two were discussing a secret that I shouldn't have heard? Seal... Holy Woman..."

"Pardon?"

“Oh, it’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

Her mumbling made me think she might have a huge misunderstanding about something or other, but she seemed to have settled it on her own.

“I-In any case, why are you here, Sita? Do you have any business here?” I asked.

“We were about to try to view the Book of Orthoaguina, but she found you guys on the way and was drawn to you both, I suppose,” Rachel answered wearily.

“H-Hey, sis!” Sita said, puffing out her cheeks in embarrassment. “Don’t make it sound like I’m a bee who can’t resist a flower.”

“Are you going to read the Book of Orthoaguina?” Magiluka asked worriedly.

I couldn’t blame her—someone had recently lost his life failing to do just that. According to the masked man, the book was protected so that elves couldn’t read it, so they were essentially risking their lives. To put it another way, it was like trying to enter the virtual world and access the data on a dangerous organization’s main server without permission—and if you get caught hacking into the mainframe, you’d get attacked and lose your life.

“Yeah, it might be dangerous, but we actually decipher dangerous books daily,” Sita replied. “And if the masked man was able to catch a glimpse of it, it means it’s not impossible to read. This is a personal hunch of mine, but I just feel like I *have* to know what’s inside. Something’s telling me that I must read it.”

When I saw her eyes filled with determination, I couldn’t just go, “Oh, I see. Good luck.” It wouldn’t have been right for me to tell her she shouldn’t take this step to defend what was important to her...but at the same time, seeing a friend of mine give her all to something despite acknowledging its fatal risks made me want to help her out as much as I could.

As I was agonizing over what to say, I locked eyes with Magiluka’s gentle gaze—and as though she read my mind, she nodded.

“U-Um, Sita. Could we tag along?” I asked.

“Huh? Are you sure?” Sita asked. She sounded hesitant for a moment before happily accepting my offer. “You’d be helping us a ton, and I’d love to have you on board, but I don’t want to rely on you so much.”

She once again groaned and lost herself in thought. *She’s a busy elf.*

In the end, we were allowed to help Sita, and we soon met up with Safina, Sacher, and the prince, who were wandering around the tower as they pleased. Ultimately, we had quite the rowdy group, but I wanted the elves to look the other way about that.

As for the spirit tree, she was playing—or being forced to play, rather—with Lily. *They’re a bit noisy, but Snow’s with them, so I’m sure they won’t cause any trouble... I hope.*

“I understand how we’ve reached this position, but this book can’t be opened using elven methods, correct?” the prince asked, voicing my concerns as well. “What will you do? If it isn’t much trouble, I’d love to hear your plans.”

“Well, about that... If we weren’t supposed to read it, how did Orthoaguina, a fellow resident of this town, read the book?” Sita replied, answering his question with one of her own.

“The most simple answer would be that this person devised a unique method only known to them that allowed them to read the book,” Magiluka surmised.

“If that were the case, no one else should be able to read the book,” Rachel replied, “and yet, the masked man managed to open it. We believe that’s where the key lies.”

“What’s the difference between the masked man and Sita?” I asked.

“Exactly,” Sita said as though waiting for just this topic. “That’s the question. And *you* were the one who found the answer, Mary.”

“Huh? M-Me? Wh-Wh-What are you talking about?”

“Remember the people in black you defeated? Well, we looked into them and found that a majority were human. Kairomea is mostly filled with elves like us. There aren’t many other elf species here, much less completely different

species. Since we found that a majority of the Regresh radicals were human, we can assume that the masked man is also human.”

“And so, we’re about to test out an ancient method of reading that humans used,” Rachel added. “If Sita’s theory is correct, we should be able to read the book with no issue.” Her explanation gave me a bit of relief, and everyone focused back on the book.

We were guided toward a door within the Grand Archival Tower. Sita fished out an odd-looking key from her pochette and inserted it into a nearby object, and the door opened. *These doors must be the root of Sita’s troubles. It does look like a daunting task.* I’d heard about the process, but it was my first time seeing it with my own eyes, and I couldn’t tear my gaze away watching it unfold.

Sita hung the key around her neck and beckoned us inside. The enclosed room had no windows, and a bookrest stood in the center of the room. The floor was inscribed with letters resembling a magic circle, implying that this place must’ve been used for some sort of ritual.

“What is this room?” I asked casually.

“This is where we unseal books and undo curses as needed,” Rachel explained. “Every method that we’ve used in the past is provided here, and we’ve already prepared the method that humans used, so we’ll be using that today.”

Sita stood alone in the center in front of the bookrest. She placed the Book of Orthoaguina there and started to mutter, expertly going through the steps to read the book. As though to answer her call, the letters on the floor started to glow, and the bookrest began to transform. The book and the key that hung from Sita’s neck started to glow as well.

“How odd...” Rachel said, tilting her head to one side. “What is the key reacting to?”

In the next moment, a vortex of light spewed forth from the key and was swallowed by the book.

“Huh?! What’s going on? What *is* this?!” Rachel cried.

I'd never seen this ritual before, so I'd assumed that this was the norm, but Rachel's surprise quickly dispelled that notion. *If Rachel's this shocked, then surely Sita is even more confused.*

As I turned back to Sita, I first noticed her trembling slightly, as though she'd gone numb. She stood there gazing blankly, the light fading from her eyes. *This can't be normal!*

"Sita!" Rachel shrieked, rushing to her sister's side to forcibly shut down the ritual. "Eek!"

Following a loud crackle, Rachel was pushed away by an invisible force field. The Book of Orthoaguina energetically flipped open on its own.

Just then, Sita's voice echoed throughout the room. Her tone lacked inflection as she spoke in a complete monotone. "Confirmed...removal...of first...seal."

"Rachel! What's going on?!" I cried. Even an outsider like me could tell that this was completely out of the ordinary.

"I don't know! This has never happened before!" Rachel shouted back frantically.

"Proceeding...to second seal..." Sita said robotically.

The vortex of light increased in intensity as it condensed into a single pillar of light. Like a hologram, it started to display a certain view.

Sita's emotionless voice changed as she let out a weak groan. "A...Augh..."

Her body was convulsing even more violently, and a single bloody tear slid down from one of her dim eyes. I wasn't sure if her body was rejecting something, but it was clear that she didn't have the capacity to continue this process as she started experiencing negative side effects.

"Sitaaa!" Rachel screamed desperately.

Before I knew it, I was running forward. I layered this scene over my own past experience when Magiluka had been captured by the Liberal Materia. I couldn't predict the future—worst case, I could increase the damage dealt to Sita. And yet, despite it all, I chose to act. I hugged Sita's body tight and pried her away from the bookrest. There was a loud popping sound, and the vortex of light

dispersed. The book quietly closed, notifying me that the ritual had been forcibly stopped.

The room fell silent as though the commotion that happened mere moments ago had never occurred.

“Sita!” Rachel cried, the first to regain composure.

I quietly handed Sita over to her and let out an exhale.

“Rachel, how is she?” Magiluka asked.

“Sh-She’s fine. She’s just unconscious.” Rachel’s reply was quiet. It seemed she’d calmed down slightly.

I guess Sita’s safe, then. But what just happened?

After breathing a sigh of relief, I turned back to the bookrest. Lying atop it was the book as quiet as ever, like nothing had happened. I was so focused on it that I failed to notice the person gazing at us from beyond the door.

“Tch. That girl again...”

I quickly glanced around, reacting to the voice, but no one was to be found.

6. Orthoaguina Is...

Sita opened her eyes in the chief librarian’s office an hour after the incident at the bookrest. The moment she did, Rachel, who was waiting nearby, angrily inspected her body from head to toe. Sita was surprised by this, but she was secretly happy to see that her sister looked so worried about her.

Rachel asked her how she felt, and she replied that she felt fine—and that if she were to bring up an issue, it would be that she didn’t quite remember the events that had transpired once she’d faced the book, and she was a bit curious about it. Rachel quickly explained what had occurred, and Sita learned that she’d been knocked out after a strange phenomenon.

It was then that Magiluka and her friends arrived to offer their well-wishes. Sita had heard that Mary had saved her, and she wanted to thank her silver-haired friend, but she was nowhere to be seen—Sita’s father had apparently

called on her to give him details about the egg and Regresh. Mary had thus told Magiluka that she'd be back soon and left with Shelly, Tutte, and the spirit. *She's always thinking a step ahead and acting without stopping to rest. She must have a plan in mind*, Sita presumed, once again jumping to conclusions.

In truth, Mary wasn't able to explain exactly why she'd been able to easily tear through the Book of Orthoaguina's barrier, and she wanted to keep some distance so that she wouldn't need to explain herself. Indeed, her thinking didn't go particularly deep, but Sita had no way of knowing this.

"I'm glad to see you doing well," Magiluka said. "I was able to see with my own eyes how dangerous these books can be. Everyone's working hard to unseal and decipher them despite the danger that comes along with it."

Sita gave an embarrassed chuckle, happy to be showered with praise. "Everyone's searching for knowledge, and their curiosities are insatiable. Many don't quite worry about the risks involved," she explained modestly, as though Magiluka's admiration didn't apply to her.

"You're no stranger to the work either, Sita. All that said, though, I never expected the Book of Orthoaguina to react so violently," Rachel chided, showing the book to everyone.

Sita eagerly reached for the book, seeming not at all traumatized by what she'd so recently experienced. Rachel sighed at the sight of her undaunted sister—though Sita had previously been able to touch the book without any problems, Rachel now had a hint of anxiety, wondering if the book would somehow react negatively to her sister's touch.

Rachel slowly handed the book to Sita. "This is a guide that I, Orthoaguina, left behind," Sita muttered the moment she touched the book. She was surprised at how the words tumbled out of her mouth.

"That must be the opening line of the book," Rachel said. "I think the masked man was able to read that far, hence his inference. Orthoaguina must be the founder of Kairomea...and the book may be a guide for its people."

"So, how do you explain the seal removal messages Sita said?" Magiluka asked.

Neither lady seemed aware of Sita's shock as Magiluka thought back to the incident in front of the bookrest.

"Huh? Did I say something like that?" Sita asked in confusion. She couldn't recall.

"Sita doesn't remember that whole incident," Rachel explained in her sister's stead. "You'd have to explain to her what you're talking about."

"Then I suppose she won't know what the scenery portrayed by the light means either," Magiluka said.

"Scenery? Maybe you'd know, sis," Sita replied.

"I don't have any proof, but it sort of looked like the underground cemetery that Regresh used to meet," Rachel answered.

Sita could only nod in agreement, as she didn't quite remember how the cemetery looked. She hadn't known about its existence until today, after all. Yet Rachel, who'd supposedly only seen it once, had memorized the minute details of the place. Sita was shocked and a little doubtful, but she quickly buried those emotions.

"The underground cemetery..." Sita muttered. "It's nearby, so I'd like to visit it again to confirm some things!"

She'd have been lying if she'd said she wasn't curious about the place, but she was also gripped with a sense of necessity. *Something* was compelling her to go there, and sitting around the tower while twiddling her thumbs would do her no good. She was choosing to act before thinking—such was always her tendency anyway—so she eagerly jumped off the sofa and headed out of the Grand Archival Tower.

The group arrived under the large bridge, in front of the hidden door. Like before, the small entrance forced the divine beast to stay behind with the prince as the rest proceeded inside.

"Indeed... The scenery we saw does resemble this underground cemetery," Magiluka observed. "The images must be from somewhere in here." Sita, of

course, didn't remember.

"Since everyone's familiar with what was displayed, why don't we split up and search that way?" Sita suggested.

"We shouldn't," Rachel replied. "This place is pretty large, so you'd get lost if you're not knowledgeable."

"Ah, fair enough."

Does Rachel mean to say she's knowledgeable about this place? Sita thought.

"We're looking for a place, huh?" Sita grumbled. "How inconvenient. If you're gonna show us a place, may as well give us a map too."

As she gazed down at the book, it glowed ever so slightly, and a maplike vision slowly emerged in her head.

"Sita! Sita!" Rachel called.

The chief librarian snapped out of it and returned to reality. "Wh-What's wrong, sis?"

"Don't give me that. You suddenly stood there in a daze with the book open!" Rachel replied, her voice carrying a hint of panic. "You had me scared for a second."

"It looks to me like Sita, the key, and the book are resonating with each other," Magiluka analyzed calmly. "Did something happen?"

"Uh, well, sort of," Sita confessed. "I think I have a vague idea about where we should head to."

She walked ahead. Even Sita was surprised by how smoothly she guided the group as they arrived at their destination several minutes later.

"Is this place...correct?" Sita asked with uncertainty.

"I didn't know this area existed..." Rachel murmured.

The ruins were so dilapidated as to make it difficult to distinguish anything clearly, but they nonetheless struck the group as an altar built in worship to something. Sita guessed that the former residents had built this place to honor the dead, but it didn't look like it had been weathered by time—no, it looked

like someone had destroyed this chamber. She found it all to be creepy.

“Hmm... The scenery we saw *does* resemble this place, but if my memory serves me correctly, wasn't there a staircase that leads down?” Sacher asked. Though he'd only seen the image for a few minutes, he was able to recall quite a bit.

As he glanced around while posing his question, everyone's gaze landed on Sita. She couldn't think of anything to say and forced a laugh.

“U-Um, okay, I'm sure there's something here,” she offered meekly. “I think I'll look around for a bit.”

I'm not like Magiluka or Mary at all. I'm not confident, and I can't guide people from within the shadows, Sita thought with a strained smile.

“Excuse me, is this perhaps a keyhole like in the Grand Archival Tower?” Safina asked a few minutes after the search had commenced.

She gathered the attention of everyone present as they headed over to her. Safina had removed some rubble behind the crumbled altar, revealing a keyhole.

“Urgh... I didn't think a keyhole hurdle would be waiting for me here,” Sita muttered. “What do I do? And the shape looks unique.”

Because she'd tried to open numerous keyholes in the past, she knew at a glance if it required a special shape. Her impatience grew, and she started to resent her powerlessness after having made it this far. *No wonder people call me useless behind my back. I haven't changed at all! Not one bit.* Her bitter feelings intensified.

Sita clenched the Book of Orthoaguina in her hand, and it glowed in response. It opened on its own, and Sita's key answered the book's call, changing its shape. The key wasn't transforming on its own—the image within the book was transmitted to Sita, and from her it was passed down to the key. Sita was thus able to understand the necessary shape for the keyhole, and when she inserted the key...it was a perfect fit. The lock was undone, and a low rumble resonated throughout the room as the altar slid away, revealing a staircase that headed

below.

“I-I did it!” Sita stammered. She still needed time to process the shocking series of events. Her body trembled, and she was unable to hide her excitement at all the possibilities that opened up for her. “A-Amazing! Is this the power of the Book of Orthoaguina? D-Does it hold the answers to all the doors within the Grand Archival Tower?”

“You did it, Sita!” Rachel said. She flashed her brightest smile yet. “If it does, you can fulfill your role as the chief librarian. No one will ever mock you behind your back again!” she said brutally honestly.

Sita quietly forced a smile. Though the people around her had always offered their support on the surface, they’d all still harbored some resentment toward her. The doors they’d once opened so easily had now been locked away since she’d taken over. Sita had accepted these complaints, finding herself to blame, but Rachel couldn’t overlook those nasty rumors.

Has Rachel been investigating various ways I could do my job? Did she...even turn to the group that sought to relive the glory days of the past? Upon seeing how happy Rachel seemed, Sita vowed not to disappoint her further.

“So, what now?” Sacher asked, peering down the staircase. “Should we go down? Or should we head back for now and make preparations?”

Sita inadvertently glanced at Magiluka, who shook her head, signaling that they should proceed with caution. Usually, Sita would respect the wishes of the holy woman she admired and choose to retreat, but bizarrely, Sita felt that they’d be safe downstairs.

“I think we should head down,” Sita said, walking ahead and stepping into the darkness. “I feel like Orthoaguina is guiding me.” The light in her hand illuminated her surroundings.

Once Sita descended the steps, she proceeded down the corridor and was met by a large, completely empty room. However, once her light revealed the wall in front of them, the group was captivated by the sight.

“What...is this?” Sita muttered.

“It looks like...a mural of ancient Kairomea,” Rachel answered, standing

beside her.

The painting depicted several scenes, but Sita couldn't tear her eyes away from the largest depiction in the middle. It showed long-eared people on their knees praying toward the heavens, worshipping a large tower...

...a tower upon which was perched a massive dragon.

