

NOVEL
10

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man



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Mira entered as directed, amazed by what she saw in the home.

"This is incredible..."

The house itself was an ordinary stone-and-lumber building, but the inside was all a garden save for the space around the central table.

Moreover, it wasn't a hodgepodge of colors like the outside; it was sorted by color in perfect order.



Fenrir glowered at her with bloodshot eyes. He was thirty meters long, too big to see his face without looking straight up. Supposedly, he was originally twice this size, proving the power of the seal.

"Even when he's sealed, he's just...frightening."

She Professed Herself Pupil of the Wise Man



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Seven Seas Entertainment



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Kenja no deshi wo nanoru kenja 10
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MICRO MAGAZINE, INC., Tokyo.
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digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
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PUBLISHER: Lianne Senter
VICE PRESIDENT: Adam Arnold
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ISBN: 978-1-68579-662-4

Printed in Canada

First Printing: April 2024

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1

AT THE CENTER of the Earth Continent were four mountain ranges. Each one ran in one of the cardinal directions and was centered around the Forest of Seasons. Despite the summer heat, snow still covered the mountain peaks, drawing a firm, white curve, more than five thousand meters high, through the vast greenery. A wagon flew above the eastern mountain range, carried by Garuda.

“Gosh, it looks cold down there,” Mira muttered as she gazed out the window.

While the snow-covered mountains stretched beneath her, the inside of the wagon was as cozy as could be. Mira’s special-ordered wagon had been created to maintain its internal environment, even at high altitudes. She savored the magnificent view as if relaxing in her bedroom, feeling just a tiny bit smug.

She leaned forward and looked westward. “It was...over there, I believe?”

The Forest of Seasons was sprawled within the valley where the mountain ranges intersected and was home to the headquarters of Wise Man Kagura and her Isuzu Alliance. The Isuzu Alliance had been formed to oppose the spirit-harming Chimera Clausen. Now that they had defeated their sworn enemy, Isuzu was focusing on the conservation of nature—their cover story for all these years.

Rumors of Chimera’s defeat are spreading, even in station towns. Things are only going to get busier. Poor Kagura.

The armed forces of Isuzu were now hard at work sweeping up Chimera remnants all across the land. As rumors spread further, they would find themselves with even more headaches.

While gazing in the direction of the Forest of Seasons, Mira prayed for their good luck and opened a station lunch she’d bought at her last stop. *Summer Night’s Imperial Cuisine* was written on the outside of the meal’s packaging. At first glance, it was a common dish that used many of summer’s staple

ingredients. But what truly mattered was the chef.

Head Chef Brown had once served royalty before retiring and opening up a small shop in the station town. Unsurprisingly, it was one of the most popular shops in the station city, and Summer Night's Imperial Cuisine could only be obtained there. Mira had waited in line for a good thirty minutes. According to an employee, the name and contents of the meal were both seasonal—and by the end of her meal, Mira was certain that she wanted to try all four.

"Oho! What a colorful meal we have today." An appetizing aroma filled the wagon, and Mira inhaled deeply, savoring the food with her eyes and nose first. A station lunch master had once taught her that this was the best way to honor the food before digging in.

"Classy, yet with a rich taste that satisfies completely. A wonderful meal," Mira mused.

The quality was proof of the head chef's breadth of skill; even though he'd made a living serving kings, he could bring out the full potential of commoners' food. *There's nothing better than a home-cooked meal made with love, after all...*

Mira had already devoured Mariana's Hall of Fame-worthy packed lunch. After she cleaned up the trash and mentally praised Mariana, Mira turned her gaze away from the distant mountains and to the nearer plains and forests.

"I hope I'll find him quickly."

Her objective was to find Soul Howl, one of the Nine Wise Men. She was on her way to Grandrings, a massive, long-standing city in northwest Grimdark. The city housed the Guild Union that managed the Ancient Underground City.

After four days of passing countless towns and villages, her destination finally came into view around midday. Past the distant, sprawling plains and forests, a grand, proud city with a long history stood at the back of a low hill.

"It doesn't get much more fantasy than this."

Grandrings was often called "the three-ringed city" due to its shape—three

rings arranged in a triangular shape. As Mira proceeded, her view of the city became clearer. Many tall chimneys jutted upward from within one ring, which was distinctly industrial and production-oriented. The other two weren't very different from one another; both had balanced commercial and residential districts. In the very center of the three rings stood the majestic palace of the duke who governed the surrounding city. Despite its age, the palace hadn't lost its luster or dignity.

Even more eye-catching was the sky above the city, however. Shikigami, summons, corpses of giant birds controlled by necromancy—there were quite a few sky travelers besides Mira.

The three-ringed city was home to an underground dungeon that housed the ruins of an even more ancient city. It was a place that had money-making opportunities for both fresh and veteran adventurers alike—a dream come true for all. It was a rare dungeon whose interior was divided by rank, making it perfect for training as well. As a result, there were far more adventurers here than in any other place Mira had stopped by yet. That meant that there were more people who were strong enough to fly as well. Even the unpopular summoner class saw some representation!

When Mira arrived in the skies above Grandrings, she surveyed the mages from her window and celebrated the fact that summoners were represented. “Ooh, they’re riding Hippogriffs. That means they’re my people! Heck yeah! There are dozens of us out there!”

Indeed, the summoners did exist.

People with the power of flight weren’t all that rare in this city, which meant additional benefits. When she looked to the surface, she saw landing spaces. This was the perfect opportunity for Mira, as she hated searching for places to land. She ordered Garuda to bring the wagon down to the landing area without giving a second thought about causing a stir with her arrival.

However, Mira had not noticed that she was the only one in such classy transportation. She still managed to stand out.

After landing in the city and dismissing Garuda, she summoned her gray bear,

Guardian Ash. Soon, the great beast was pulling the wagon along the main street.

The main street was constructed with beautifully arranged cobblestone and was wide enough for large carriages to pass each other with ease. Pedestrian traffic was quite diverse as well. The large buildings on either side of the road were made of stone, lumber, and brick. The view from the driver's seat was a fantasy lover's dream. *Now this is what I'm talking about.* It was incredible how the impression changed now that things were reality.

Thinking about her gaming days, Mira headed for the Guild Union to search for eyewitness reports of Soul Howl.

The Guild Union was at the end of a maze of streets, but Mira managed to make it—with the help of ample signage *and* a few kind security guards along the way. Grandrings's Guild Union housed both the warriors' and mages' guilds, making it much bigger than the surrounding buildings. While it was also made of stone and brick, a luxuriously decorated gate sat at its front, and its surrounding walls bore intricate carvings. As one might expect, the gate received traffic worthy of its size, and people flooded in and out. This was quite different from the union buildings she'd visited so far.

Ah, I shouldn't dawdle. Mira realized she was holding up traffic and drove the wagon through the gate.

The main building standing beyond the gate was as fancy as that of any duke's mansion. The grounds around it were perfectly manicured, making an ideal parking lot. Brick stables could be seen nearby. It seemed the Guild Union allowed adventurers to store carriages too. A sign hanging at the side read, "3,000 ducats per day for carriages; 2,000 ducats per day for horses."

Upon seeing it, Mira rode into the parking lot and spoke to a man in uniform. "I'd like to store this wagon."

"Understood. Thank you." The man ran over with an affable smile on his face and quickly explained the details.

The day's fee would be taken not upon deposit but at midnight. She could stay for up to ten days; any longer and her vehicle would be impounded. However, if she let them know that she would be delayed ahead of time, they

could be flexible. The carriage-washing service was an additional charge. The covered lot was limited to veteran adventurers.

After listening to the rough explanation, Mira presented her ID card and parked the wagon in the covered lot, where she was given a receipt with a number. Incidentally, she told them that she didn't need the wash service and informed them that she might be staying longer than ten days.

"Best of luck, ma'am," the staff member said, seeing her off.

Mira left the parking lot and stepped into the Guild Union.

"It's even bigger than Sentopoli's..."

She'd expected as much from the size of the building, but the lobby was still shockingly spacious. It was easily two hundred meters wide. To the left was the Mages' Guild, and to the right was the Warriors' Guild. The lobby overflowed with people.

Mira found an open reception counter and stood on her tiptoes to peek over it. "Excuse me? I'd like to ask a question."

A female employee smiled gently at her and replied, "Of course. Ask me anything."

"I happen to be searching for an acquaintance. Do you know if anyone has entered the Ancient Underground City's Chalk Chamber of late?"

In order to create the Holy Grail of Heavenly Light, one needed a fragment of the Chalk Orb. The orb was in the Chalk Chamber. That was the *only* place the fragment could be obtained—Soul Howl would have no other choice.

The receptionist didn't recall anything of the sort. "The Chalk Chamber is beneath the bottom level and protected by the guardian of the underground city. None can even approach it. I think I would remember if someone so rash passed through here," she declared firmly. Indeed, the guardian protecting the deepest depths of the underground city was no ordinary monster. Even a Wise Man would struggle against it alone.

"Hrmm, I see. Just to be sure..." Her first question had flopped, but Mira did not give up. She tried to describe Soul Howl on the fly. "You haven't seen a

gloomy man with fierce eyes? Tries too hard to act cool, somehow making it cringe? Er, the kind of man who wears clothes that a child would think a cool person would wear? No one like that?”

“Gloomy man with fierce eyes... Tries to act cool, but in a juvenile way...” She considered the description for a moment, but given the sheer number of people who came through here, it was unlikely that she would remember. “I’m sorry. I have no idea who you’re talking about.”

“Hrmm. Well, I suppose that’s fair.”

Given the volume of adventurers here, it would be all the more difficult to find one particular person among them. Moreover, she wasn’t certain that Soul Howl had even been here yet. It was a total shot in the dark. Mira wondered what to do.

Just then, the receptionist piped up, as if remembering something. “Oh! It wasn’t the Chalk Chamber, but someone did request a permit for the bottom level a week ago.”

“What?! Are you certain?!” Mira leaned forward and looked up excitedly.

In order to get to the Chalk Chamber, one naturally needed to go to the bottom level. That would require a permit. If someone had come in search of a permit, then maybe it was Soul Howl. Mira had asked the wrong questions. She felt silly for not asking about the bottom level first.

“There aren’t many people who go to the bottom level, even among all of these adventurers. I remember him vividly. His face was covered with a mask. I would call him more *suspicious* than gloomy.”

“Ooh, that must be him!” Mira squealed. He was exactly the sort to call attention to himself while trying to stay low-key. It was likely the man himself. That was a Wise Man for you; even in a city full of adventurers, they stood out. “You wouldn’t happen to know where he is now, would you?!” she asked expectantly. Given how conspicuous he was, maybe others had information.

“I’m sorry, I don’t. But the underground city is vast. He may still be working to clear it as we speak.”

“Hrmm. You’re not wrong there...”

As a city, it naturally took up a large area. There were seven levels in all, including the Chalk Chamber. The dungeon was so vast that clearing it normally took an entire month. It had taken Mira many weeks to clear it herself. The person who seemed to be Soul Howl had visited one week ago. He could still be there. If she pursued as fast as she could, she might be able to catch him.

Knowing that, she pompously revealed her ID and handed it to the employee. “Then I would like a permit for the bottom level too.”