Sita recalled the massive shadow that had once flashed through her mind. For some odd reason, the memory sent chills down her spine, and she broke out in a cold sweat as she shuddered. To her surprise, she was gripped with a fear she couldn't explain. It had nothing to do with her past experiences—it was terror on an instinctual level, and every fiber of her being was pleading with her to cower. Sita glanced at Rachel and noticed she was just as fixated on the mural as Sita was, and cold sweat dotted her face too.

"This seems quite ancient," Magiluka said. "The beast in the center looks like a dragon, and it appears the elves are worshipping it." She calmly glanced around, seemingly unfazed. The mysterious fear hadn't come over her.

"Magiluka, look," Safina said, stepping away from everyone and illuminating the rest of the walls around them. "This entire room is filled with murals." Different paintings decorated the surrounding walls, but a dragon was in the center of all of them.

Sita once again faced the painting of a dragon. The ominous beast sported jet-black scales, and the flesh from its neck to its underbelly was the deep red of spilled blood. A colossal pair of wings, so imposing you'd think they could enshroud the world in their expanse, jutted from its back. Upon its two muscular legs, it stood as tall as the lofty tower beneath its claws.

Sita found herself drawn to the painting as she inadvertently staggered toward it. She didn't know why she touched it, but she felt like the mural was beckoning her to do so. The moment her fingertips brushed against the illustrations, a crackle of magic popped underneath her fingers, and the book opened wide.

"Sita?" Rachel asked, sensing that something was off about her sister. She began to approach her, but then she froze at what she saw. Sita was holding the open book in one hand, and the key hanging from her neck was glowing

brightly. Her body once again started to tremble, and her eyes were wide as though she were surprised. Something was clearly amiss.

“Sita!” Rachel shouted.

The light faded from Sita’s eyes as she uttered in a monotone,
“Confirmed...removal...of second...seal.”

The light emanating from the key stretched toward the center of the wall, then it began to slowly seep outward, stretching across the mural. There was a deafening rumble, then a stone monument next to the painting slowly drew nearer.

“Sita!” Rachel cried. In an instant, she was aware that this was much like what had occurred in front of the bookrest. She rushed to her sister’s side and tried to snap her out of it. She’d expected to be blocked by some sort of invisible barrier like before, but to her surprise, she was able to touch Sita’s body. Rachel didn’t question how—she just clenched Sita’s shoulders and shook her. Only Magiluka realized that Mary had caused the barrier to malfunction.

“Sita! Stop! Come back to me!” Rachel shrieked, violently shaking her sister’s body.

Light slowly appeared in Sita’s eyes. “S...Sis?”

Rachel breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing her sister speak, but a man’s voice suddenly echoed from behind the group, his tone brimming with excitement.

“Wonderful! Simply wonderful! This is the truth of ancient Kairomea that you were all searching for!”

When the group all turned around, they saw a man dressed in the clothes of a priest.

“Pastor Thomas?” Magiluka recognized him—he’d struck her as a quiet man, and she never would’ve imagined him capable of shouting so loudly.

The pastor paid Magiluka no need, however. “Ah! Magnificent! A dragon! This is a dragon, is it not? Ancient Kairomea must’ve been ruled by a dragon!”

He stared excitedly at the murals all around him, captivated by the sight. He

proceeded to read the letters engraved on the stone tablet as though he was telling everyone a story.

Long ago, a lone dragon alighted from the skies, razing the trees and gouging out the soil until he was satisfied. He called himself Orthoaguina.

Orthoaguina lusted after knowledge. In his pursuit to learn all there was to know about the world, this awakened beast researched every conceivable subject. Days passed. Months passed. Years passed...

One day, he noticed he had attracted a following of dark elves. They were attracted to his power and wisdom, and they worshipped the ground he walked on. Orthoaguina was perplexed by these curious beings, so he agreed to coexist with them. Their shared space would come to be known as Kairomea.

“So, that’s the truth behind Kairomea’s founding,” Sita observed. “Our knowledge and technology came from a dragon...”

“The center of the Grand Archival Tower must be so needlessly large because...” Rachel mused in awe, using the murals and story to draw her own conclusions.

The pastor glanced at the two ladies before moving on to a different mural to read its stone monuments.

Time passed, and the fangs the dragon had sunk into the world for the sake of knowledge were soon pointed toward the residents. It wasn’t long before experimentation on people commenced under the guise of learning.

Had the elves never revealed themselves to the dragon, they may have been able to live in peace. However, they had vastly underestimated the greed of the creature, to whom their ethics and morals did not apply—sure enough, all the residents of Kairomea became Orthoaguina’s test subjects.

“H-He experimented on people?” Sita gasped.

“The reason the ancient underground cemetery is so large and full of bodies is because...” Rachel trailed off.

They couldn’t believe their ears as the pastor continued to read. Sita couldn’t process it—it was all she could do to murmur the words she was hearing—but Rachel had drawn some kind of conclusion and was looking around the room.

Sita couldn’t understand. She didn’t *want* to understand...yet the truth told by these murals and writings was unmistakable. She now knew why the Kairomeans were so different from elves outside their town, and why they weren’t quite like the dark elves either: their very being had been formulated by the dragon.

“Heh. Ha ha ha!” The pastor laughed loudly without a care for the stunned elves. “This is it! This is what I’ve been looking for! No doubt the mechanism was necessary for his experiments! Wonderful! Simply wonderful!”

“Mechanism?” Magiluka asked.

“Oh dear, my excitement made me have a slip of the tongue. Heh heh... You really are quite perceptive. I truly can’t let my guard down around you people.”

The pastor soon regained his composure and repented for his carelessness. *He’s wary of Magiluka’s group—no, more specifically, he’s cautious of Magiluka*, Sita thought.

“But no matter,” the pastor said. “I’ve called in reinforcements from our nation and hastened the plan. Now’s as good a time as any to make my move.” His lips curled into a faint smile that Sita had never seen him make before, and a shiver ran down her spine.

“What...are you on about?” she asked.

“Heh heh heh.” The pastor chuckled as he took something out of his pocket. “Why don’t I give you a word of advice? I hope it’ll be useful in the future...that is, if there *is* a future for you. Just because someone is friendly and cooperates with you, it doesn’t mean they’re on your side.”

When the pastor brought the item to his face, Sita drew in a sharp breath. She knew this visage all too well—none other than the masked man, the one who was behind this entire fuss, had appeared before her.

“I-It can’t be...” she murmured.

“Oh, and by the way, that piece of advice isn’t about just me. Heh heh heh,” Thomas said with a smirk.

Sita couldn’t possibly process all of this at once. Her mind was a muddled mess—she wasn’t able to organize her thoughts at all.

While Sita was stuck trying to grasp the situation, Rachel was the first to move. She unsheathed her blade and jumped toward Thomas...but several daggers emerged from the darkness flying straight for her. She dodged them all, but they kept her from pressing on. Immediately after, two men in black jumped out and held her to the ground.

It’d all happened in an instant—they were clearly used to combat. At a glance, the men greatly resembled Regresh members, but on closer inspection, their attire was a bit different, and they seemed more coordinated.

“The Annihilation Corps...” Magiluka whispered.

Only then did Sita understand who was behind this incident—the armed forces of the Einholst Papacy.

7. The Situation Turns Worse

“I suppose we’ve veered off topic. Let’s return to the subject at hand, shall we?” Thomas said.

He gazed down at Rachel and tucked his mask away, finding no further need for it. Unable to act with Rachel taken as hostage, Sita and her group were surrounded by the corps.

“Now that you know what happened in the past, I suppose you can imagine what occurred after,” Thomas said, sounding regretful.

Sita knew that if Orthoaguina were still alive, she wouldn’t have been able to live in Kairomea so leisurely.

“Sadly, they flew the flag of revolt against the superior being,” Thomas said, glancing at one of the murals.

It depicted the elves taking up arms as the dragon was chased inside of the tower. Sita was bothered by the lone elf who stood between the dragon and the rest of the elves. Said elf had a key hanging in front of their chest.

“So you’ve noticed, Sita,” Thomas said excitedly, sensing Sita’s gaze. “That’s right. The ones who sealed Orthoaguina were your family, who had been put in charge of the tower.”

“My ancestors sealed him?” Sita asked.

“To be precise, while your ancestors performed the sealing, they’d been *ordered* to do so by the ancient Kairomeans. Your ilk don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“Huh?”

“Think about it. You’re currently trying to undo the seal, but are you doing so out of your own volition?”

“W-Well...”

“You’re just part of a mechanism. A terminal, so to speak.”

“I am?”

Sita fell silent. As Thomas had said, she had no idea what she was doing. She’d lacked awareness—she’d simply searched for the secret of Orthoaguina because she’d wanted to look into it. That was all. She’d never had an actual choice throughout this situation, and her own will had been disregarded as the situation had continued to escalate...

“So, the question is, who *is* making you do all this?” Thomas inquired with a smile as Sita looked visibly confused. He glanced toward the restrained woman who was frantically struggling to free herself from the clutches of the men.

“Why don’t you answer that question for her, Rachel?” Thomas said with a knowing smile. “You would know, as the woman behind the mask. Heh heh heh.”

Rachel froze in place as blood drained from her face.

“What? S-Sis?” Sita asked in shock. She had an inkling when the masked woman had offered a few pieces of advice, but part of her had denied this

possibility.

Thinking back, Sita realized Rachel had persistently encouraged opening the archive that led to the discovery of the Book of Orthoaguina. She had also been the first to make preparations to decipher the book. Was she perhaps not looking to decode the text, but to undo the seal?

Sita couldn't deny it—Rachel, the person who'd led her here and handed her the book, was the masked woman of Regresh. The person who'd started this all was clearly her very own sister...but Sita was unable to accept this answer. Doing so would mean that Rachel had used and manipulated her.

Out of everything she'd learned today, this was the most painful pill to swallow. Her heart tightened out of shock, and her emotions were a complete mess. Sita realized that she was unable to immediately refute the claims made against her sister, and she shook her head as she tried to suppress the hard feelings in her mind. Of course, in her grief, Sita completely lost sight of the fact that Rachel had always been more concerned for her safety and well-being than anyone else...

Rachel struggled on the ground. "N-No, I—"

Thomas kicked her in the stomach, silencing her.

"Gh..."

"Rachel!" Magiluka cried, stepping forward. Sita was still too stunned to react.

"Whoa there! Don't you dare act rashly, you dogs of the prince," Thomas warned Magiluka and Sacher as the men in black around them raised their weapons. He gleefully stepped on top of Rachel's head, and she hacked and wheezed in pain.

"Ugh... I just...wanted to relieve her...from her duties..." Rachel eked out through gritted teeth.

Her voice was so faint that Sita couldn't hear a thing. Thomas and Rachel were clearly not allies, but Sita was so confused that she couldn't even understand that. Her brain had completely stopped working.

"Pastor Thomas, just what is your goal?" Magiluka asked. "I can't possibly

imagine that you're cooperating with Regresh."

"Heh heh. How rude. I *am* cooperating with them, you see," Thomas said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm also trying to reclaim the old glory days of Kairomea, back when they were under the rule of Orthoaguina."

"No one's wishing for that!" Sacher roared angrily.

"Pastor, you speak as though you knew about the secret of Orthoaguina," Magiluka pointed out.

"Ha ha ha! Precisely!" Thomas replied happily. "Really, I expected no less from you. Indeed, I was right to keep you here for our plans!"

Magiluka couldn't help but become more suspicious over how triumphant the pastor sounded. She was at a loss for words.

"Heh heh heh. That's right—we knew from the start," Thomas divulged. "It's all thanks to the notes left behind by Sita's father."

"M-My father?" Sita asked.

"That's right. He's nothing more than a manager for the dragon, yet he was so stubborn. Good grief—if he had obediently listened to our requests, he could've avoided that 'accident' with his wife."

Thomas took out a small, old notebook. Its surface was smeared with blood, although it had long since dried. It wasn't difficult to put two and two together. *My parents didn't pass away due to an unfortunate accident. They...*

The moment the tragic thought crossed Sita's mind, the muddled emotions swirling within her condensed into pure rage. "Aaahhh!"

Before she knew it, she was rushing toward Thomas with her sword drawn. At the same time, Rachel was trying to stand up as she angrily bellowed the pastor's name. Even Rachel hadn't known that Sita's parents had fallen victim to Thomas and the Annihilation Corps.

However, Sita's furious impulse worked to her disadvantage. Thomas had predicted her reaction, and he violently grabbed Rachel to interpose her between him and Sita.

"Ah..." Sita said.

The moment Sita locked eyes with her captured sister, the anger faded from her features, and she instead hesitated and froze in place. Moments ago, she'd learned Rachel had apparently betrayed her, but the memories and trust that the two shared wouldn't waver. In the end, Sita was unable to hate Rachel.

Thomas didn't let his chance slip by. He quickly restrained Sita while she was hesitating, and Magiluka knew that the situation had taken a turn for the worse.

"Now then," Thomas said with satisfaction. "We've unsealed the book and dispelled the lower seal. We've got the key. All that's left is the upper seal."

Despite Sita's struggling, she couldn't break free of Thomas's subordinates, and he had them take her away. He gazed down at Rachel, who he was still having held to the ground.

"Heh heh... That face..." Thomas said. "You're thinking that if we take Sita outside, the clan chief will take notice and free her, aren't you? Goodness, you're horribly naive."

Rachel gritted her teeth in frustration—Thomas had practically read her mind.

"I told you, didn't I?" Thomas continued. "We hastened our plan. As we speak, I imagine a massive horde of the chimeras we secretly planted and coordinated to hatch simultaneously are attacking the town. The residents will get slaughtered amid their confusion."

"What?!" Rachel gasped.

"Because of *that* woman, the womb and device were destroyed, so we couldn't make as many as we liked, but we've more than enough to proceed with our plan. Heh heh. I'm guessing pandemonium has broken out by now. It'll be a sight to behold." Thomas gazed at Rachel's pained face of despair with glee.

"Oh, I wonder about that," Magiluka said in an unusually provoking manner. Even Sita looked at her in surprise. "And do you know where *that* woman currently is?"

Thomas quickly looked around. *He must think that Mary is hiding somewhere and waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike*, Sita thought. However, she couldn't be more wrong. Before Sita had awoken from her last ordeal, Mary had

already been on the move, acting by herself with the eggs in mind. *Did she perhaps know that this would happen and work to prevent it?*

“Lady Mary isn’t here,” Magiluka said confidently.

“Y-You mean...” Thomas stammered.

“I do. Oh, and one more thing. I’m currently connected with His Highness via communication magic. It’s all according to Lady Mary’s plan.”



Mary hadn't expected this exact situation, of course—she'd decided to take care of the eggs while running from making excuses as to why she screwed up. Magiluka had actually been the one to suggest connecting with the prince using communication magic, but thinking that this wasn't the time to worry about taking credit, she decided to make it all a part of Mary's plans.

No one but Magiluka knew the truth, and when she gave a triumphant smirk, the sound of a man shouting in the distance reached her ears. An armored man jogged over with loud footsteps, and one of the people in black swiftly approached Thomas to whisper in his ear. Sita, who was nearby, heard the news and felt the back of her eyes sting as her chest grew warm.

Mysteriously, a silver-haired girl riding atop a divine beast had drawn the attention of over half the chimeras, greatly decreasing the confusion that would've washed over the town. Furthermore, the clan chief and Prince Reifus were commanding the town guards and were converging on this location.

"The...Argent Holy Woman," Sita murmured, the words tumbling out of her mouth as she imagined the sight of Mary fighting on the divine beast.

8. She Had No Idea

So, where had I been since Sita passed out at the bookrest?

Well, I had inadvertently used my powers when the Book of Orthoaguina had gone berserk. Worst case, I could've broken something. If someone had cornered me and asked why I hadn't been repelled by the barrier while Rachel was, I wouldn't have been able to find a convincing answer, and I didn't want to be questioned about it, so...when Shelly called for me to leave with her, though I was a bit reluctant, I took it as a stroke of good luck that I'd been given the perfect excuse to make my exit.

"But why did this happen?!" I shouted.

"Wh-What's wrong?" the spirit asked, surprised by my sudden outburst.

I was currently walking around the town with the clan chief, Shelly, and the guards of the town in tow. Why was I in such an imposing situation, you ask? A few minutes ago, the clan chief, Shelly, and I were talking about the chimeras (I

wasn't really involved in the conversation and was just listening while nodding along), and when they moved on to the topic about chimeras appearing throughout the town, I was reminded of how badly I'd failed during the magic mirror incident at the academy. It was about time I exacted my revenge.

First, I had them prepare a map of the town with dots symbolizing where the chimeras had spawned. When I connected all the dots...they didn't form a shape. Like, nothing. I'd made them go through all that effort in hopes of finding something, but I now felt awkward. *Crap, now what?* I kept a smile plastered on my face and hoped to power through it as the clan chief crossed his arms and groaned.

"Hmm... Now that we've plotted all the points, it looks like they're all avoiding the routes that the guards use to patrol the town," he said. "What's more, the spawning locations are scattered equally throughout the city, and no monster emerges from the same area twice. Is this a coincidence?"

"Now that we know Regresh is involved in this, you want to imply that there must be some sort of meaning behind the locations of these monsters, right, Mary?" Shelly asked.

I totally wasn't thinking anything of the sort, so I could only look at the two of them in awe... Still, being the sheepish fool that I was, I couldn't just admit "No, not at all" either. I laughed and played it off. I could easily imagine what Tutte, who was behind me, was thinking, but I didn't have the courage to turn around and confirm it with my own eyes.

"I see!" the clan chief said. "Because the beasts came from a different place every time, we misunderstood their appearances as natural occurrences, which led our research astray. I would've never guessed that their eggs could be carried around and that they'd grow at a rapid pace. You must mean to say we would do well to reinvestigate!"

Uh, no. Dude, I wasn't thinking that at all. While I was internally denying his claims, he called for his subordinate and explained a few things, then the subordinate swiftly walked away. I guessed that they were sent to summon more people.

"And? What next?" the chief asked.

I had no idea what he was expecting, but he gazed at me hopefully. He was clearly making a huge misunderstanding about who I was. I could only tilt my head to one side, perplexed as to what he wanted.

“Clan chief, even Mary won’t be able to fully grasp the current situation without seeing it for herself,” Shelly advised. “Also, surely you must find it problematic to rely so heavily on someone from another nation.”

“You’re one to talk,” the chief retorted.

“Oh, but I’m her *friend*, so I get a special pass! ♪”

“Gh... But you’re right. I’m sorry, Lady Mary. I heard about you from my daughters, and I couldn’t help myself...”

“Help yourself”? I sorta wanna hear how your two daughters regard me, but I would probably regret hearing anything at all. I’ll just let it slide. I was unable to offer any more input, as the conversation ended with me trying to smile my way through the pain.

In line with Shelly’s suggestion, we decided to check the spawning sites for ourselves. Some important officials, experts, and heavily equipped guards followed us as we made our way through the town.

Needless to say, I didn’t want to stand out, so the spirit and I wore the hooded robes we’d become so accustomed to as we quietly tagged along. Naturally, I had no way of knowing that *certain* folks had no idea I was here because of the way I was trying so hard to sneak around.

“All right, here we are,” the chief said. “I want the rest of you to investigate the points on the map. We don’t know what’ll happen, so be careful.”

Everyone dispersed, leaving behind only a few armored guards.

“Why don’t we just take a quick look at the scene, claim that I don’t have a clue what’s going on since that’ll probably be true anyway, then return to the inn?” I whispered to Tutte. “Sita just woke up, after all.”

On our way here, we’d bumped into the prince and Snow, who’d been waiting outside of the inn. I was told that Sita had awoken and that everyone was headed for the underground cemetery. The clan chief had looked visibly

relieved and a touch worried, but he'd soon reverted to his chief-like demeanor. He couldn't act so weak in front of his subordinates.

I'd been a bit worried about what my friends were up to, but I'd guessed that it wouldn't be too late for me to join them after I finished business with the clan chief, so I'd continued to tag along with him.

"Do you think things will go that smoothly?" Tutte replied. "This is *you* we're talking about, my lady."

Oof, what an ominous thing to say! I thought to myself. However...

"Yeah, yeah, I know!" I replied.

...I was sadly unable to definitively refute her. *I'll regret it if I back down here though!*

"Men, I've located the maid who keeps jinxing me!" I said, dishing out a vicious tickling punishment.

"Ack! M-My lady! Stop! That tickles... Ah ha ha!" Tutte started to giggle.

Unfortunately, I had to end it all too soon when the chief called me over. I stepped away from Tutte and headed over to him with a smile. He seemed a bit taken aback, but I decided to ignore that for the time being.

"F-For now, I've been told that a chimera suddenly appeared here and wreaked havoc on this neighborhood," the chief explained. "They managed to slay the creature, but if your story is to be believed, the egg must've been planted in the vicinity. Why do you think that is?"

I decided to follow my initial plan of glancing around to think for a moment before confessing that I didn't have a clue—and it wasn't totally a lie, as I truly was perplexed. However, once I gazed around, I noticed there was an alleyway lined with residential houses, and it seemed to lack much foot traffic. It was probably difficult to sneak in and cause commotion without getting caught here. That said, since we knew how the monster had appeared, the more important consideration was why the chimera had been set loose in this place in particular.

"Was it an experiment?" I wondered. "But for what purpose? I don't think

they'd be investigating hatching conditions or anything like that. Maybe it's something after it hatches... Yeah, I don't know—"

"Ah, I see what you're getting at, Mary," Shelly said, hitting her fist over her palm.

Hey, excuse me, you butting in wasn't part of my escape plan.

"It's likely their hatching experiments already ended, and they must've collected quite a few eggs from the womb already," Shelly said. "If so, they decided to plant one here to check just how much damage the monster could do if it was released in this neighborhood, and also the means by which the citizens would slay it. Am I right, Mary?"

"Huh? S-Sure?" I said with a nod.

I didn't quite understand the hypothesis Shelly had so confidently described, and I nodded without thinking.

"When I was looking at the map, I *did* think that they'd targeted densely populated places, but could their motives have been to attack the town?" the clan chief said. "That can't be... Regresh is aiming to revert the town back to ancient times, not destroy it or cause confusion."

"Mary stated it earlier, didn't she?" Shelly replied. "The Regresh aren't currently united, and the ones in black are acting out. The rebels are aligned with their leader, to boot..."

"S-So you're saying the eggs were all brought in from outside? W-Were you thinking that far ahead?"

Although the chief was looking at me with awe, I wasn't able to keep up with the conversation, so I just vaguely mumbled, "Uh, well..."

What am I supposed to say that'll clear up any misunderstandings and get me out of here? Quite honestly, I wasn't sure I'd made a single good decision this entire time, so the only thing I felt I could do was remain quiet.

Troubled as I was, I glanced over at Tutte for help. She was currently letting the spirit roam freely so that I could change topics if needed.

"A-Ack! The spirit's wandering around again!" I said.

I immediately took Tutte's helping hand and quickly ended the conversation by walking over to the spirit. I heaved a sigh of relief over no longer having to think about what I'd say to Shelly and the chief.

After I approached her, the noseless spirit started sniffing around and said, "It smells. It definitely smells."

Now you're making me anxious? What am I supposed to do now? I wanna leave you alone too now!

"Wh-What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well, I'm sniffing around, and I smell it. The egg. Its stench is faintly wafting in the air. I wonder where it is."

She was likely "smelling" magical energy, but she sounded so natural calling it a smell that I unthinkingly began sniffing right along with her. There was no chance that I would've caught the scent she was noticing, but I nonetheless followed close behind her.

"My lady, you're being rather uncouth," Tutte advised.

I finally snapped back to my senses and realized what I'd been doing. Feeling embarrassed, I glanced to the side, only to lock eyes with Shelly and the chief, who looked like they'd been watching someone humiliate themselves. My face turned bright red, and I chased after the spirit as though I could run away from what'd just happened.

In my shame, I was too embarrassed to notice I was walking fast enough that I'd overtaken the spirit. The only saving grace was that I was wearing a hood which hid my expressions. When I turned a corner and headed deeper into the city by myself, an odd sensation gripped my body. *Huh? This feels like I just forcibly broke through a barrier or something.*

I stopped in place and looked around, but it was too late. Whatever I did had been done, so I had no point of comparison—I only saw a normal alleyway. The only other thing I noticed was a stone staircase that led below. *I hope this isn't what I think it is...*

I had a bad feeling in my heart as the chief caught up with me and gazed at the surroundings in befuddlement.

“If memory serves, this staircase leads to the underground waterways,” he said. “It’s not used anymore.”

“My lady?” Tutte asked as she saw me freeze.

“I-It’s not what it looks like,” I hastily stammered. “Well, it probably is, but I didn’t do it on purpose, I swear!” I didn’t have any proof, but my first instinct was to make excuses.

“What did you do this time?” Tutte looked at me with exasperation.

“N-N-Nothing! I-I swear! It’s just...this place felt a bit weird.”

“Weird, huh?” the clan chief said.

He stopped once before slowly and cautiously descending the flight of stairs. The dark, damp staircase was eerily quiet, and the chief used his light magic to illuminate his surroundings as he proceeded deeper inside. I could’ve waited for him to return, but I wanted to escape Tutte’s nagging, so I chased after him.

All too late, I started getting worried—not about my safety, but about the fact that I was likely sticking my nose into something I’d regret.

“The stench is getting stronger. We’re close,” the spirit said, blowing my fears out of the water with confirmation they were terrifying reality.

“Wh-What *is* this?” the clan chief gasped. He’d been taking the lead, and I was also at a loss for words when I laid my eyes on the discovery.

An entire army of eggs was dotting the floor—a vast amount, too numerous to count. It didn’t take a genius to know that these were chimera eggs at a glance.

As everyone was stunned by the scene, I happened to notice a faint voice behind me.

“Impossible... The barrier...”

A black silhouette wavered in the darkness—I only noticed it because the person was aiming for my maid.

“Tutte!” I cried, rushing forward and landing a kick on the assailant.

I heard a muffled grunt as the entity slammed against a wall. I knew I was up

against a human, and they'd likely selected Tutte as the target because she seemed easiest to kill or take as a hostage. Needless to say, they didn't realize that would touch a nerve of mine. I've said it once, and I'll keep saying it again: when it comes to Tutte, I become narrow-minded, and I will absolutely not forgive *anyone* who dares to try endangering her.

The chief and his crew put their guards up and attacked the other assailants, who seemed shocked at my swift movements. The elves captured one of the men and brought him over.

"They're Regresh... No, they look different," the chief said, confused for a moment. "And they're humans... As you said, they're outsiders."

As he called out to me, I realized that I was very familiar with their appearance. "The Annihilation Corps...?"

"The Annihilation Corps?! From the Papacy?!" The chief could hardly believe his ears.

I removed my hood to take a better look at the captured man. "I-Impossible!" he cried, doubting my identity. "Silver hair? I thought you were with the chief librarian! W-Were you hiding yourself this entire time because you knew that we were wary of you?! Ugh... Then we were baited..."

It was true that I'd been wearing a hood outside, but the thought of keeping the corps in check or trying to fool them had never crossed my mind. Unfortunately, since those surrounding me didn't see it that way, I could only stare back at him in silence. I had no idea what I was supposed to do now. *I'm the one who wants to be shocked, you know! How the hell are you the one who gets to be surprised?!*

"Hmph. So your plans were to hatch these eggs around town and cause chaos," the chief said. "That's why you carefully selected your locations. If she didn't guide us here, I imagine that your plans would've reached fruition. Too bad for you."

"Heh. If *you're* here, that means the other team is progressing smoothly," the restrained man sneered and chuckled. "I see. So you determined which chimera would cause more destruction and came here. However, it's too bad for *you*. The grand being will be resurrected soon—we're a step closer to walking down

the path of our dreams!”

“What are you talking about?” The clan chief couldn’t understand why this man sounded so excited. But before there was any reply, an explosion sounded in the distance.

“Wh-What was that?!” the chief gasped.

“Heh heh. Did you really think that all the eggs would be here?” the man replied. “You’re all so naive. With the womb now destroyed, we *did* have to use up our entire supply though.”

As the man laughed, the clan chief jolted in realization. He left our current location to his subordinates and ran out aboveground. We followed close behind and saw smoke billowing throughout the town.

“Damn it!” the chief cursed. “Were they placing that many eggs all over this town?! Just how many did they have?”

He was trying to process the information, and I guessed that he was right. There weren’t many eggs in the womb, so I’d assumed that it simply didn’t lay very many, but actually, they’d simply all been carried out. If the womb hadn’t been destroyed, there would’ve been many more eggs.

“Luckily, we had our soldiers head to each location thanks to your advice, Mary,” the chief said, trying to maintain his composure. “But perhaps they’re not enough to hold off this many monsters.”

I didn’t know what to say. As I surveyed my surroundings, I noticed a snow leopard cub charging toward us.

“Huh? Lily?” I said in surprise.

“Ah, *found you! Heya, Mary!*” A snow leopard emerged from behind the cub, and she was carrying the prince on her back. The prince then told us about Sita, the identity of Pastor Thomas, Orthoaguina, and Kairomea’s past.

9. Is This the Return of a Nightmare?

“Pastor Thomas? It can’t be...” the clan chief said, unable to believe his ears at the prince’s story. He turned back toward the destruction in town and shook his

head, trying to switch gears. “I’d love to head over to Sita and provide my assistance as soon as possible, but we must do something about the monsters in this town first, or else we’ll be wiped out.”

“Because the chimeras can mature at an absurdly fast pace, they also weaken as time progresses,” the prince explained. “They’ll ultimately grow old and wither away, but if we just try to wait it out, there’ll be way too many casualties.”

“Damn... If only we could gather all the monsters all into a single area. Then we might have a chance...”

Honestly, I didn’t have a plan to instantly eradicate the numerous chimeras dispersed throughout the town either. As the chief had suggested, I would’ve been able to use my magic to exterminate them all at once if they could’ve been gathered into one spot, but the Annihilation Corps had likely spread the monsters out as a countermeasure.

“You need them to bunch up, huh? Well, maybe it’s possible,” the spirit said, walking in the middle of our huddle. She puffed out her chest proudly. “But I’d need your power for that, Mary.”

“Huh? Mine?” I asked, pointing to myself. I hadn’t expected to be requested by name here.

“Yup. Judging from what I’ve heard before, I think you’d be the best one for the role. Besides, only you possess the power to wipe them all out in one—”

“Whoaaa there! Come on, little lady. Why don’t we talk over there?” I had to hastily cut her off—I hadn’t expected her to spill the beans on my powers while I was curiously listening to her explanation. I scooped her up and walked away.

“Wh-What’s with you?!” the spirit demanded. “I was in the middle of talking!”

“You were about to say that only I was able to wipe out all the monsters in one blow or something, weren’t you?”

“Huh? You can’t?”

“Ugh... I-I probably can.”

“Then what’s the issue?”

“W-Well...” I shyly muttered, tapping the tips of my index fingers together.

While the rest of the group wondered why I’d completely stopped the conversation, the prince called out to us to get things moving again.

“Um, Great Spirit, time is of the essence right now. Would you please tell us the details of your plan?”

“Sure! Pop quiz: what am I?” the spirit asked.

“What? You’re a spirit tree, no?” I asked.

“Bzzzt! What am I *currently*?”

I had no idea what she was on about.

“My lady, she’s currently manipulating a subspecies of a mandrake, I believe,” Tutte advised.

I realized that I’d completely suppressed that detail. As I gently tapped my fist over my palm, awful memories started to flood my mind.

“Hold it,” I said. “The only thing that comes to mind is a certain tragic incident when it comes to subspecies of you-know-what. Is that what you’re referring to? Does it relate to that at all?”

“That’s right!” the spirit replied. “I heard that you used this plant’s abilities to attract people in a place called the academy. You captivated them, didn’t you?”

“Urgh...” I may have been invincible, yet my chest stung as she dug up my memories of my dark past.

“Huh? So the Great Spirit will put a charm on Lady Mary again to lure the chimeras to her?” the prince asked in surprise.

“Precisely!” the spirit replied proudly.

“Like *hell* I can do that!” I roared. I knew full well that this wasn’t ladylike at all, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk. Don’t you worry—I’m the great spirit tree, the one who causes anyone to freeze in terror! You’d do well not to underestimate me,” the spirit said calmly, likely expecting our shocked response. “Charm can manifest through a wide variety of enticements. I’ll channel everything I have into

charming them in a way you won't find objectionable."

"Really? How do you plan to do that?"

"It's simple! I'll make you look like the most delicious feast they've ever seen!"

"Say what?"

The spirit seemed proud of her idea, but I had to come clean and admit I was too dumb to get it. As the prince would proceed to explain to me, charming an opponent didn't have to involve one's beauty or cuteness—actions and words held just as much capability to bewitch others. The prince surmised the spirit would appeal to the monsters' sense of hunger in particular.

"No, no, no," I said at Reifus's explanation, shaking my hand. "Impossible. No way, no how. There's no chance that things would be so convenient."