However, Mira had forgotten one major detail.

The receptionist looked at the overconfident Mira with pity in her eyes. “I can only give C-rank adventurers a permit to the fifth level. Sorry...”

Indeed, her adventurer rank was still C. The required rank went up as one descended from the top first level to the bottom seventh level. Only those who were A-rank could go all the way down. This was an unexpected obstacle.

Nrgh... The stupid A-rank wall. Maybe I ought to show off my awards and force the issue. No, even Solomon couldn't get me greater than C-rank. Awards probably won't work either. I'll have to find some A-rank adventurer...again...

Mira began pondering how to convince an A-rank adventurer to accompany her, just like when she had gone to the Celestial Ruins and Citadel of Scales.

After holding Mira's adventurer ID to some kind of scanner, the receptionist said, “Oh, wait just a moment.”

What now? Mira waited as directed and watched the clerk operate something.

“Well, that's that. Thank you for waiting. It seems you've been putting in some fantastic work. You've been granted permission to be promoted to A-rank,” the receptionist said, surprised.

Mira broke into happy celebration.

“My word! That is convenient!” Mira's gratitude gave way to puzzlement, as she had no recollection of performing exceptional feats as an adventurer. In fact, she found herself suspicious at this convenient yet sudden turn of events. “But what did I do?”

The receptionist's next statement cleared things up. Her promotion was a result of her accomplishments in Sentopoli. In other words, defeating Chimera Clausen had earned her quite a few points.

"Ooh, I see. So that got counted."

The contract between Isuzu and the adventurers they worked with actually included terms stipulating that their efforts would be recognized. That was Isuzu being considerate since they were keeping these adventurers away from other work for so long. The Guild Union couldn't refuse this either; though it might not have been a formal request through the guilds, defeating Chimera Clausen was a big deal. As a result, Mira now found herself the recipient of a windfall.

The destruction of Chimera Clausen had been the biggest news in quite some time, so the receptionist said that it was understandable that the people involved had been promoted. However, it was extremely rare for people to be promoted two whole ranks at once. She was still a little shocked.

"Once I've finished the paperwork for your promotion, I can issue a permit to the lowest levels. It will take some time, given that you're rising two ranks at once. I'll need to contact the home office, so it may not be ready until tomorrow morning."

It seemed that, on top of the usual paperwork, she needed to receive A-rank confirmation from the home office. That would take a day, but from Mira's perspective, that meant waiting *only* a day for something she'd never expected to get in the first place.

"I'll be counting on you!" Mira entrusted the promotion paperwork to the clerk. With that settled, she said she'd be back in the morning and departed.

Chapter 2

Now, knowing this dungeon, this may be a long run. I'll have to prepare!

The Ancient Underground City was deep and vast. When combined, all of the dungeons Mira had been to since this world had become reality were still only a fraction of its size. If she needed a break, she couldn't just simply log out partway through either.

Mira looked around the lobby as she considered all this, searching for the specialty shops for adventurers that were common in large Guild Union buildings. The lobby wasn't just wide, it was extremely tall as well. The stone construction was imposing. On closer inspection, the pillars were covered in intricate carvings. The ceiling had a fresco painting of the Trinity in paradise. As someone who knew nothing about art, Mira simply found it all impressive and got back to her shopping. Or she tried, at least.

Hrmm... I don't see any. She was soon discouraged by the lack of specialty shops.

"Very well. Next stop..." Mira stepped away from the map posted at the corner of the lobby and entrusted her hopes to the town's shopping district.

Just then, a man ran over to her. He smiled affably, took up position right next to Mira, and said, "Pardon me. When you were at reception, they said you were part of the group that crushed Chimera, didn't they? I wanted to ask you about the team—specifically, its members."

He had a pen and notepad in hand and wore a loose-fitting shirt and pants. A big bag was slung over his shoulder. The man didn't look to be an adventurer; Mira thought that he looked much more like an old-timey newspaper reporter.

"I'm afraid I don't have much to share."

Mira was acquainted with the executives at Isuzu's home base, but she didn't know much about the other members. In fact, she'd only met most of the people involved after the battle was over. How could she possibly tell him

anything?

Despite Mira's reluctance, the reporter pleaded, "Please, anything. Tell me what you know about the Spirit Queen, at least. Hobbies, favorite foods... I'll take anything! Bust, waist, and hip sizes would be great too. I'll pay for the information!"

Spirit...Queen?

The word *pay* tugged at Mira's heart. She put a finger to her chin, her face serious, and silently repeated the other two words over and over. At the same time, the room fell silent. More precisely, the voices of those around them had ceased. This union, one of the largest on the continent, naturally had many staff members to serve its even more numerous adventurers. All attention had turned to Mira at the reporter's words. Apparently, everyone else was keen to know about someone called the Spirit Queen too.

After ten seconds or so of this rare silence, Mira took the opportunity to speak. "Erm...Who is the Spirit Queen, exactly?"

Everyone instantly froze, and the air filled with tension. All those people with expectant looks on their faces widened their eyes in shock as if confused by the question.

"Huh? You know, the Spirit Queen!" The reporter repeated the name, clearly bewildered.

This still meant nothing to the summoner. Mira tilted her head. "Yes, I can guess that much. But is there anyone who actually goes by that name?"

People around her began to speak up, speculating that perhaps she'd lied about being part of the mission.

"Anyone from the mission would've seen the Spirit King's appearance. The Spirit Queen is the one who caused it! She's the unparalleled beauty who drew the Spirit King out of hiding!" the reporter shouted in frustration at the confused Mira.

Then she understood. The Spirit Queen who'd drawn out the Spirit King... All of her questions had been answered.