"How rude!" the spirit insisted. "Don't look down on me! Plants are literally my *only* area of expertise, and nothing is impossible with them if I'm around! Look, those monsters already see you guys as food, so I'll simply be enhancing that feeling. I suppose it *is* true that it won't be limited to monsters though—if there are any people nearby who think humans are delicious, they'll also get dragged into this mess."

Okay, if there was anyone like that, it'd be terrifying. The spirit was being so stubborn about this that I feared I might have hurt her pride. *If any people really do show up, I'd totally be at a loss for what to do.*

"E-Even if that *were* possible, does that mean that Lady Mary will be chased by a horde of monsters?" the prince asked.

"Yep. We just need her to climb on top of the divine beast and have them run around town," the spirit replied. "Once the monsters are gathered in one area, we just need to kill them all in one fell swoop. I'm sure Mary can—"

"Aaahhh! Hello! It's me!" I interjected. "O-Once we trap them in one area, we just need to bide our time until they grow old, I think! I-I-I wonder if there's a convenient place to do that."

"We'll need a deserted area," the clan chief said, joining our lively exchange

of information. “Beyond the west gates, there’s a stone bridge that leads to a small island. We use that place for festivities and rituals, but no one’s there now. It’d be a perfect location.”

I was thinking I didn’t want this discussion to wrap up as it stood, when suddenly...

“Still, I don’t want Lady Mary to endanger herself with no one to support her. Could I join her in this role too?”

...the prince floated a crazy suggestion.

“I don’t think so,” the spirit replied. “This is an extraordinary case—you don’t have enough mana for this method to work for you. It’s only viable because Mary and I form a team.”

I should’ve been moved by just how much trust the spirit tree placed in me, but I was quietly nervous about her phrasing—I was too worried she might cause misunderstandings to be flattered about it. *Y-You didn’t have to say it like that, I think.* Sure enough, the clan chief began cheering in awe while glancing at me and the spirit.

“Now then, enough yammering!” the spirit said. “Leave this to Mary and me! You guys go save Sita! *That’s* what you guys should do right now!”

She sounds like she’s coolly guiding everyone, but underneath that hood is a small plant. I feel like that kinda takes away from the “wow” factor...

In any case, everyone followed her orders and jumped into action. *I guess it doesn’t matter what form she’s in or how small she appears. To the elves, she’s a holy spirit tree.*

“I’m sorry, Lady Mary,” the prince said apologetically. “We’ve once again pressured you into taking on a dangerous task.”

“Please don’t worry too much about it. Just tell yourself this is how fate would have it,” I said, half jokingly. I may have been prone to screwing up again and again, but I didn’t want him to worry. “Prince Reifus, I leave Magiluka and the others in your capable hands.”

“The fate of an Argent Holy Woman, huh,” the clan chief muttered from a

distance.

I imagined that, right? Must've been the wind, right? After I walked away from everyone's sight, I called for Snow. Meanwhile, I had Tutte remove my hooded robe.

"Um, so after this is all over, how do I make the effect fade away?" I asked the spirit.

"Naturally, you'll brew a tea out of me and drink it," the spirit replied.

"B-But you'd die if I did that! You don't have to go that far for everyone..."

"What? This is just a temporary body, remember? I'm actually a large tree. Did you forget who I truly am?"

I really had for a second. "Ah, you're right. I've been with this temporary you for longer, so I tend to forget."

"Well, you did allow me to have all sorts of fun experiences. I'd been looking for a way to thank you. So, Mary..."

"Wh-Why are you acting so stiff now?"

"Hee hee. Once this is all over, please find me delicious! ♪"

"Stop saying things like that! You'd only traumatize me further!"

The spirit was only being sincere, but her mischievous streak had still gotten the better of her.

As I tried my best to not think about consuming her, she smiled, completely shattering my resolve and dispelling the heavy atmosphere.

"Ugh... I'm soaked..." I grumbled a few minutes later. My entire body was covered in sweat, and I wiggled my arms and legs to shake off the droplets. The mandrake subspecies had caused me to sweat buckets.

"Hey..." Snow said, inching away from me like she was looking at something dirty. *"You're not gonna ride my back like that, are you? At least dry yourself first."*

"Sorry, but I'm dragging you down with me!"

“Aaagh!”

After climbing on her back, I smiled brightly at Tutte, who was holding Lily in her arms. “Come on, Tutte,” I said, offering my hand. “I’ll drag you down to hell with me! ♪” I was all too willing to subject even more people to this torture.



Snow, Lily, and Tutte didn't manifest the same effects as me, so they weren't technically in the same state that I was, but I still wanted to share this sticky soaked— Ahem, I mean, I couldn't leave them behind. If they were by my side, I could maintain my composure, even if I was riding toward hell.

I wasn't sure if Tutte could read my thoughts, but she grabbed my hand without hesitation and sat behind me. Lily didn't seem to understand the situation and was playfully slapping my dripping body.

"Nice! Caught a few already! ♪" the spirit said happily. She pointed toward a few chimeras that were charging toward us as she clambered on top of Snow's back.

Seriously?! They're actually coming?! Which means that I look like a delicious piece of meat to them, right? Ugh, I don't know how to feel about this...

"Let's go, Snow! Keep a low altitude and fly around the town!" I said.

"All right, all right! Fine! You want me to fly, do you?! Wish granted!" Snow answered wearily, turning a bit defiant.

The chimeras didn't even cast a passing glance at the people near us as they headed straight for me.

"It's as though the monsters can't take their eyes off them," the clan chief said in awe. "Is this the miraculous power of the spirit tree and the Holy Woman?"

He didn't seem aware of how this was working, and he appeared to be under a certain major misapprehension. Of course, I was so busy running around that I never could've guessed his tragic misunderstanding would spread throughout the town.

10. Flight and Fight

"What?! What's going on?!" Thomas said with confusion. Sita was in restraints beside him. Now that the Annihilation Corps had captured Sita and Rachel, they were escorting the girls through the labyrinthine underground cemetery to make their way aboveground.

In the distance, Sita and Rachel heard the sounds of Magiluka and her friends fighting against the corps. It'd only be a matter of time before they met up with the clan chief's group and closed in on Thomas and his squad—the girls knew this and wanted to make the Annihilation Corps's escape as difficult as possible. However, the collars that had been placed around their necks made it difficult for them to use their magic. Every time they tried to cast their magic, it was a painstakingly slow process, and their captors would use violence to cancel their spells' activations.

Unbeknownst to Sita, she and Rachel had been fitted with binding shackles, technology that had been stolen from the Relirex Kingdom. Of course, Mary had prevented the Papacy from stealing Girtz's original design, and they lacked skilled smiths like him and Fifi, so these binding shackles were only cheap copies...but they were more than enough to restrain the two elves. The Annihilation Corps also had a few more to spare.

Thomas and his men likely didn't want to rely on such shoddy products, but their backs had been against the wall, and they'd wanted to prevent Sita and Rachel from making any sort of resistance. They didn't have a moment to spare.

Being driven this far into a corner had left Thomas, careful planner that he was, with a face contorted by panic and shock. Sita looked up at his expression satisfied—he'd gotten what he'd deserved.

"Damn it! Shit! / have to flee?!" Thomas mumbled. "My plan was perfect. It took a bit of pushing, but we managed to make it this far. The chimeras that were supposed to wreak havoc on the town have gathered in one place?! At this rate, once the dragon's unsealed, the Papacy's army won't be able to invade this town under the guise of helping the residents!"

It was clear that he wasn't thinking straight—Sita could hardly believe her ears learning this information. *Not only does he want to use this commotion to undo the seal, but he even has a plan after that? This entire thing was carefully orchestrated!* Sita thought.

"The chimeras are following a silver-haired lady riding on a divine beast?" Thomas continued wailing. "I thought that the blonde girl was controlling that beast! C-Could it be? Were they trying to fool us? Had they planned all this far

before they'd made it here?"

Thomas remembered meeting Magiluka at the spirit tree's domain—before Mary's group had reached Kairomea—and couldn't hide his shock. Had the silver-haired girl been planning this all along to evade the vigilance of the Annihilation Corps? (For her part, Mary had likely never imagined that her impulsive attempt to hide her identity would affect Thomas and his group so much.)

"Impossible! Impossible!" Thomas shouted. "*We're* the voices of God! *We're* the messengers of our lord! *We're* the chosen ones! My plan cannot fail!"

"You'd better keep your ego in check!" Sita yelled back. "*You're* not the ones favored by God. *She* is!"

"Silence!"

Sita knew it wouldn't amount to much, but she couldn't help but mock him. Thomas was the one who'd brought chaos to this town and killed her parents—she wanted to deliver a cutting remark or two.

Thomas, enraged by Sita's taunting, slapped her across her cheek.

"Thomas, you bastard!" Rachel roared furiously. She tried to pounce on him, but the collar restricted her movements. She was quickly surrounded and beaten by the men around her. "Ugh!"

It was no secret that Thomas was infuriated by Sita's claims. He slapped her once more with all his might, and her cheek turned red as blood dripped from the cut on her lips. However, she didn't shrink with fear at this. Rather, she glared at Thomas with murderous intent. She wasn't just angry at him—she hated the Annihilation Corps and the Papacy that backed them.

Thomas wasn't one to cower at the glare of a little girl, however. Still livid, he grabbed Sita's hair and jerked her head back while continuing to scowl at her.

"Hmph! You're nothing more than a tool, yet you keep running your mouth!" he snarled. "As long as we've got you—as long as we can take *you* to the sealing site—how we got there won't matter at all!"

Sita remembered that she didn't have control of her body during the ritual.

She again struggled to shake free from Thomas's grasp, but to her frustration, she currently didn't have enough power to do so.

"Over my dead body!" a voice roared.

As Thomas and Sita were glaring at each other, Rachel had managed to jump in between the two. She'd gotten rid of all the men holding her back and charged at Thomas. Upon closer inspection, one could see that her collar was broken. The item was nothing more than a cheap imitation—Sita wasn't sure if the collar couldn't contain Rachel's power, or whether it perhaps had a time limit, but in any case, now nothing was holding her older sister back.

Rachel still didn't have full control of her body. She wanted to use her magic, but with Sita nearby, she knew that wasn't an option. The only thing she could do was buy as much time as possible and create an opening for Sita to escape—with that in mind, she tackled Thomas.

He had expected Rachel to be restrained for a bit longer. Caught completely off guard, he bore the full brunt of Rachel's body, causing him to lose his balance and release Sita from his grip. Sita wasn't about to let this opportunity slip by—she forced her powerless body to move and ran away.

Suddenly, she heard a muffled cry behind her. She turned around and saw Rachel fall to the ground with a deep gash running down her back. For a split second, Sita locked eyes with Rachel, who was contorting her face in agonizing pain. Rachel's eyes weren't searching for help, however—no, Rachel was pleading with Sita to leave her behind and run.

Sita slowed down. She realized why Rachel had been brought along—it was to ensure she wouldn't flee. The best-case scenario was for both of them to escape, but given the current situation, could Sita abandon her sister and escape by herself?

She couldn't reach her decision quickly. It was true that Rachel seemed to have utilized her, but she could hardly act so coldly toward her sister.

"Run, Sita!" Rachel shouted. The way she said it reminded Sita of when Rachel would scold her—Sita instinctively jolted and froze for a moment before she squeezed her eyes shut and ran in the opposite direction like a child who'd just been punished. Luckily, she was moving much more nimbly after having made

up her mind, but she felt like her legs were entangled—she couldn't run well.

“Damn it! Every single one of you dares to get in my damn way!” Thomas bellowed, absolutely irate.

Rachel's cries of pain echoed within the underground cemetery, and Sita wanted to cover her ears.

“You guys stay here and defeat the other elves headed this way!” Thomas shouted. “I'll chase after her!”

“Yessir! And what shall we do with this woman?” his subordinate asked.

“She's useless now. Kill her— No, wait. We can still use her here.”

As Sita heard those ominous words reverberate throughout the area, she slowed down and was tempted to return. She quickly shook her head at these thoughts and headed for an exit.

Moments after Sita fled from Thomas, Magiluka and her group caught up to him.

“Rachel!” Magiluka shouted.

The elf was lying motionless and face down on the ground, surrounded by Thomas's men. Thomas turned toward Magiluka's voice and smirked—he'd been waiting for this moment. He took out a certain chimera egg from his pocket...one with a different shape and size from the rest.

“This is still a prototype and riddled with issues, but I'll give you all a sneak peek for daring to make a fool out of me!” he gloated. He plopped the egg on top of Rachel's deep back wound. The egg—or lump of flesh, rather—started to bubble and bulge, quickly swallowing Rachel's back. The elf cried out.

“Rachel!” Magiluka shouted.

“J-J-Just leave me behind. Sita's past here...” Rachel managed to squeeze out. She'd regained consciousness from the pain and from Magiluka's crying out.

Rachel felt herself losing her mana and her senses at a rapid pace. She could no longer move her body well—it was being stolen from her. This was a

parasitic chimera. Unlike the conventional monsters that used their own mana to undergo a rapid growth spurt and run berserk, this type used the energy of its host.

The monster swelled and grew in an instant, swallowing Rachel within its stomach. As Magiluka froze in horror for a moment, unsure of what to do, the massive, three-meter-tall monster loomed over her.

The chimera stood on two legs to resemble a dragon, but it looked so deformed that it barely mirrored the beast. Magiluka had seen a similar misshapen dragon during her last encounter with the chimeras, and even she could only barely recognize what this chimera had tried to imitate.

“Heh, we simply used the system that the Liberal Materia uses—I didn’t think it’d be so effective,” Thomas laughed. “The dragon did well concocting you elven test subjects. You respond so splendidly to experimentation!”

Sacher noticed whom Thomas was talking to. He raised his weapons and shouted, “Look at its stomach! Rachel’s there!”

Everyone turned toward the chimera and saw that Rachel’s upper body was exposed on its stomach. All the while, black robes were stepping forward as though to assist the chimera in defeating Magiluka and her group. Magiluka also noticed Thomas silently watching the scene unfold, poising himself to leave and chase after Sita.

In terms of numbers, Magiluka and her group were at a clear disadvantage, not to mention they were up against a cryptic monster. The chimera was indifferent to such considerations, however, and it let out a mighty roar signaling that it would attack.

Magiluka, Sacher, and Safina braced themselves for the creature’s strike, but to their surprise, the chimera wasn’t going after them. Instead, it was using its sharp talons to shred its own allies to ribbons. In a flash, the black robes who’d tried to assist the monster had been torn asunder. The chimera had sliced through their armor like it were butter, showing the trio just how dangerous it could be.

“Hmm... As I thought, we can’t control it well. It doesn’t make a difference who’s sacrificed...” Thomas mumbled to himself calmly.

“You don’t care about allies, do you?” Magiluka spat.

Sacher swiftly stepped forward.

“Look out, Sacher!” Safina cried.

“Leave it to me!” he replied, raising his shield. “Safina, prepare yourself!”

Just then, the chimera roared and raised the massive arm that it had used to rip apart the people in black just moments ago. It swung down at Sacher, but he predicted its movements and used his shield to guard the attack, making it lose its balance.

Sacher was shocked by how sturdy his shield was. He’d seen how tough it was during the testing phase, so he’d intuited that he could safely guard the chimera’s blow—and sure enough, he had. He internally thanked Shelly for making the shield.

“Wind Blade Slash!” Safina shouted. Her blades of wind flew toward the chimera. She sliced off its arm, and blood gushed in the air.

“Aaahhh!” Rachel screamed along with the monster’s roar. Her upper body, which was embedded within the chimera’s stomach, writhed in pain.

“Are they connected?!” Magiluka shouted.

Even more shocking was the monster’s regeneration speed. Just like the faux dragon that Magiluka had fought before, the chimera’s arm was regenerating at an astonishing pace, while Rachel was growing paler by the minute.

“Heh heh,” Thomas chuckled. “She’ll run out of mana eventually, and then the chimera will disintegrate. Take as much time as you need to say your goodbyes. I’m a busy man, so I have to go on ahead, however—it’s a pity that I won’t be able to see how this one ends.”

After his gleeful declaration, he walked in the direction Sita had fled, showing off how relaxed he was. Magiluka’s group gritted their teeth as they could only watch him stroll off. As Thomas had said, this chimera would likely weaken as time wore on, but only after it absorbed Rachel’s mana and killed her in the process.

Magiluka wanted to end this battle in a flash, but attacking the monster

would cause Rachel terrible anguish. Worst case, killing the monster might take Rachel down with it.

“What do we do?” Sacher asked.

“We need to peel Rachel away from the monster, then deliver a fatal blow that won’t allow it to regenerate,” Magiluka replied, offering the best scenario. “We mustn’t dawdle. Let’s act quickly.”

“I see. That *does* seem to be the best solution,” Sacher agreed.

He didn’t press Magiluka for a method, likely because he knew she couldn’t provide one. Indeed, he was good at reading the room during times like these—Magiluka smiled bitterly when she realized the truth.

“All right,” Sacher said only a few minutes later. “I’ll pull Rachel away from that thing, so I’ll leave it to you guys to land the finishing blow.”

Magiluka and Safina turned toward him in surprise. Magiluka wasn’t sure if he had a plan in mind, but she knew why she and Safina had been tasked with landing the fatal blow. Usually, Safina and Mary would unleash their combination move here to destroy their foe—Sacher was telling Magiluka to fill Mary’s role.

Magiluka hadn’t used learning about Mary’s true powers as an excuse to give up on bettering herself—in fact, she’d worked harder than ever in hopes of one day catching up to her silver-haired friend. However, unlike Mary, she wasn’t capable of launching a barrage of five spells in a row. Currently, she could only manage two rapid casts...or, if she discarded all other considerations and decided to use up all her mana, knowing she would faint soon after doing so, she could manage three casts in a row. Her best paled in comparison to Mary’s five-spell strike, despite all her hard work.

While Magiluka was lost in thought considering her capabilities, the long silence worried Safina, who peered into her face. She was painfully aware of what Safina sought to know—she was simply hesitating to commit to an answer. “My limit is two— No, three spells,” Magiluka said at last.

She wasn’t trying to act tough. She was fully aware of what would happen to her if she needed to use three spells...but she decided she could entrust her

safety to the prince's efforts. She had the resolve to faint on the spot and risk her life.

Safina accepted Magiluka's determination and silently nodded. "Then I shouldn't focus on protecting myself, should I?" Safina said, tightening her grip on her blade.

"Safina?" Magiluka asked.

"I'll leave the timing to you. I promise I'll match your pace."

Magiluka felt her chest grow tight. *She used to be so timid, but now she's so reliable*, she thought. Once again, Magiluka's friends had proved to her there was no need for her to shoulder all the responsibility herself—she knew that, were she to falter, her dependable friends would surely be there to back her up. Just as she'd striven to be a person her friends could rely on, she knew they'd done the same for her, and she thanked God from the bottom of her heart for being so blessed.

"All right, then it's settled. Let's do this!" Sacher bellowed, glaring at his foe and leaping forward.



With that, the battle had begun. Mary may not have been around, yet her three friends wanted to become as strong as her and were aiming to support her as much as possible.

11. At the End of the Battle...

“Provoke!” Sacher shouted.

His taunt had caused the chimera to focus its aggression on him. This took the monster’s attention away from Magiluka and Safina—Magiluka was grateful that she now had ample time to prepare, but she felt guilty for leaving everything to Sacher. Still, she knew that she didn’t have enough leeway to help him out.

Safina, possibly having the same thoughts, stood in front of Magiluka, ready to unsheathe her blade at any moment. She didn’t help out Sacher and maintained her distance.

As the monster’s sharp claws hit Sacher’s shield, a metallic clang echoed throughout the area. Magiluka turned toward the noise. Any normal adult would’ve been easily sliced in two, but Sacher defended himself adroitly against the attack with his shield and utilized the creature’s openings to launch some strikes of his own. He was well aware that his attacks would affect Rachel, but he didn’t hold back.

The chimera focused solely on attacking and did not protect itself whatsoever—it wasn’t clear whether that was its nature or if it was simply unfazed by the offense it was facing. That said, it quickly regenerated the moment it was injured.

Sacher was aware that they couldn’t defeat this monster without putting a scratch on it. Meanwhile, seeing Rachel stifle her pained screams every time the chimera was cut was making Magiluka hesitate—she was in awe of Sacher’s ability to grasp the situation and bravely make the right choices in the face of everything. “Right here!” Sacher shouted.

He expertly parried the monster’s arm with his shield—he’d been defending himself for this moment. The chimera’s arm was flung away, its upper body

raised in the air as it staggered back, completely defenseless. Sacher saw his chance. He stepped forward.

“Rachel, clench your teeth!” he yelled.

He dashed toward the chimera’s stomach and violently gripped Rachel’s shoulder, trying to tear her away from the beast. There was a grotesque squelch as Sacher ripped her from the creature’s flesh and muscles. Rachel contorted her face with pain, but she gritted her teeth and endured the agony as her body slumped more and more toward Sacher. Everyone was certain she would be saved...but in the next moment, a dull impact blew Sacher to the side.

“Sacher!”

“S-Stay back, Magiluka!” he shouted, preventing her from stepping forward to offer her aid.

Though he’d just been slammed against a wall, approaching him would nullify his Provoke spell, and Magiluka would be targeted once more. She knew that she’d only cause him to waste his mana, so she stopped dead in her tracks.

Sacher coughed, and a sliver of blood dripped from his mouth, attesting to the painful blow he’d endured. Magiluka felt her chest tighten.

Before long, however, Sacher wiped his mouth with his sleeve, staggered as he got up, and shouted brightly, “Hey now, if you’ve got four arms, you should’ve said so from the start!” He forced himself to sound cheery so that Magiluka wouldn’t worry.

As Sacher had declared, whether it was due to the chimera reaching its peak form or due to it keeping them hidden up to this point, the monster now had four arms sprouting from its body—Sacher must’ve been hit by a newly created arm. Luckily, the new arms lacked sharp claws, but their fists were mighty and powerful, as Sacher had just experienced for himself. Still, the attack would’ve been fatal had the monster not been off-balance and had Sacher not cast a defensive spell on himself just in case. Furthermore, had he taken that blow head-on, he would’ve surely been crushed to death... He was alive mostly due to pure dumb luck.

After that hit, could Sacher move just as nimbly as he had before? Not quite.

He'd been able to avoid a fatal injury, but he'd still been seriously injured. Furthermore, he was unsure how to fight against a powerful monster with four arms.

Is it over for me? Sacher thought.

Magiluka and Safina could give their support to help him and Rachel, but that would leave no one available to land the final blow.

"I wonder what Lady Mary would do..." Sacher mumbled, showing a hint of weakness.

He berated himself for yearning for the aid of someone who wasn't here with him. *I'm the one who assigned the roles, so I gotta do what I gotta do!*

"Hey, monster! You stupid oaf!" Sacher yelled. "Where do you think you're looking? I'm over here, peabrain!"

The chimera, who had been glancing toward Magiluka after she'd shrieked, turned back to Sacher as he laid into it once more, picking their fight back up where it'd left off. However, it was painfully clear that Sacher was at a disadvantage now—the beast's sharp claws dug into Sacher's flesh, and its mighty fists caused his bones to creak and groan.

Magiluka could no longer stand to watch this. She unconsciously stepped forward, wanting to help Sacher out, but Safina quickly barred her path. Magiluka gasped and kept herself in check. The two ladies were unsure if they even had enough power to defeat the monster as it was—they weren't able to offer Sacher any support here.

It would've been better for Rachel if she had been unconscious during this entire fight. Cruelly enough, she'd been awake the entire time, and currently she was watching the parasitic monster battle against Sacher up close.

"E-Enough..." she muttered. "Just attack me and the monster at the same time. If I go, then this will..."

Rachel no longer cared about herself. She felt powerless knowing Sita had assumed she'd betrayed her. Combined with the fact that the monster she was feeding was attacking Magiluka and her friends, Rachel was overcome with guilt and shame.

When Rachel's despairing pleas reached Sacher's ears, he knew what he had to do...and yet, a moment's weakness gave the chimera an opening against him. With a loud clang, Sacher's shield had been knocked out of his hand.

"Gh! No!" he cried.

Sacher continued to dodge the monster's attacks, but its four arms wouldn't let up so easily. One after another, the arms rained down on him. He dodged them all as he dashed away, but he wouldn't last for long. The creature shattered his blade, signaling the end for him.

"Gah!"

A heavy blow to the stomach with one arm lurched Sacher upward. The sharp claws of another dug into his shoulder. Then, with a third arm, the monster grasped his head and dangled him in the air... He was completely helpless.

"Magiluka!" Rachel screamed. She was so weak that even raising her voice took a toll on her body, but she wished nothing more than the safety of others. "Hurry! Just kill me!"

"Heh... Rachel, this is gonna hurt, but endure it, all right?" Sacher replied.

She had no idea what the boy was on about.

"Shield...return to me!"

Just as the order left the boy's lips, Rachel felt an intense impact behind her, and the chimera started to roar with agony. She had no idea what had just occurred, but Magiluka and Safina, who were a good distance away and knew the shield's abilities, fully understood what Sacher had done.

An object had sunk into the chimera's back and showed no signs of stopping as it tried to make its way toward Sacher. His trusty shield was returning to his hand. The shield's power was intense, and it plunged deeper into the chimera, trying to cut through the beast's insides to make its way back to its master's hand.

"I knew I could count on Lady Mary. As she said, it's much more effective using the shield as a weapon," Sacher muttered with a strained smile, remembering her reaction to the shield.

The chimera released Sacher from its grip due to the intense pain it was under. When Sacher had wondered what Mary would do, he'd remembered her words at the elf village, so he put her suggestion into action.

Sacher pulled the beast's talons out of his shoulder. As the pain shot through his body, he once again approached the monster and grabbed Rachel's body, which had been extricated by the shield's inertia.

"I'll leave the rest to you!" Sacher yelled.

He didn't even brace himself as he took Rachel's body and flew backward. The two girls heard his call and prepared for combat.

"Here I go, Safina!" Magiluka shouted.

"Roger!" Safina replied, leaping forward. "Accel Boost! Accelerate! Accelerating Charge!"

In response to her powerful commands, her magic, bracelet, and sheath propelled her forward, making her as fast as possible. Magiluka was stunned. The sword that Fifi had forged was a dangerous one—there was always a risk that the sheath that swathed the blade in flame could spread its fire to the wielder. Safina used this to her advantage, however, pushing her usual accelerating magic to go even faster.

While accelerating magic sped her up, no one was sure if her body could tolerate such high speeds. Worst case, she'd be torn to shreds. And yet, she was doing it effortlessly—no, she'd made her resolve and was risking her life. And now it was time for Magiluka to do the same.

"Nine Blade!" Magiluka shouted.

As three magical blades formed before her, her vision went dark instantly. She quickly bit her tongue, using the pain to forcibly keep herself awake. *Not yet! I can't lose consciousness here! If my mana isn't enough, take my life force too! Take whatever you need!* Magiluka desperately thought.

She wasn't the only one suffering. Safina, who'd sheathed her blade and leaped forward, hadn't been attacked, but her muscles and veins were crying out in agony. Blood spurted from various places as her body was about to give way, but she still continued to charge forward at the chimera. Just as the

magical blades converged, she unsheathed her sword.

“Cross!” Safina yelled.

A grating metallic clang echoed throughout the room. Magiluka managed to see the chimera blown away into little pieces as she staggered to the ground. The shredded monster showed no signs of regenerating. Sacher, who’d managed to drag Rachel out, was lying motionless on the ground. Safina noticed that her blade had been shattered as she fell to the floor lifeless and covered in blood.

Before long, Magiluka fell backward, facing the dimly lit ceiling. “Lady Mary... I leave the rest...to you.” She thought of her best friend fighting a good distance away as her consciousness plunged into darkness.

12. All According to Plan?

Sita hadn’t received combat training like Rachel had—though the collar around her neck was weakening, she wasn’t able to resist its effects as she dragged her heavy body in search of an exit. She was vexed that her powerlessness had forced her to abandon her sister, but she couldn’t get caught here.

Eventually, she saw a light emerging in front of her. It felt like a ray of hope after she’d spent so long gloomily trudging through a dark corridor—her footsteps started to quicken as she headed to her goal.

“If I go there, I’m sure...”

I’m sure of what? she thought to herself. What exactly was she expecting? She racked her brain for an answer and soon found one—she was placing her hopes in the Argent Holy Woman outside. *I’m sure she’ll...*

Despite her hopes, negative thoughts filled her mind. *There’s no way a fairy-tale-like ending is waiting for me. I don’t even know where I’m going. There’s no way she’s coming for me.*

“Heh heh heh. My plan is perfect! I knew it! God is guiding me to fulfill my goals! Those little girls can’t possibly hinder my empyreal designs!”

A voice Sita didn't want to hear reverberated in the darkness, and she shuddered as she turned toward it. Thomas had appeared with bloodshot eyes, his lips curled into a conniving grin as he tried to catch his breath.

"Now go! Head outside! It's the place where you were destined to be! It's where you must undo the last seal! Hah! Ha ha ha ha!"

Sita didn't know what to say. She'd been trying to flee, but all she'd done was head to the location Thomas had been planning to take her to all along. Now she had nowhere else to go but forward.

Thinking back, I ran toward where there weren't many people. Were they expecting me to do that? Basically, I would've ended up going where he wanted whether I'd fled or not! I was tricked!

Tears welled up within Sita's eyes. She'd been dancing in the palm of Thomas's hand from beginning to end. He grinned upon seeing her look of frustration and took out the Book of Orthoaguina that he'd stolen from her.

"Now then, why don't you guide me to The Great One, Sita?" he asked.

She instinctively recoiled when she heard him say her name and reflexively ran ahead. She simply wanted to stay as far away from Thomas as possible. She couldn't contain herself from running outside.

Sita was blinded for a split second by the bright sunlight, but as her eyes adjusted to the outside world, she found a chimera looming in front of her. For a moment, she panicked at the sight, but she still much preferred to be swallowed alive by the monster than be manipulated by Thomas any further—her own safety was no longer her greatest concern.

The monster, perhaps sensing her thoughts, approached her—it was all Sita could do to stop and stand still. She noticed that a large number of burnt objects were surrounding it, but decided to not give that much thought for now.

Thomas appeared to be in disbelief—he must not have expected the chimera to be here. Sita felt a touch of satisfaction, happy that things weren't totally according to his plan at the end, and it strengthened her resolve.

What kind of life did I lead? Fun, sad, happy, and lonely memories flooded her

mind. She'd made all sorts of discoveries and met all sorts of people.

I met her...

At long last, Sita had met the woman who made her heart dance with excitement—the woman she'd read about in books and heard about in stories. Sita had seen her power firsthand when the two had worked together to face their problems for the past few days...

Sita couldn't become the heroine of her story, but she *could* avoid causing any more trouble to others. *Yeah, I should've done this from the start—from the moment I knew I was just a tool to be used.*

As the chimera came ever closer, Sita put her hands together in a prayer...and just then, there was a flash of light from above.

"Huh?" she gasped. Sita widened her eyes in shock, unable to process what had just occurred.

The chimera had been sliced cleanly in half lengthwise. Thomas hadn't done it—who had?

The monster collapsed in a heap, enabling Sita to get a clear look at her surroundings. In the skies above, a good distance away, was a divine beast. Riding atop it was a person with her arms extended as though she'd just cast a spell—a silver-haired girl.

"The Argent...Holy Woman..." Sita said, unable to stop herself. She maintained her praying posture in awe.

"Impossible! It can't be!" Thomas shrieked with insanity. "Why are you here?! Who are you?!"

"'Who,' you ask? Why, I'm Mary Regalia, the daughter of a duke," the silver-haired girl casually replied, undaunted.

"You insolent brat! How dare you make a mockery of me!"

In a furious frenzy, Thomas rushed toward Sita, likely assuming that he'd get away if he could use her as his shield...but his efforts were for naught. Mary jumped off the divine beast and landed in front of Sita.

Thomas was up against a little girl—assuming he'd be able to fight her off, he

raised his sword. Mary thus used her bare hands to shatter his weapon to pieces before delivering a powerful kick that sent him back from whence he came. The blow knocked the Book of Orthoaguina out of his hand, and it fell with a flutter in front of Sita.

Just like that, it was curtains on Thomas's plans before they'd even truly begun.

Sita knew that this chapter had ended so easily because the silver-haired girl possessed so much power. She let out an exhale, easing her nerves, and picked up the book as though she were drawn to it.

"Good grief, what a boring ending. This was quite an interesting test too."

Sita had never felt more fear in her life as a voice suddenly echoed in her head. She hastily looked around, but didn't see anyone else. Since no one else looked wary, it was clear that only she was hearing the voice.

"Very well. How about I liven things up a bit more?"

At that moment, the book started to glow as its pages flipped open. She realized that the voice was coming from the Book of Orthoaguina.

"No! Stop!" she cried.

But she was too late. Before Sita could do anything, her vision faded to darkness as the light left her eyes.

"Confirming administrative controls... Final seal will be forcibly removed..." Sita droned in monotone.