Wait a second. That's... He's talking about me!

Indeed, the Spirit Queen was none other than Mira herself. How could they not realize it was her? She'd shown herself off proudly during the demonstration, so anyone should've been able to tell at a glance. Was it her clothes? To be fair, she was wearing summer clothes now. Was that enough to make her unrecognizable?

Curious, Mira asked, "Can you describe what you believe the Spirit Queen looks like?"

The man seemed to return to his senses. He cleared his throat and described the Spirit Queen in glowing detail, like a little boy talking about his dreams. According to him, she was a tremendous summoner who had even the Spirit King at her beck and call. The Three Great Kingdoms had expressed interest in her, for they considered her the second coming of the Hero-King Forsetia. The man raised his voice further as he claimed that, above all else, the Spirit Queen was an unparalleled beauty with long, sparkly silver hair.

Definitely me. Why haven't they noticed?

After the man finished his glowing description, Mira ostentatiously flipped her hair, puffed out her chest, and said, "Does that not sound a lot like me?" Surely, they'd make the connection.

However, both he and those around him recoiled.

"Your hair is silver...but you're not like the Spirit Queen. Y'know?" the man said, looking Mira over. The other men looked disappointed.

That was all it took for Mira to understand. When stories spread far and wide like this, they often became exaggerated. It seemed the people here preferred someone large enough to *stand out* rather than someone who was just the right size.

"Then I'm afraid I wouldn't know." Now certain that these people were a lost cause, Mira turned on her heel, ignoring the reporter's cries for her to stop.

Naturally, the name of the Spirit Queen had supplanted the name of Mira when it came to news of Chimera Clausen's defeat. The Spirit King's overwhelming presence had made everyone more or less forget about Mira's

introduction mere moments prior. Moreover, Mira's "cute" aesthetic had been idealized and dramatized until it had become "beautiful." So now she was the *Spirit Queen*, and from that title emerged a false image of a woman with *bountiful proportions*. If Mira had measurements closer to Luminaria's, there wouldn't have been any question.

Rumors went halfway across the world before the truth could even get its boots on. It would take some time before Mira was recognized by the average person.

"Ignorant jerks... This is *perfection!* All those idiots care about is size," Mira grumbled as she left the union building with a hand on her ideal bosom. After getting a good feel for their size and softness, she confidently faced forward and declared, "Perfection!"

Then she headed into town in high spirits. The opinions of the unwashed masses didn't matter to her.

Now where are those shops?

She wandered around for some time, but she never found a single store. Mira stopped. Grandrings was ridiculously large, and she'd only been here a few times in the past. She didn't remember much about its layout. Many adventurers passed by, but only residences and government buildings lined the road. When she turned around, she saw the Adventurers' Guild Union.

Most of the unions she'd stopped by, up to this point, were conspicuously placed in convenient locations—downtowns or commercial districts. It seemed this one was an exception. She'd expected to find shops near the building, but there were still no shops in sight. This was just so odd.

Just when she'd decided that boarding Pegasus and looking from the sky would be faster, someone addressed her. "What are you doing standing around here, little girl? Are you lost?"

When Mira turned, she found a beautiful woman in a man's blue coat. Indeed, a *man's* blue coat. The woman was of average height, and while her clothes were masculine, certain feminine parts were still prominent. Her cute

face bore an innocent expression, but anyone could tell that she was a fully grown woman at a glance. Mira stared at the woman's chest, thinking her "little girl" remark was a snide insult. But just like the ignorant masses she'd just scorned, she found that she couldn't tear her eyes away. Mira's perfection aside, she found herself entranced by the quality of the woman's quantity.

While Mira gawked at the woman's feminine curves, the woman mistook her expression as confusion and said with a gentle smile, "Er, guess I surprised you. Sorry about that. I'm not a creep or anything. Just figured it's a little dangerous for someone like you to stand still in a place with so much traffic like this."

"Ah, hrmm... Um, well." Mira averted her eyes, flustered by the kindhearted woman's pure intentions. Then she made an excuse, hoping it seemed as if she hadn't just been ogling her. "I expected there would be shops near the union building. Haven't found any, though. It's a bit of a surprise."

"Oh, so you're an adventurer too. Is it your first time in town? I'm not surprised you're confused. Things work a little differently here."

Thanks to her appearance being that of a cute little girl, Mira's staring had gone unnoticed. The woman spoke gently, explaining the difference between Grandrings's Adventurers' Guild Union and those of other cities. As Mira knew, most were conveniently located near shopping districts and downtowns. However, this city's long history meant that there were many long-established shops in the shopping district, leaving no space for such a large building. As a result, they'd refurbished an old party venue in this district, which was otherwise full of residences and government buildings, and turned it into the union.

"But as you saw, the union is as busy as they get. It's probably for the best that they kept it out of the shopping district," the woman said, wrapping up her explanation pompously. However, her femininity won out, making it just look cute in the end.

That explained, the woman told Mira where the shopping district was, and the two parted ways. Mira watched her as she left. It was then that she noticed a familiar symbol.

"Goodness, she was one of Cyril's guild? No wonder she's so kind."

The scarlet bell—the symbol of Écarlate Carillon, a guild led by former player Cyril—adorned the woman's coat.

Next time I see Cyril, I'll have to mention her...except I forgot to get her name. Well, I'll just call her Takarazuka. I'm sure he'll get it, Mira thought to herself, while she followed the woman's directions and successfully made it to the shopping district.

Grandrings's biggest shopping district was just as busy as the ones in Sentopoli and Roslein. Despite the old-fashioned, subdued appearance of the streets, the crowds were thick and rowdy. Many of the people here were adventurers. Armor shops and potion stores thrived, and people gathered at the familiar equipment specialty shop.