Clouds started to gather and swirl in the bright sky beyond the Grand Archival Tower. They were forming above the land that the Kairomeans used for festivities—the ritual ground where their forebears had sealed a great being.

"The gates...shall open," Sita murmured, plainly stating their sudden new reality.

13. How Did It Come to This?

Let's get everyone up to speed here. Using the mandrake's effects, I'd

gathered a majority of the chimeras into a small, isolated island, then I'd burned them all with my fire magic. On the way, Tutte and Lily had borrowed some cooking supplies from a nearby house, and they were currently preparing the mandrake for consumption so that I could nullify its effects.

However, I wasn't sitting around and waiting for them—instead, I'd decided to kill any nearby chimeras lurking about. Why not stay, you ask? Because I knew that spirit would pull some weird stuff and play a prank on me to attack my psyche! My brain had all the mental strength of a lump of tofu, so there was no way I could just consume her like nothing's wrong!

In any case, as I was picking off chimeras, I noticed Sita and beat the pastor to a pulp. I didn't really know what'd been going on, but I'd thought that would be the end of it.

"How did it come to this?!" I groaned.

Unable to process my situation, I gazed up at the swirling clouds and distorted space above the Grand Archival Tower as I slurped on Tutte's special soup. Yeah, I mean, this probably seems like the last thing someone ought to be doing given the situation. B-But you can't blame me! If I dallied any longer, the effects might intensify... Please forgive me. *I'll visit the spirit tree on my way back to thank her.*

I'd heard from the prince that Orthoaguina was a dragon who'd been sealed by the residents of Kairomea—I gathered his seal must have come undone. What I didn't get was *how*. No one had done a thing, yet it seemed to have lifted on its own.

Presently, I was watching Sita manage a massive magic circle and utilize the force field at the ritual space to undo the seal. The light from her eyes was completely gone, and she was rhythmically going through the steps like a futuristic robot from a science fiction movie.

I didn't want to be idly sipping on soup while I watched her work—I wanted to step in, slap her face to stop her, and snap her back to reality—but Snow claimed that I shouldn't interrupt her since the magic circle was of such a grand scale. In the worst case, Sita's life would be in danger if anything went wrong. My mental fortitude was already weak as it was, so hearing all that made me

feel too scared to try anything. It seemed like all I could do for now was watch. *Please forgive me.*

“Who could’ve caused this to happen?” I wondered.

“Well, if I were to hazard a guess, maybe Sita wanted this to happen?” Snow replied skeptically.

“If releasing the seal had been her goal, I feel like she wouldn’t have needed to go to all this trouble from the outset.”

“Agreed. Which leaves us with...Orthoaguina himself.”

It seemed Snow and I had reached the same conclusion. *But if Orthoaguina is behind this, couldn’t he have undone the seal at any time? Why now?* I felt like I only had a portion of the pieces of a puzzle, and they weren’t quite fitting together.

“Heh. Ha ha ha! Wonderful! Magnificent! I knew it! God wishes for me to succeed! God is guiding me!” the pastor said with a maniacal cackle. He broke my train of thought as he gazed up at the sky. Then, as though he were being sucked in by the Grand Archival Tower, he made a dash for the building. This was bad—I didn’t want to make things even worse, so I stepped forward to stop him. Just then, a hoarse voice called out to me from behind, and I stopped in my tracks.

“L-Lady Mary!”

I turned around and saw Rachel emerge from the underground path that her sister had used mere moments ago. Her body was frail and in tatters—my chest grew tight and I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach at the sight of her. I let the pastor go and rushed to her side. She walked staggeringly to meet me. I noticed a trail of blood spattering the ground behind her, and I quickly grabbed her hands to support her and her aching body.

“Rachel, what’s going on?” I asked.

“Argent Holy Woman... Please, I beg you... Use your powers to... Because of me, everyone is... It’s all my fault,” Rachel muttered, her eyes glazed over. I didn’t understand what she wanted, but I understood that she was desperately crying for help. Moments later, the clan chief appeared after following her here

—he looked pale in the face at her condition.

With these injuries, Rachel should've been resting, but she'd been unable to sit still and had come all this way by herself to beg me for help.

Help? The moment the thought crossed my mind, I left this awful situation with Sita to Rachel and the clan chief as I ran down the path they'd come from. When I got to a clearing in the tunnel, my mind went blank.

"What...?" I murmured in a stupor. I was stunned by what I saw, and my body went numb.

"Lady Magiluka has depleted all her mana and she needs some serious help. She needs to recover her mana as soon as possible. I conducted some emergency treatment on Sacher and Lady Safina, but as you can see, they're gravely wounded. I'd like to treat them as soon as possible, but only the church can use healing magic, and there isn't anyone that can treat them right now," the prince explained, disheartened.

I barely heard what he said. I wanted to reject this reality so badly that I was tempted to just stop thinking at all.

"My lady..." a voice said.

I felt the warm hands of Tutte. My blank mind and my frozen body slowly unthawed with her warmth. *Right, now isn't the time for me to be standing here. I have to use my head! Get a grip on yourself, Mary Regalia!* I squeezed Tutte's hand and took a deep breath.

"I can only thank Magiluka that a certain book had been mixed in with the recommendations she gave me at the Grand Archival Tower," I said. "Or maybe she predicted this outcome..."

"*Mary?*" Snow asked, perplexed.

I cursed myself internally for complacently thinking I'd never be in this situation. "Prince Reifus, Snow and I shall heal everyone," I said.

"*Huh? Me too?*"

"Can you...?" the prince started, but then he stopped himself. "No, you're right. I'll leave it to you."

He didn't ask any further questions and accepted my proposal. I couldn't blame him for his surprise—I'd never had the opportunity to learn healing magic until now, yet here I was claiming that I'd be using it to save everyone.

Much like holy magic, the Papacy had kept study of healing magic under wraps since ancient times, so there weren't many who could use it—to be exact, healing magic wasn't especially uncommon or highly valued, but rather, its spells were difficult to learn, and one couldn't just pick a book up and start using it right away. Even in my kingdom, one had to attend an advanced institution to pursue mastering healing magic. My current self couldn't possibly have known how to cast any healing spells.

However, among the books that Magiluka had given me at the Grand Archival Tower, there was one that'd contained information about healing magic. The book was difficult to parse, but my understanding was that to use healing magic, one needed to understand the anatomy of the organism they were healing, then they needed to employ massive amounts of mana.

Luckily, there was no need for me to attend lectures regarding anatomy. I'd spent much of my previous life in hospitals, where I'd learned about certain medical technologies. I was thus rather knowledgeable about human anatomy, and anatomy in general. Furthermore, God had given me an abundance of mana. *I guess nothing I've experienced was meaningless, in the end...*

I breathed in and took a step forward as everyone around me obediently stepped back. Everyone in the room was willing to grasp at straws by leaving it to me—no one had a better plan.

"Let's do this, Snow," I said. "We'll start with Magiluka. Remember what we did in the past for Lily? We'll use the same method to transfer my mana over to Magiluka."

"Ah, got it. Aye aye! You might overwhelm her with your magic, so I'll make the adjustments," Snow said, instantly understanding what I was trying to do.

We synchronized ourselves and chanted, *"Harmonious Healing."* The light emanating from me traveled through Snow and into Magiluka.

"Is it even possible to transfer mana over to others?"

“It must be. Look at her. Doesn’t she look familiar?”

“A divine beast and a girl... But even so, if she uses her mana like this, she’ll...”

“This is her resolve. And before she came here, she rounded up the monsters throughout our town. She must’ve used quite a bit of mana there too...”

“What a lady...”

I hear people chattering around me, but I gotta focus for now. Eventually, color started to return to Magiluka’s cheeks, and she looked visibly much better. The people around me started to gasp in awe, and I breathed a sigh of relief knowing that this had been a success.

“Phew. Next up, Sacher and Safina,” I said.

“Gotcha! I have to leave this bit to you though. Sorry, I don’t think I can support you all the way,” Snow replied.

“No, you helped me tons for Magiluka. Thank you.”

I wiped away my nervous sweat and glanced at the divine beast to thank her. I knelt between Sacher and Safina before gently placing my hands over their bodies.

“Overall Healing,” I chanted. At once, their bodies were enveloped in light.

“She’s healing multiple people at once!”

“And she’s healing their entire bodies! Is that even possible?”

“Look! Their wounds are healing as we speak.”

“It’s a miracle... This is the power of the Argent Holy Woman.”

Focus... Focus... Retain the image of healing others. Ugh, I can hear the people around me talking. No! Concentrate, Mary!

I couldn’t afford to fail here. I was a bit distracted by people talking around me, but I tried to focus on using my spell.

A few minutes later, Sacher’s and Safina’s pained looks were gone. Their haggard breathing started to stabilize, and they looked to be in good health again.

At once, loud cheers erupted from all around. I breathed a sigh of relief that my spell had gone well. Without taking a moment to rest, I stood up and headed toward the prince.

“Prince Reifus, may I leave the rest in your hands?” I asked.

“O-Of course. Thank you, Lady Mary,” he replied.

“Tutte, watch over them. And Lily, protect Tutte for me, okay?”

I immediately gave out my orders. *Ugh, I’m so scared to see how people are reacting! I have to leave this place as soon as possible!* I tried to look sharp, but my mind was filled with anxiety.

“Lady Mary, what will you do?” the prince asked.

“I’ll go back and put an end to this entire debacle,” I replied while heading for the exit.

No one dissented as they made way for me. I felt like Moses splitting the sea as people moved aside to let me through. *I’m just imagining those people bowing at me, right? I must be. Please! I’m not a holy woman! I just used healing magic. That’s all! I’m just your neighborhood gal—anyone can use healing magic! Come on!*

Why would I be making tracks if I hadn’t done anything special, you ask? Well, I couldn’t tell you—why do you think I was running away?! I had no idea if there were ranks or difficulties in regards to healing magic, and I had zero clue as to spells’ differences, so I intuitively knew it was time I got out of there.

“*Good grief, you’re so busy, Miss Argent Holy Woman! ♪*” Snow said, following behind me. She teased me the moment we were out of sight from the crowd.

“Oh, so you wanna go there, huh?!” I cried. “It’s all your fault! It’s your fault because you’re a divine beast!”

“*What does that even mean? Stop getting angry at me. Hey! Stop! Stop fluffing me! Calm down! I’m just joking!*”

“Whew... And you’re gonna help me out, right?”

“*Could I stay behind if I said ‘No’?*”

“Ha ha! Of course not! I’ll drag you down with me, of course! ♪”

“Right! Knew it. Yep.”

As we joked around, we headed toward the darkening skies. I calmed down, glanced at the snow leopard walking beside me, and felt compelled to give her my heartfelt thanks. “Thank you, Snow,” I said.

“Wh-What’s with you? Stop it—you’re making me uncomfortable. Besides, I’m already used to it. We’re always doing stuff together, aren’t we?”

Before I knew it, I was gently stroking her soft fur. She purred gently as she tried to hide her embarrassment.

After I’d seen my friends in such a run-down state, if I’d had to walk down this dark path alone, my immature mind would’ve doubtlessly been plagued by all manner of negative thoughts, and my emotions would’ve gotten all twisted around. *What did come over me just now? I guess I’m just glad she’s always a bright light at my side.* I could only smile—even I wasn’t certain of my own feelings.

A few minutes later, we were back aboveground. Sita was slumped in Rachel’s arms, and the clan chief was supporting them. For a moment, I wondered if the ritual had been successfully stopped, but no one seemed too happy. Regret and frustration were written all over their faces.

Is Sita...dead? As I wondered that, Sita groaned and moved ever so slightly, dispelling my fears.

“Ah, Mary! Over there!” the clan chief said. He noticed me before pointing toward the Grand Archival Tower.

When I shifted my gaze toward the building, I saw a circular rift hovering above it. A building eerily similar to the Grand Archival Tower itself was slowly descending toward its summit, as though this other-dimensional edifice was intended to crush the Grand Archival Tower beneath it. Unlike most towers, however, the Grand Archival Tower didn’t become narrower on top or have a spire of some sort, so the incoming building came to a rest atop it.

No wonder it looked like we were only seeing the bottom half of a building. I stared at the combined structure in shock. “Is that the upper half of the Grand

Archival Tower?” I asked.

“*Probably,*” Snow replied, equally in shock as her eyes were glued on the building. “*I couldn’t have guessed the entire building was sealed away—and in a different dimension, no less. What impressive magical technology... Looks like we ditched the scene at a crucial time—I’m pretty sure Orthoaguina has been unsealed and is waiting for us. We’d be up against a dragon if we went in there. You ready?*” Snow crouched low and looked at me with worry.

“Leave it to me. I told you before, but I’m invincible! I won’t lose to a dragon!” I stood tall and proud.

“*Ah, right. Of course. You’re so reliable.*”

“Let’s go! We’ll face Orthoaguina!”

Encouraged by my words, Snow energetically took to the skies and cut through the wind as we rushed toward the Grand Archival Tower.

14. Orthoaguina, the Greedy Philomath Dragon

Thanks to Snow, I managed to make it to the former top of the tower in a flash and get a look at the new tower. The tip of the lower half of the Grand Archival Tower we’d known had been crushed on impact, and I was worried about its interior. Meanwhile, the upper half that had just emerged from the skies looked like the Grand Archival Tower, but it was actually a bit narrower. They didn’t seem like two connected pieces after all—I guessed that there used to be two separate buildings. *The upper half is Orthoaguina’s private room, and the lower half is his work space, maybe. But now isn’t the time to be bothered about that. The problem now is...*

“Hmm... There aren’t any entrances where a person could enter. Where should I go?” I wondered.

The upper half didn’t have any doors. I may have been able to find one on closer inspection, but it was such a massive monument that I didn’t know where to start. *Maybe I should go take a closer look...*

Just then, Snow paused midair. “Hmm? What’s wrong, Snow?” I asked.

“Howling Blast!”

Just as I posed my question, the divine beast inhaled deeply and did the unexpected. She let out a roar that gouged out a side of the tower as I stared in silence.

“Uh, Miss Snow? What are you doing, sweetie?” I asked.

“I made an entrance, of course. It’s a pain to go searching for one.”

“That’s a flimsy reason to blow out a chunk of someone’s house!”

“Hey, they made a flashy appearance first! If we don’t return the favor, we’ll get underestimated. Now, outta my way! Coming through! It’s the Argent Holy Woman! Bow down, cretins!”

“Stop! You’re embarrassing meee!”

Snow ran forward as I screamed, and my voice was carried by the wind and echoed into the distance. She energetically leaped through the hole she’d made and went inside.

“Whoa, it’s huge!”

Snow was impressed to see a large circular room similar to the one at the Grand Archival Tower. The only difference was that this one had no books or connecting rooms—it was just an empty space.

In the center, a large black dragon stood solemnly. I’d only seen a skeleton of one of these beasts before—I’d never laid eyes upon the real deal. My heart fluttered a bit with excitement. His lustrous black scales shone under the sun, and his underbelly was red like blood. The dragon looked exactly like the murals the prince had told me about, and very similar to what I’d imagined.

The dragon seemed to notice us as he moved his large neck toward Snow.



“Hmph! How dare you interrupt this fruitful conversation that I’m having with Orthoaguina!”

I looked down to find Pastor Thomas, who was staring at me angrily.

Unlike me, who can fly, you must’ve come here on foot. Probably took a lot of time and effort, eh?

“Fruitful?” I asked.

I guessed that I must’ve cut off some kind of important discussion and decided to confirm the facts. Based on the situation, I was more than willing to apologize for what my stupid snow leopard did. *Of course, that’s just the conversation bit. I still haven’t forgiven you for your past deeds.*

“Hmph, that’s right! This is our— No, the Papacy’s ideal goal!” the pastor shouted. “We, the ones loved by God, plan on reaching His domain! The Liberal Materia and the chimeras were all created for this purpose! Combined with the wisdom and technology Orthoaguina possesses, we’ll be a step closer to our ideals! God is eagerly awaiting us, and now that seal is undone, He has drawn me to Orthoaguina through His providence!”

Does he have a screw loose because his plans reached an impasse? The pastor’s sudden revelation of his ideals didn’t strike a chord with me at all.

“You know, judging from the situation, it looks like Orthoaguina unsealed himself,” I said. I only possessed knowledge about the seal as Snow and I had talked about it before.

“Heh, are you an idiot?” the pastor said wearily as he scoffed through his nose. “You’re just making pathetic excuses because *you* aren’t loved by God. Your words imply that Orthoaguina could freely manipulate the seal anytime he wished. If that were the case, why did he remain sealed? Good grief—this is why I dislike stupid, foolish dunces like you.”