While I am curious about that one, I must focus on the most important thing: food.

Mira gazed at the “New products in stock!” sign hanging at Dinoire Trading’s Grandrings branch, remembering the reality of her situation.

The Ancient Underground City was massive; it could take a month to clear. Since she didn’t know where Soul Howl was, she’d have to search extensively. This meant she’d be gone for more than just a few days—she’d have to prepare for weeks. The biggest problem was food. Monster meat could serve as a source of protein if she could stomach the taste, but it would not provide vitamins normally found in veggies. An underground city received little sunlight, which meant she wasn’t likely to find any fruits or wild vegetables to forage. And without proper nutrition, it would be impossible to search the underground city.

Mira often thought about the differences between the game world and reality when she read the *Encyclopedia of Skills*, which she’d obtained from Luminaria. The biggest major difference was food. While it had once been optional, it was now an indispensable must.

“I’ll just have to buy several weeks’ worth!”

The Ancient Underground City was a popular dungeon. Instead of pinning her

hopes on foraging greens that other adventurers might harvest before her, it would be far more efficient to bring safe, shelf-stable ingredients. Unlike the User's Bangles held by most veterans, Mira's Item Box had no capacity limit.

With a spring in her step, she looked around the shopping district for a grocery store. She'd finally get to use one of the adventurer's items she'd purchased in Sentopoli: the cooking set. There was something exciting about using a new tool for the first time. Fantasizing about what she might cook first, Mira stopped in front of a store.

After looking at all the colorful, juicy fruits and veggies, she declared, "I'll buy a little of everything!"

The shopkeeper turned, surprised. "Th-that's going to be pretty heavy. Are you sure?" he asked, concerned.

Mira showed off the glistening bangle on her left wrist. "I'll be just fine," she replied. Despite being fundamentally different, Mira's bangle looked like the User's Bangle used by veterans.

"Oh, an adventurer? Did your party send you shopping?" the shopkeeper mused. He was impressed when he saw the bangle and began arranging piles of each vegetable and fruit in stock. As he went, he told Mira how long each one lasted. Some remained fresh for two weeks. Others had to be eaten in four days for freshness, and so on. "Be careful out there, now."

She bought around 30 kilograms worth of produce, costing 52,000 ducats in total. As she left, the shopkeeper turned to serve other customers.

Most of these expire in under a week. There's no way I can eat all of this in time. Nah, I'll be fine!

The expiration dates the shopkeeper gave her didn't matter much to Mira. Unlike User's Bangles, former players' Item Boxes still functioned like they had in-game. As long as something wasn't already expired when placed in the Item Box, it would stay fresh—worrying about expiration dates was unnecessary.

According to Solomon, there were former players who took advantage of this to make money by importing fresh seafood to the mountains. Fresh food always tasted better than frozen, making it popular among noble gourmands. It was a

simple but clever way to earn honest money.

Still...I splurged a bit. I don't even know how to cook some of these.

Mira checked the type of each fruit and vegetable as she deposited them in her Item Box. Some vegetables were the same as those in her old world, while others were totally unfamiliar. Should she look for a cookbook? Or should she entrust her fate to the all-powerful cooking method that was boiling? After she finished storing everything, Mira found her next objective: the butcher on the other side of the road.

The butcher had meat from rabbits, sheep, goats, horses, deer, frogs, and even snakes, in addition to such staples as beef, pork, and poultry. They also sold a variety of fantasy meats from dragons and other exotic beasts.

Mira slipped into the crowd of meat-seekers and took a good look at each cut. However, she turned her face away from the rabbit meat; the image of her adorable Luna popped into her mind, and it was too much to bear. All of the others were fine, though.

“I’d like two kilograms of each of these!”

Mira pointedly avoided the rabbit meat, but she picked out beef, pork, and poultry, along with some others based on their appearance and pure curiosity.

“Did someone send you out shopping? Aw, poor kid.” The woman running the store gave off a laid-back vibe. She smiled when she saw the bangle on Mira’s arm. But she was all business as she skillfully wrapped Mira’s order with dark green paper.

“Mm. Is it just me, or does that paper smell good?” Mira asked. It smelled like sweet herbs and didn’t seem to be simple wrapping paper.

“That’s because the paper was seeped in medicinal herbs. It absorbs the smell and makes the meat less likely to spoil. And it’s cheap! My boss says all butchers use it.”

“Oho, so it’s the smell of medicinal herbs. How interesting.”

No doubt the green paper took time and effort to prepare, but it was cheap

enough to always be available. *How convenient*, Mira mused as she watched the wrapped meat pile up in no time. She learned that it was called preservative paper. Former players had produced and circulated it throughout the world.

Once the transaction was done, the butcher smiled and waved to Mira. “Okay, thanks for your business. Come again soon!” Another customer promptly called her over, and she left to deal with them, staying relaxed the whole time.

With this much food, I think I could last a month down there.

She had bought two kilograms each of beef, pork, and poultry—sirloin, ribs, thigh, and more. She’d also picked out a few bits of sheep, deer, and dragon based on their fattiness and marbling. Now she had 35 kilograms of meat in total, which had cost her 150,000 ducats. Combined with the produce she’d bought earlier, this shopping trip was over 200,000 ducats already. She’d used one-fifth of the funds she’d received from Solomon already, and there was still shopping to be done.

Mira smiled gleefully as she deposited the wrapped meat in her Item Box. It felt like getting ready for a trip. Once the huge pile of meat was put away, she ran around the shopping districts in search of more.

Chapter 3

FLOUR AND GRAINS, frozen seafood, condiments—Mira purchased it all. After buying all of her notable wants, Mira murmured happily, “Well, I think that will do. Now...”

With that out of the way, she charged into the branch office of Dinoire Trading, the specialty shop for adventurers.

“Oh, so these are their new products? There are so many!” Mira’s eyes shone as she stood before a display in the corner of the store. Above the plentiful shelves was a large sign that proudly boasted, “Commemorating our new series!”

Long ago, Mira had met Cedric, the heir of Dinoire Trading. It seemed they had finally released their new series, intended for veteran adventurers with User’s Bangles. The sleeping bag he’d given Mira was quite a useful item. Mira ran over to the display as if magnetized, her expectations high.

“I see. This is quite well-thought-out.”

The first thing that drew her eye was a large tent. It was big enough to fit six adults lying down, and more than two meters tall, making it surprisingly spacious. The fabric was both fireproof and insulated. The attached description also claimed that one could safely cook *and* keep warm by buying the technomancy-powered stove and chimney (sold separately).

Even more noticeable was a device casually placed in the corner—a magical tool with a cooling feature. An ad proclaimed, “For the coming hot season!” It operated using Dinoire Trading’s magic cells. The air conditioner was a little big, but light. The signage noted that it could cool an area exactly the size of the tent, which stood proudly nearby, clearly meant to serve as an example. The inside was well-cooled.

“Isn’t this just perfection?! With my sleeping bag, it’ll be even more comfortable!” Mira sprawled out in the center and recalled the comfort of an air-conditioned room on a hot summer’s day. “And a mithril frame too? Now

that is what I'd expect for luxury camping."

Mira turned her attention to the frame. There was a lamp attached to this display, illuminating the light, green mithril frame. Strong winds wouldn't stand a chance against the tent.

With this, she'd be able to glamp in style in the Ancient Underground City. *Light, yet sturdy mithril construction. All this living space! It becomes even cozier when using all the equipment sold separately too. What a lovely item,* Mira thought, fancying herself a critic.

Just as she began rolling around, the tent flap suddenly opened. A man who looked to be an adventurer peeked inside. She looked up at him, having rolled around right at the entrance, and tensed up when they made eye contact. Though her embarrassment was clear, she managed to squeak out to her fellow adventurer, "It...seems comfortable to me. I'd recommend it."

From his point of view, he'd opened the sample tent and found a little girl rolling around without a care in the world. And her skirt had rolled up.



“Uh, yeah, seems like it. Uh... S-sorry for interrupting.” The apology was genuine. Perhaps it was because he’d seen her underwear. Perhaps it was because he’d interrupted her fun. Maybe it was both. Either way, he retreated.

The tent’s sheer comfort made me forget I was in a shop.

Mira stood up and straightened out her clothes and hair. After a moment of reflection, she gathered herself and checked the tent’s price tag. She gasped. “Seven-point-eight million?!”

I underestimated the standards of veteran adventurer luxury...

Mithril was in high demand in many fields due to it being lightweight and durable. Likewise, the coal-crystal fabric excelled at heat resistance, insulation, and even blade resistance. Both materials were used amply in this tent, known as the All-Purpose Kumamuro Tent Mk1. Its quality was a direct result of the materials used to make it.

Mira’s previous certainty that she *had* to buy it had already been blown away by the sheer price. But it got worse.

“And this is three million...”

The air conditioner, which would turn a hot summer’s day into paradise, was jaw-droppingly expensive as well. Even the extra parts that were sold separately, such as the technomancy-powered stove and anti-monster alarm, were all millions of ducats as well.

Totally deflated, Mira fearfully checked to see if she’d broken anything before sneaking out of the tent.

“Well, it’s *fine*, I guess. I just don’t have the cash on hand. If I sold some of my assets, then maybe...” she blustered to nobody in particular before moving to a section with less expensive-looking goods.

Along the way, she found a familiar object at the end of the expensive section for veteran adventurers. It was the same special sleeping bag that Cedric had given Mira, advertised as being Heinrich the Avalanche’s favorite. It was a million ducats—no less jaw-dropping in price than the other goods here.

“He had seemed rather interested in it at the time...”

Heinrich, an adventurer, had met Mira on her way to the Celestial Ruins. He was a man who was very particular about his sleep, and he'd shown a lot of interest in Mira's special sleeping bag. Based on that advertising slogan, he must've purchased one as well and really liked it.

In a roundabout way, I suppose this means my advertising worked. Next time I meet Cedric, I ought to bug him for a commission. She grinned ruefully to herself in front of the special sleeping bags. The adventurer who'd walked in on her before gazed worriedly in her direction.

From there, Mira—spirit deflated by the high prices—had her vigor renewed by the cheaper goods for lower-ranking adventurers. She splurged madly, indulging in a little retail therapy. She tossed everything that caught her interest into her shopping cart, from extra utensils for her cooking set to the “just add water” laundry bag. Finally, she bought a value pack of thirty magic cells to power all of her goods and lined up at the counter. Mira proudly presented her coupon and received a 20 percent discount for her entire order. Having forgotten all about the expensive tent, she paid with a smile.

Just as she began depositing all of her purchases into her Item Box, the ground shook violently, as if something were trying to split the earth.

“Goodness, an earthquake?”

Twenty seconds later, the rumbling calmed. It hadn't been intense enough to cause any accidents or injuries; it'd merely made the shelves creak and the signage shake.

As someone who'd grown up in a country known for its earthquakes, Mira didn't mind a bit of shaking every now and then. The other shoppers didn't seem to be of the same mind and made their discomfort known. Mira heard their complaints and discovered an unexpected truth about Grandrings: These earthquakes had become common in the city over the past year. Moreover, this region hadn't had any known earthquakes for the past thousand years. The locals were especially uneasy about the current state of things.