Indeed, I had no retort to that. I could only glance at the dragon in question and wait for his reply. The beast simply narrowed his eyes at me with great interest and remained silent. *No, I must be imagining things. I’m overthinking this. Okay, stop staring at me! I’m begging you here.*

I couldn't tolerate the dragon's gaze and looked away, but the pastor misunderstood this as fear. Satisfied at feeling superior, he said, "Goodness... So, you tried to interrupt our grand plans without fully comprehending them? I still have business with Orthoaguina, so I ask that you leave at once, dunce... No, there's no worth in leaving you alive. Why don't I dispose of you?"

He was beginning to cook up a dangerous plan. *What's he on about? He got one-shotted by me earlier.*

"Now, Orthoaguina," the pastor bellowed. "Express joy toward God that you may participate in our noble plans, and destroy this witch who dares to get in our way! You don't want us to seal you again, do you?"

Ah, I see now. The motionless dragon slowly started to move. *I don't know what he's thinking, but it looks like he'll cooperate with the pastor's plan. Should we remain in the air?* Snow and I braced ourselves.

"Ha ha ha ha!" the pastor laughed ecstatically. "I'll make you regret ever going agains—"

As he was in the midst of mocking us, he was suddenly obscured by Orthoaguina's foot. A grotesque squelch instantly put an end to his gloating—the dragon had squashed the pastor without a second thought. I could only open my mouth in shock by how quickly he'd been snuffed out.

"Hmm? Did I squash something?" Orthoaguina said, stopping in place. It didn't seem like his mouth was moving, yet I understood him, and he spoke fluently. The gears in my brain finally started to turn once more.

"I rather like how much quieter the room has become," he said.

His voice sounded like a man's, seeming to confirm my working assumption that he was a male dragon all along. *I have no idea how to differentiate male and female dragons, so I won't be so bothered about that.*

I'm grateful he's talented enough to speak my language. If he spoke in the language of the dragons, I wouldn't have been able to understand him, and he might've thought I was ignoring him. I'm sure I would've pissed him off then. I slumped my shoulders and let myself feel at ease, but I soon learned that I'd jumped to conclusions.

“Now then. I suppose I shall continue preparing for my observations,” the dragon said.

“What? Observations?” I asked.

“That’s right. You came here because you knew that I was the one behind the seal, didn’t you? You saw through it all.”

Hey, don’t ask me! I’m just here! Also, wait, so the entire seal thing was self-orchestrated?! I was unable to hide my shock at Orthoaguina’s confession.

“You are supporting those people mentally,” he continued. “How will they react if I crush you and appear before them unsealed? I’m very interested, you see. These people were so reliant on me, so I had them turn around and revolt against my actions. I’ve been observing their progress sans my influence for many moons, but I’ve found their meager evolution to be quite lacking. What an entertaining incident this has been amid all the boredom!”

I could only barely keep up with Orthoaguina suddenly revealing everything, but I continued to silently listen on.

“In truth, I would’ve liked to have faced you in the middle of town to demonstrate how puny you are, but since you made such a flashy entrance to my abode, I must fight you here,” he said. “Ha ha ha! I’m sure you did so to bring the damage to the town to a minimum.”

Nah, that was just Snow doing her own thing. I was still trying to wrap my head around his explanations, so I didn’t say that out loud though. *So a majority of the events that occurred in Kairomea were all due to this dragon? To him, these were just experiments, and the residents were just dancing in the palm of his hand?*

The residents had once lived with technology and knowledge so advanced that they didn’t know what to do with it. Then, suddenly, when their lives were in danger due to the inhumane, atrocious acts of the dragon, they revolted and sealed him up. However, that was all according to his plan—the sealing procedure had been created by him, and Sita’s people had been manipulated by him from the start.

Perhaps his technology and knowledge hadn’t been passed down because

he'd been secretly confiscating it from the residents—that could explain why they were unable to expertly wield ancient techniques. *All because the dragon was simply interested in observing what would happen if the residents had everything taken away from them...*

This meant that the Kairomeans had always been subject to the dragon's every whim. They were simply test subjects that he'd used to satiate his desire for knowledge.

I felt endlessly frustrated. I thought about Sita, who would always press on with a smile while burying her feelings of shame; Rachel, who'd dragged her wounded body across town thinking only of helping Sita; and the clan chief and the residents, who were trying their best to quell the chaos rampaging their town. As their faces flashed across my mind, my heart was telling me one thing. *I cannot let things go according to this dragon's plan! And so...*

"I won't let you do as you please!" I declared. "Your folly ends here!"

"Well said, Mary!" Snow cheered with praise. *"Make this scummy dragon suffer!"*

With a roar, she ran toward the massive dragon.

"Ha ha ha ha! Excellent! Very well, then! Show me a possibility beyond my knowledge!" Orthoaguina roared with elation. He grinned and reared his head back. "Vermilion Nova!"

A fifth-order spell from the get-go? Good going, final boss! You're on a whole other level! I was impressed with him, but Snow was no slouch either—she gracefully dodged the large fireball and took some distance.

"Ha ha ha! I remember now. You two have an interesting technique of launching the same spell at the same time!" he said.

Can he see everything occurring within Kairomea?

Orthoaguina snickered as he launched another unexpected attack.

"Triple Vermilion Nova."

Three enormous fireballs flew toward us.

"Hey! That's cheating! I can't handle three five-order spells in a row—do

something, Mary!” Snow cried, throwing in the towel since she couldn’t dodge them all.

One’s bad enough, but three at once? Being on the receiving end of the powerful attacks I was normally dishing out, I realized just how unfair this felt.

“Then let’s do the same! Triple Vermilion Nova!” I chanted. I wasn’t trying to compete with him—I just wanted to counteract his attack. However, I’d completely forgotten how insane it was for a human to cast this spell.

“This is absurd!” the dragon bellowed. “How could a human so easily match my fifth-order spell?!”

As the fireballs slammed against each other, a sea of flames spread within the tower.

“Yowch! That’s hot! Good going, Mary...is what I’d like to say, but could you pay a bit more attention to your surroundings? How do you think you’re gonna make it up to me if you singe my beautiful, elegant fur?” Snow complained while running around.

“Sorry, but it’s better than being burnt to a crisp, isn’t it?” I replied. I noticed that my sleeves had caught fire and quickly extinguished the embers.

“Interesting! Very interesting! Then how about this?” Orthoaguina said. “Quadruple Lightning Bolt!”

“Seriously?! Does he have unlimited mana or something? He even increased the number of projectiles! Mary!”

I had no time to catch my breath as Orthoaguina unleashed another barrage of attacks. As I tried to think of a different method to nullify his spells, my mind became a tangled knot. I could only handle one thing at a time. *U-Um... Lightning is electricity, so I should fight back with...rubber? No! Argh! Now what?! I’m so confused!*

Completely losing my composure, I decided to mirror his attack again. “Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt!”

And, of course, I miscounted. *He fired four, and that was... Oops. I think I might’ve put an extra one in there.*

“Aghhh! It feels so tingly and staticky!” Snow cried.

“Sorry. I messed up.” The electricity caused Snow’s fluffy fur to become all puffed up.

As I was apologizing to her, I heard a groan from an unexpected place.

“Graaah!” the dragon cried. My extra bolt of lightning had struck his massive body.

“H-Huh?” I said.

“How could this be? You surpassed my spell? I can’t believe it. Are you really human? Or are you something else wearing human clothing?” Orthoaguina cautiously stepped backward.

“How rude! I’m a human! Don’t make me sound like I’m a monster!” I protested.

“I see... You must be an irregular type who specializes in mana. I presume you’re average, or perhaps even lacking, in other areas—and the divine beast must compensate for your weaknesses.”

Orthoaguina had instantly recovered from my attack, and he completely ignored my complaints as he mumbled to himself. He shifted his gaze from me to Snow and grinned while baring his fangs. He let out a mighty, deafening roar that shook the air around him and forced me to cover my ears. It was more powerful and had a larger range than Snow’s Howling Blast; the shock wave sent Snow flying, and she slammed into the wall. I had no way of combating a move that had such a wide range, and I crashed into the wall along with her, but it didn’t affect me much. I glared at Orthoaguina, bracing myself for his next attack.

“This is the end!” he bellowed, swinging his colossal tail at us.

He’d given up on using magic and instead decided to get physical. *At this rate, the two of us will be squashed flat by his tail! Well, technically, I’ll be safe, but there’s no reason for me to take a hit if I don’t have to!*

“Not quite!” I shouted in retort, running toward his tail. I tackled it, nullifying its force, and it bent in an awkward position.

“Owww!” Orthoaguina yelped. “I’ve never seen such toughness and power! Who are you?! Seriously, *what* are you?!”

He blew on his tail and started rubbing it. *Okay, that looks kinda cute...*

“I told you. I’m Mary Regalia.” That silly response was all I had to offer. Cold sweat dripped down my face.

“Ha ha ha! Very good! This is why I find this world to be so interesting!” he shouted. “Why don’t I go all out too?”

“You were holding back after all that? It’s no wonder they call dragons the strongest beings.”

“Where does that leave the lady who cornered one of those dragons?” Snow jabbed reproachfully, ruining my cool moment.

“Heeey! Shut up!” I cried, silencing her.

I climbed onto her back and she took to the skies once more. Orthoaguina turned toward us as his jaws yawned wide. *Oh my, what a large mouth. And no cavities, I see. I mean, no, this is probably bad...*

“Megid Flame!” Orthoaguina’s maw started to glow, and a searing hot laser condensed inside before flying toward us.

Snow managed to dodge the ray in the nick of time, and the wall of the tower behind us exploded. The spell’s power was devastating—just one shot bored a massive hole in half of the tower. I saw the town behind it and shuddered. *If that were fired toward the town, everyone would be...*

“Snow, fly higher!” I ordered.

She obediently climbed over the exposed wall and ran outside, flying higher above.

“Are you fleeing? How boring,” Orthoaguina said, chasing after me as he emerged from the tower. He gazed up at me before looking down at the town. An idea seemed to have hit him as he smirked. “Ha ha ha! If you won’t face me, you’ll get what you’re asking for!”

He must’ve understood what I feared. With a mocking chuckle, he opened his jaws toward the town, provoking me to attack him.

“I never asked for that!” I shouted. “Snow, throw me at him with all you’ve got!”

“Doing that again, huh? Knew it!”

I’ll play along, Orthoaguina. But don’t think things will go according to your plan!

My power combined with Snow’s launched me toward him.

“Get him, Mary!”

“Ha ha ha! How foolish! How very foolish!” Orthoaguina laughed, pointing his open jaws toward me. “Megid Flame!”

I maintained my kicking pose and showed no signs of slowing down as I headed directly into the fiery ray. If that fake magical girl Mary had been here, she would’ve surely known the name of the move I was about to unleash—the ultimate move of magical girl Platinum Heart SR, Atomic Thunderbolt Kick.

My vision went white, and I had no idea where I was aiming, but my kick was apparently splitting the laser in two as I plunged toward the dragon.

“Impossible! I went all out! How could this happen?!” Orthoaguina cried, not expecting this outcome.

Once his laser petered out, it created an opening for me.

“Don’t you underestimate an invincible ladyyy!” I shouted as my foot reached Orthoaguina.



“Gaaaaah!” Orthoaguina’s muffled cries echoed throughout town.

Since I was against a dragon, I didn’t hold back and landed my kick squarely in his chest. We plummeted down together as his sturdy body absorbed the impact and blew through the Grand Archival Tower below, only coming to a stop once he slammed into the ground with devastating force.

15. Before I Knew It, I Was the Argent Holy Woman Part 2

The incident at Kairomea came to a close. The next day, the residents did what they could to start restoring their destroyed town. The prince and the rest of my friends had been out and about since morning trying to see if there was anything we could do to help out. When I'd seen Magiluka and them walking around like nothing had happened to them, I'd breathed a sigh of relief.

As for me, I was presently inside of the least destroyed room that the town had to offer and wondering whether I could manage to walk outside. Why was I so hesitant, you ask? Well, it all started right after I'd kicked Orthoaguina away.

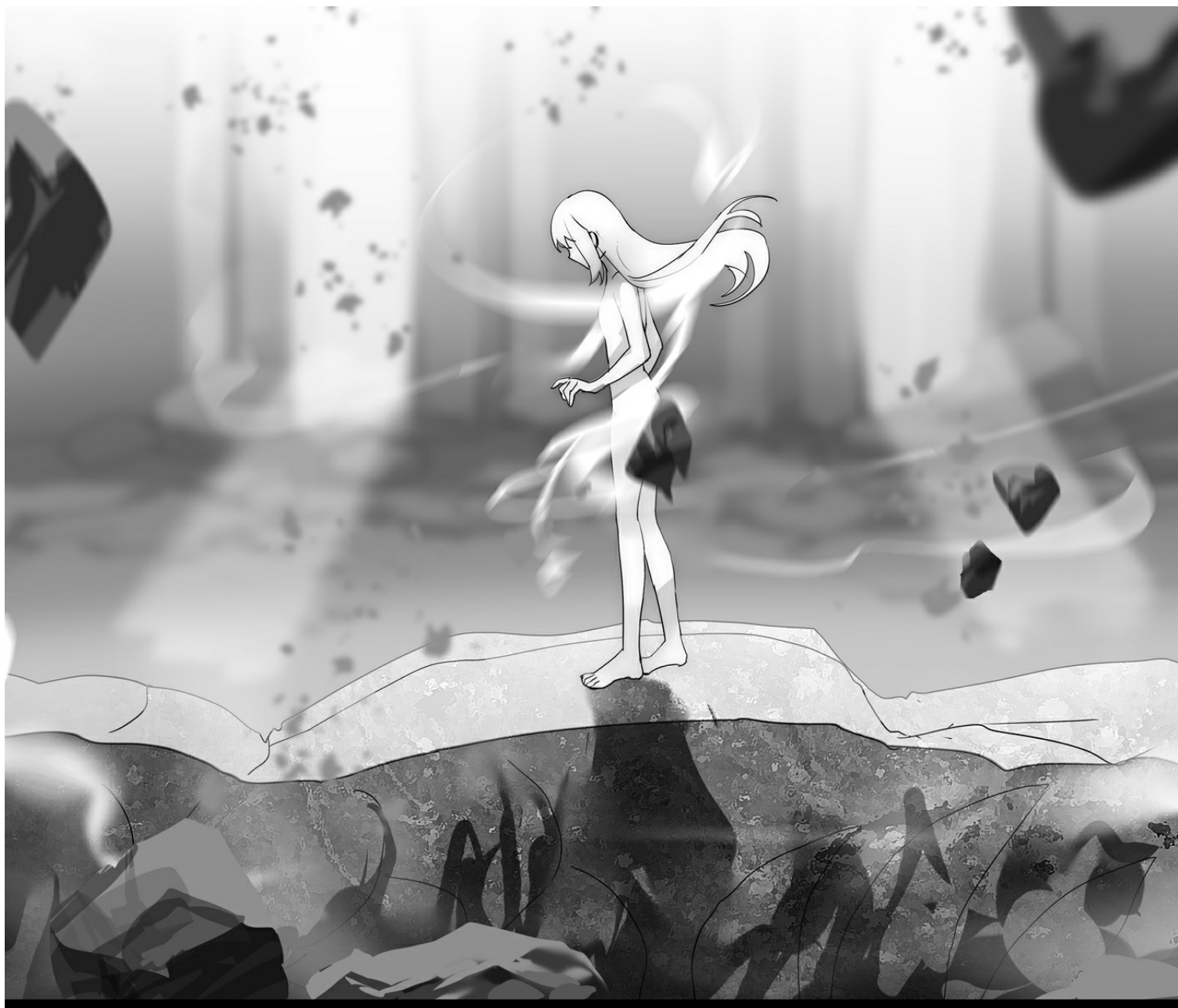
"Ha ha ha! Interesting! Very interesting!" Orthoaguina said. "I didn't think I'd be this out of commission after receiving a single kick from a human. I simply cannot understand. As I thought, this world is interesting."

Orthoaguina didn't seem to harbor any hatred toward me as he lay on the ground. In fact, he was happily chuckling. I'd created a crater on the ground with him at its center, and I was standing on his chest while gazing down at him. I'd been so engrossed in my battle that I was now panting to catch my breath since the fight had ended. I hadn't been able to pay attention to my surroundings.

"I see... I thought that you must have been bestowed with magical protection of some sort, but I sense no indication of such even while you're disrobed. In other words, this is purely your raw power," Orthoaguina said. He could barely move, but he'd managed to turn his long neck toward me and inspect me closely.

"Dis...robed?" I asked.