Hrmm... The past year?

There weren't any volcanoes nearby, and perhaps due to the earthquakes not being particularly strong, some people had stopped caring. That said, many speculated as to why these earthquakes were occurring, due to the cause being unknown. Some had even thought up grand conspiracies involving large fiends, secret organizations akin to Chimera Clausen, and the like. But despite her curiosity, a tiny earthquake wasn't anything that Mira could fix.

After she finished her preparations for the coming dungeon, she left Dinoire Trading and focused on searching for a place to rest her head.

Wherever adventurers gathered, inns prospered. When Mira asked some patrolling guards where she might find them, they pointed her to a district on the other side of the shopping plaza. Mira thanked them and went down a side street. She strolled down the road, under the evening sky, her interest piqued by the many stalls selling various rare and unusual items. When she exited the side street, it was like merging into a station town. Countless inns lined the streets and competed for attention.

"Business is booming here too, I see."

It was approaching nighttime, so the place was just as bustling as the shopping district.

Mira found that one of the best parts of traveling was that once-in-a-lifetime encounter with an inn in a new place. *Which will I choose today?* she wondered as she walked happily down the street. Eventually, she noticed that many of them had put up No Vacancy signs.

"Even this one?"

All of the cliché fantasy inns with beds and dining halls had already been swamped by other adventurers.

She stopped by another inn and questioned a friendly innkeeper. He replied that the average inn cost around 5,000 ducats per night, and they were popular among adventurers. At this time of night, she'd have trouble finding an empty room. This city possessed the largest dungeon on the continent, and many adventurers stayed long-term. Since one could make a day trip to the first level, beginners especially loved to use inns as a base. They would stay for months, making it difficult to find free rooms—and easy for the innkeepers to profit, he

added with a chuckle.

“Go back to the road, then go all the way down to the other side,” he said, nodding in the general direction as he cooked, “and you’ll find the more expensive ones. They might be your only hope for finding a room.”

Regular visitors of inns of middling and higher prices were experienced-to-veteran adventurers and merchants. There would be many veterans in a city that drew so many adventurers, but they’d be heading for the lower levels of the Ancient Underground City. That was too far for just a day trip. Once they left, they’d be out of town for some time. As such, the inns that matched their budget would have more space.

After his thorough explanation, the innkeeper remembered something and said, “You’ll find an inn called Folkspeak about a five-minute walk from here. They had a large group of adventurers leave for the lower levels just yesterday, so I’m sure they’ll have space for you.”

He clearly wasn’t an actor; his obvious attempt at advertising prompted Mira to ask, “I don’t presume you know the owner?”

He sighed. “It’s my dad’s place...” he confessed.

“Well, thanks for the tip. I suppose I’ll have to go and see,” Mira said with a smile before leaving the inn.

Just then, she heard the man’s cheerful voice call out behind her, “You’ll be a fine woman someday, young lady!”

In the end, Mira decided to stay the night at the rather expensive Folkspeak Inn. When she mentioned the man’s poor acting, she managed to get a discount on her stay from his father. What would have been a 30,000-ducat stay, excluding meals, had become a 30,000-ducat stay with meals included. A smile crept across her face as she celebrated her successful haggling.

Just after the morning rush, Mira finished enjoying her free breakfast, drank the rest of her lemonade au lait, and stood. She thanked the innkeeper before departing Folkspeak.

“Back to the Guild Union.”

Given its size, the city was still full of morning hustle and bustle. However, there were surprisingly few adventurers. Low-ranking guild members got an early start in order to secure the best hunting grounds, so the only adventurers left in the city were high-ranking ones who didn't need to rush.

Mira savored the crisp morning air as she walked along the white stone pavement with light steps. The good, old-fashioned fantasy land made her heart jump for joy on her way to the Guild Union.

Mira found the same receptionist from yesterday. "I'm Mira. Yesterday, I was told that I would receive a rank-up. Is the paperwork finished?"

"It's all done." The woman smiled and handed over Mira's new ID, which had been updated to reflect her A-rank status.

After accepting it, Mira requested permits to go to the lowest level of the Ancient Underground City. The Ancient Underground City was special; as one went down in levels, the difficulty gradually increased. As a result, a total of seven permits were needed to descend to the seventh level. The fee for each permit was 3,000 ducats, resulting in a total price of 21,000.

With her ID and permits in hand, Mira knew that her time had come. She ran out of the building. *Just you wait, Soul Howl!*

People in the building, who saw her run in and right back out, wondered, *Could that have truly been the Spirit Queen?*

There had been much commotion and speculation yesterday after the reporter had angered Mira.

The woman dressed like a man entered the building not long after Mira's departure, the emblem of the famous scarlet bell on her back. The guild Écarlate Carillon had a massive information network, thanks to its size, and it was common knowledge that their leader, Cyril, had fought in the battle against Chimera Clausen. Someone happened to ask her if she knew anything about the woman who bore the Spirit King's blessing.

"Oh, Flicker mentioned her during regular reports, just the other day," the woman had replied. "Her name is Mira, and I hear she's an adorable little

angel."

Testimony from someone directly involved would naturally be more trustworthy than rumors passed down the grapevine. Flicker had a reputation for her love of cute things, too; the fact that *she* was involved made it all the more likely that the Spirit Queen *would* be cute rather than voluptuous.

When Mira came to pick up her updated ID and introduced herself by name, the riddle was finally solved.

"My god..."

One man looked up to the ceiling. Others slumped over sadly. Their hopes of a buxom Spirit Queen had been dashed. But among them, there were a surprising number who *weren't* disappointed.

"Hmm... The Spirit Queen sure is cute, huh?"