I followed his gaze and looked down at my body—then I almost screamed in horror.



I was in my birthday suit.

Now that I think about it, it's only natural. I charged headfirst into fire—my body might be all right, but my clothes didn't have any divine cheat abilities, so they were all burned away. Thanks to that, I was standing tall on Orthoaguina's chest in full-frontal nudity as he stared at me closely. My face grew redder than a tomato.

"You pervert!" I shrieked.

"Graaah!"

The sound of his final cries followed by a loud slap rang through the air amid the debris, dust, and smoke that obscured the vision of the Grand Archival Tower.

Things got awkward after that. Snow curled up in a ball around me to hide my body. I waited for someone—or more specifically, Tutte—to meet up with me. After all, I wasn't brave enough to walk around nude. Furthermore, though Orthoaguina was a dragon, a male had seen my naked body, so I was redder than a beet, and my eyes were swirling with confusion. I was absolutely incapable of making any sane decisions right now, so I froze in place and waited for help.

The worst part was that Tutte wasn't the first to arrive. Sita, who'd woken up; the clan chief; and his troops (all men) were instead the first to approach me.

"No one will want to marry me noooow!" I wailed, my cheeks growing warm as my mind replayed the past events.

I buried my face in my pillow and flailed my legs wildly in the air.

"D-Don't you worry, my lady," Tutte said. "Lady Snow hid your body, remember? Everyone noticed what was going on and glanced away too."

"That means everyone knew that I was naked! Which means, they...they saw... Aghhh!" Tutte's reassurance didn't help me at all, and I shrieked on top of my bed with agony.

Several minutes later, after we repeated an endless cycle of my maid offering

me reassurance while I continued to let out odd shrieks, I finally started to calm down. *It's already in the past! There's nothing I can do to change it.* As always, I ultimately managed to turn defiant and not pay the issue any mind.

"Ugh, if only I had a memory-erasing beam or something..." I muttered.

"My lady, please don't casually say something so terrifying," Tutte answered.

"Ugh..."

"Everyone is working hard right now to restore the town. Why don't you go outside and show them your face, my lady? You might just brighten their gloomy mood. The people working on the Grand Archival Tower could especially use your presence."

"Argh!" I'd run out of excuses to stay in bed, and as Tutte hit a sore spot, I felt a tinge of guilt. I reluctantly got out of bed.

As Tutte had stated earlier, the tower had experienced the most damage. Everyone had skillfully evacuated from it, however, and no one had sustained any major injuries, but the building was half destroyed. While no one disputed that Orthoaguina was at fault, I felt like half of the responsibility fell on me. *It hurts! My poor heart!*

Even if the residents considered me blameless, it was no reason for me to lounge around while they were hard at work. I wasn't *that* arrogant. Actually, if my poor maiden heart hadn't made me hesitate, I would've loved to have offered them my aid as soon as possible, but I was at the awkward age where I couldn't just assume all was in the past. *I'm sorry. I'd be grateful if you blamed adolescence instead of me.*

"All right, let's go," I said, huffing through my nose.

I decided to switch gears and amp myself up. Tutte helped me get dressed, and I headed out for the Grand Archival Tower.

As I walked through Kairomea, men and women of all ages started using the nickname that I feared.

"Ah! It's the Argent Holy Woman!"

"Thank you, Argent Holy Woman!"

“Argent Holy Woman!”

I could only force a smile in reply. “Tutte, I feel like a large problem is about to fall on my shoulders which will put my embarrassment to shame. What happened overnight?”

As the residents went back to work, I was left alone with my maid and the smile plastered on my face as I glanced around stiffly.

“You ran throughout town to round up the chimeras, and you even healed Magiluka and your friends in front of a crowd,” Tutte replied. “In addition, you fought against the almighty dragon with Lady Snow. Any normal person would have been too afraid to do such a thing, but you not only tried it, you attained victory against your foe. It’s only natural that the people who watched the scene unfold from afar would start claiming that you’re the Argent Holy Woman, and your nickname would thus start to spread like wildfire.”

“Thanks for your lengthy explanation. I-I mean, you’re kidding, right? This is just some kind of joke?” I asked with pleading eyes. When she smiled at me, I felt relieved for a moment, thinking that she was just playing a prank on me. I smiled back with that sliver of hope in mind.

“I’m not.”

“Ghhh!” I gave a stifled scream at Tutte’s relentlessness and buried my head in my hands. The residents who saw me looked worried about my well-being.

“Oh, there you are! Heya, Mary! That was quite the show! I’m so glad I made it—I only barely got here in time! Whew!” a familiar voice called out to me.

“Hshhh!” I instinctively hissed as I laid eyes on a subspecies of a mandrake. “Wait, why are you here? Didn’t Tutte butcher you?”

“My lady, I’m not sure you should say it that way...” my maid said.

“That’s right. She made me into a delicious dish,” the spirit said, puffing out her chest. “Just in case, I had a backup head for Kairomea. I’m awesome, aren’t I?!”

It sounded like she was well prepared. *Which means, during the entire time she was with us, she was manipulating another one to head our way.*

“Impressive multitasking,” I said with envy. “Spirit trees really are something else. I’m so jealous of that ability—I want it too.”

“Please, don’t compliment her for unleashing the horde so she could get to a place she barely remembered the directions to,” Shelly said with a look of exhaustion while staggering over to us.

Right... She’d been gone during the whole Orthoaguina debacle.

“What’s wrong, Shelly? You look tired,” I said.

“Ha ha...” Shelly said with a dry chuckle. “When you were fighting against the chimeras, I was having a battle of my own, you see.”

I was surprised to hear it. “Huh? A battle?”

“The spirit tree left midway, right? Her spare body never arrived, but she said that she wanted to see things through to the end. Thus, she gave me a certain order.”

“An order?”

“She sent an army of spare mandrake bodies to Kairomea—so many she lost count of the number. She wanted me to find at least one of them so that she could see the conclusion of the incident here. If I didn’t make it in time, she threatened she would send the mandrakes to flood the town as revenge.”

Shelly heaved a large sigh and slumped her shoulders while the spirit tree turned away. According to Shelly, the spirit tree only had a vague sense of direction and had sent dozens of mandrakes to simply march forward in a straight line.

“But I wanted to see this through! Is there a problem?!” the spirit tree whined as she saw my reproachful gaze.

“I’m sure that was quite exhausting for you, Shelly,” I said sympathetically.

“It really was,” she replied. “I was so scared that I wouldn’t make it in time, so I gave searching for a mandrake my all. Worst case, there would’ve been mandrakes running wild within this town along with the chimeras. I would’ve usually just laughed it off, but the situation was dire here. It would’ve been beyond annoying, so I’m glad that we made it in time.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, as though she'd won a large war.

"What happened to the other mandrakes?" I asked.

"I didn't need them anymore, so I had them return to the ground. I'm sure they became wonderful nutrients to the plants around them," the spirit replied.

"What a waste of mandrakes..."

I'd just learned that behind the scenes, another source of exhaustion—ahem, another battle had unfolded, and I was glad that nothing major had happened. *So glad everything's fine. It is fine, right? I didn't inadvertently expand the spirit tree's domain, did I? Do I have responsibility for dragging her out in the first place? No, I'm overthinking things! Hah! Of course I am!* I hastily walked over to the tower, ignoring the looks of envy from the residents.

"Ha ha ha. So you've come, Argent Holy Woman," a large dragon said. He was standing in the middle and helping restore the tower as he swiveled his neck around to greet me with delight.

Orthoaguina was still alive. Perhaps his vitality as a dragon was something to commend, but anyone could've finished him off back then. Sita had stopped people from doing so.

When she had deployed the massive magic circle, she'd connected herself to the Book of Orthoaguina and, by extension, to the one behind it. She claimed to have learned his true thoughts. Though she wasn't able to give any details, she begged me and the rest of the residents to spare his life. As an outsider, I didn't have much say in the matter, and since I was standing au naturel, I'd swiftly left the scene. I'd left the final decision up to the residents, but it seemed like Sita's wish had been granted.

"And now you're being worked like a dog," I said. "That's rather laudable. And don't call me 'Argent Holy Woman.' When you say it, it lends credibility to the nickname that'll cause it to spread far and wide."

"Hmm? Is that not your name?" Orthoaguina inquired.

"Of course not. My real name is Mary. M. A. R. Y."

"Is that so...? Argent Holy Woman suits you far more."

“Stop that. I’m not the type to parade around with that name.”

“Heeey!” Sita interrupted our trivial conversation. “Stop fooling around and help us out here, Sir Orthoaguina!”

She looked cheery. She always was, but she’d been faking it to mask the heavy responsibility of chief librarian that had fallen on her shoulders. In the past, it’d looked like she’d been pushing herself to act happy, but now, she looked brighter than ever and dazzled in my eyes, as though she’d been freed from the chains that bound her. Her cheerfulness was supporting the glum residents greatly, and she was helping propel the restoration efforts forward. After all was said and done, it seemed like she had the qualities of a great leader who could pull everyone alongside her.

I’d expected the dragon to look miffed by his scolding, but he had a troubled expression on his face.

“Good grief, she sure does know how to work a dragon,” Orthoaguina said, his voice carrying a hint of nostalgia as he turned to Sita. “Ha ha ha, I suppose one cannot go against their blood... She’s just like that girl.”

“What girl?” I asked.

“An unusual elf girl who talked to me without fear. I made her my first test subject and put her in charge of this tower.”

Is he talking about Sita’s ancestor? Orthoaguina’s gaze softened like a father watching his child. Or so it seems. I don’t understand dragon facial expressions, but that’s what it looks like to me.

Without pausing for second thoughts, I posed a question that I had always had in the back of my mind ever since I’d learned about his existence.

“Hey, why did you start these experiments?” I asked.

Orthoaguina’s toothy grin quickly faded. He stared into the distance with narrowed eyes. “Back then, the forest was more dangerous than it is now. And they’re a weak race. They were so surprisingly frail...and so dear to me.”

I said not a word. I had no idea how dangerous the forest was back then, but I was able to empathize with the feeling of being more powerful than the rest

and realizing that my surroundings were exposed to immeasurable danger. Orthoaguina said nothing more and walked away. I didn't stop him and watched him leave.

While I gazed at the dragon's back, Magiluka called out to me from afar.

"Lady Mary!"

I turned toward her. Magiluka, Safina, and Sacher looked so energetic that I could hardly believe that they were on the brink of death just yesterday. Orthoaguina's words echoed in my mind. *Will a time come when I have to make a choice like he did? Will I be propelled by the urge to not lose anyone close to me? Or will I...*

"My lady?" Tutte said with worry at my silence.

I shook my head, freeing myself from those thoughts. "It's nothing. Let's go, Tutte." I smiled and squeezed her hand as I ran toward my beloved friends.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up the sixth volume of *The Invincible Little Lady*! It's been a while. This is Chatsufusa speaking.

After all manner of things happened, I was finally able to release this volume. It's all thanks to the publisher, everyone involved in the making of this book, to my readers who've supported this series, Micro Magazine, and my editor, Mr. I. Another thank-you to fuumi for providing fantastic illustrations to this volume as well. Thank you so, so much.

How did you enjoy the events that transpired within the Grand Archival Tower? I tried to make another heroine aside from Mary—a more...normal kind of girl. So it was that Sita came to be. However, as time wore on, I felt like she'd picked up a few unique traits of her own, which might be a bad habit of mine... What *is* normal, anyway? I ask myself this all the time.

In the beginning, I'd wanted to make Mary a side character, but before I knew it, she'd become a protagonist who made things happen behind the scenes. I wonder why... (Insert thousand-yard stare.) In any case, as usual, things never go according to Mary's plan. In a good way, of course. I'd be delighted if you enjoyed this volume.

And with that, I pray that we get to meet again! Until then, I'll be off.



Characters



I knew
it... It was
here...

Rachel?

Sita

Rachel

The Book of Orthoaquina

Bonus Short Story

It's Different from What I Imagined

"What are you doing, Sita?" my older sister, Rachel, called out from behind me.

"S-Sis! Don't be so loud," I said, putting a finger to my lips. "You'll get me caught."

My name is Sita. I'm the elf who serves as the chief librarian of the Grand Archival Tower in Kairomea.

"That so? Caught doing what?" my sister said. She seemed tired of my antics, but lowered her voice.

"N-Nothing, really."

"Oh, I see. And here I thought you were secretly watching Magiluka."

"Ugh... Well, if you know, then don't ask! Meanie." I puffed up my cheeks and pouted, and Rachel smiled and poked my face.

Once she had her fill, I stopped pouting and turned back toward Magiluka, who was standing in front of a bookcase some distance away. I'd met her and her friends within the domain of the spirit tree and guided them to our town.

"To tell you the truth, I have a sneaking suspicion that Magiluka is the Argent Holy Woman from the stories," I said.

"And that's why you're tailing her?" my sister asked.

"Well, if she's anything like the Argent Holy Woman from the books, she'll eventually get dragged into some kind of squee-worthy bittersweet situation. I can't take my eyes off her in case it happens. You get it."

"You're what I don't get! Good grief. Listen, Sita. I'm always telling you that reality and fiction aren't—"

“See! Look! Magiluka’s trying to grab a book that’s out of reach! She’s stretching her back to get it! Now here comes Sacher with impeccable timing. Just like in the story, the knight will grab the book for her from behind, and things will get romantic.” I was all too excited to regale Rachel with a scene from my books.

Sure enough, Sacher saw Magiluka’s predicament...and he turned on his heels to leave? It looked like he was fleeing the scene.

“Huh?” I gasped pathetically.

I hadn’t expected this at all. My sister looked at me dubiously as reality set in. *Your gaze hurts, sis.*

“Ah, Sacher!” Magiluka said, noticing him before he escaped. “You’ve come at just the right time. Could you please get these books for me?”

He sighed with resignation as he came back.

“Um, I want you to grab this one and this one,” Magiluka requested. “And that one. And that one. And the one over there. And this one too, please.”

“Stop! Don’t tell me all of them at once! It’s too many!” Sacher cried. “I can’t remember them all!”

Suddenly, my maidenly senses (some might say my overactive imagination) began tingling. “I get it now—my prediction was off because Sacher isn’t the gentlemanly type of knight, but rather, he’s more of the oblivious, awkward type,” I insisted in a frantic whisper. “He’ll tell her to grab the books herself and lift her on his shoulders, and that’ll really get her heart pounding!”

Rachel seemed skeptical, but she stayed with me and quietly watched Magiluka and Sacher bicker.

“Very well,” Magiluka said. “I’ll grab them myself, so could you go on all fours? I’ll use you as my stepladder.”

“Do you *really* think I’m gonna say yes to that?” Sacher replied. “Damn, I shoulda left when I had the chance!”

There was nothing romantic about this. I froze, completely taken aback she would ask that of him—and once again, my sister shot me a dubious look.

“Now, now, calm down, you two,” His Highness Prince Reifus said, quelling the argument. “You’re disturbing the other guests.”

Wait, hold on! Romantic situations can happen with knights, but princes are just as good too!

“I’m sure that the prince’s gentlemanly conduct can make her heart skip a beat!” I said. I wasn’t ready to give up, so I gazed at the prince with hope.

“Lady Magiluka, I think it’s quite unladylike to step on top of Sacher,” the prince said. “You mustn’t forget your manners as a lady. Not to mention you’re wearing a skirt—it would really be quite problematic.”

“Ah, you’re right,” Magiluka replied. “I was so absorbed in my books that I neglected to remember that. It was indeed quite thoughtless of me. It’s so like you to be in touch with women’s matters— Ahem, I mean, thank you.”

Magiluka’s awe at the prince’s advice reminded me of the way a girl would hang on every word of a more experienced woman. *This is different from what I imagined... Is it just me, or is the prince awfully familiar with how women comport themselves?* I tilted my head to one side as my imagination underwent yet another dose of reality.

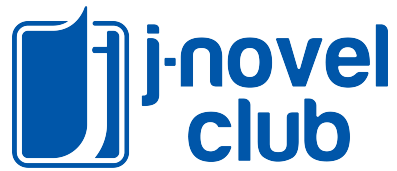
Before long, Rachel grabbed me by the scruff of my neck. “Satisfied?” she asked. “Reality and fiction aren’t the same. Stop fooling around and get to work. Come on.”

“W-Wait, sis! I just want to observe them just a bit more! Please? There might be a bittersweet romantic scene here! We might miss a legend unfolding right before our eyes!” Despite my attempt to ignore the writing on the wall and resist, Rachel dragged me away from the scene.









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The Invincible Little Lady: Volume 6

by Chatsufusa

Translated by piyo Edited by Zubonjin

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