"Damn right, she is."

She might not have matched the rumors, but those who found her charming laughed despite themselves.

Mira left, went to the parking lot, and summoned Pegasus.

"Now, I believe it was to the east? I'm counting on you, Pegasus," she said.

Pegasus neighed happily and took to the sky. Mira gazed down at the city, which still basked in the morning light. She noticed a large carriage lot behind the Guild Union, storing many vehicles. Most of the adventurers leaving the Guild Union headed there, boarding carriages and departing in various directions.

The Ancient Underground City was vast. How vast exactly? Well, everything within Mira's current field of vision sat atop some part of the dungeon. In truth, the entirety of Grandrings sat directly above the Ancient Underground City. Multiple entrances to the first level existed as proof of its size. The entrance north of Grandrings was close to a location full of beast-like monsters. The southern entrance was home to the undead, and the west was where bugs nested. The eastern entrance had magical life forms and was the closest to the

stairs leading to the second level. Adventurers chose entrances according to their purposes.

Carriages leaving the lot often went between the Guild Union and these locations. The roads for these carriages were quite well-maintained, and the carriages could travel at high speeds, showing just how much money the adventurers using them spent. Going one way would probably take less than an hour. Of course, flying was even faster.

As Mira left Grandrings, she watched the carriages on the tidy roads below for a while until she arrived at the eastern entrance. Several groups of adventurers were having strategy meetings nearby; they must've left quite a while before her.

After thanking Pegasus for its efforts, Mira looked around at her surroundings. Vast grasslands stretched into the distance, with trees occasionally popping up among large rock formations that seemed out of place. Each time the wind blew, the scenery rippled.

“Goodness, it’s just like I remembered.”

In the midst of all this nature, the area around the entrance had remained unchanged from when she’d first seen it in-game, so long ago, save one thing: there were street stalls lined up there. Mira peeked into the stalls and muttered in amazement, impressed by the audacity. “A little expensive, but very convenient for resupplying in an emergency.”

There were also clinics staffed by priests, forges where blacksmiths repaired tools and weapons, and merchants who were buying unwanted loot. It was like a small settlement. Surprisingly, there were no sleeping accommodations in sight. Curious, Mira asked a shopkeeper about it while she bought a set of eating utensils she’d forgotten to get in the city. They answered that fiends occasionally appeared in the area.

Fiends. They were naturally occurring animals that had been exposed to magic and mutated. Even the weakest was an equal match for a B-rank adventurer. It wasn’t exactly safe or easy to sleep tight around here. When asked what they did when fiends appeared, the reply was that everyone had special permits that allowed them to escape into the underground city until the

danger passed. Even the monsters of the first level were better company than fiends.

While Mira looked around and chitchatted at the stalls, the carriages she'd passed during her flight began to arrive in droves.

"Things sure are getting lively out here."

The adventurers stepping out of the carriages looked to be quite capable; no doubt they were going to the second level or beyond. These men and women gathered into groups and began double-checking everything before continuing onward. It was necessary prep work when moving as a group—but for the lone Mira, there was no need.

Time to get going.

Mira had prepared before she left and quietly entered the hole in the middle of the grassland while the meeting area behind her only grew noisier.

Chapter 4

MIRA USED HER PERMIT to pass through the barrier and descended the long, gently sloping tunnel. At the end of it, an enormous city stretched as far as the eye could see. This first level of the underground city used every possible inch of the cave available. It wasn't dark, but it wasn't exactly bright either. Even amid the decay, a faint light continued to illuminate the city.

Rock pillars towered here and there. Large rock formations had been carved out and made habitable. Among the boulders were large stone buildings that could be mistaken for castles, connected by various passages and bridges. The ceiling wasn't too high, and most of the larger buildings went all the way up to it. This meant that many passages and bridges stretched through the air midway up the first level, making it difficult to see very far ahead. Corridors ran through buildings whose residents were long dead, and main streets lined the floor. And all of it had become a living space for monsters. This spectacle spread before Mira for tens of kilometers.

This place really is incredible. It truly has the atmosphere of a dungeon. Mira surveyed the sight before her once more. Faced with the overwhelming scale, her adventurous spirit flared up. The Ancient Underground City was the final evolution of the tried-and-true dungeon formula. It was intricate enough to be a game on its own.

It was with both leisure and irreverence that Mira stepped inside. She crossed a massive bridge, easily trounced the monsters in her way, and stopped in front of a road with several forks. One path led to a large, fortress-like building. A stairway led to another bridge up above. A third bridge led to a collapsed dead end, and the final passage led to the bottom of the first level. These sorts of branching paths were common in the Ancient Underground City. Combined with its size, it was very easy to get lost. Mira knew this place like the back of her hand, though.

"As I recall, the first solution is forward, then right," she muttered as she stepped onto the broken bridge. Then she used Air Step to walk in midair in

order to reach the other side.

Besides the division of difficulty between floors, the Ancient Underground City was home to a wide range of monsters, making it a popular hunting ground, even in game times. Mira had trained herself here in the past, so she had a good recollection of the local geography. She knew all the shortcuts.

After crossing the bridge, Mira entered a nearby tower, handily dispatched the monsters inside, and put her hand on the crystal ball at the top. A small symbol appeared on her palm.

“Well, there’s the first one done.”

By collecting all five of these symbols, one gained the ability to open the door at the back of the Great Shrine, which contained the staircase to the second floor.

Mira left the tower and made her way to the next crystal ball. She proceeded through corridors, up stairs, through buildings, and occasionally jumped between paths, defeating the occasional monster along the way. She took the optimal route and gathered all five symbols in under an hour.

Riding Pegasus might have been more efficient, but Mira hadn’t done so for a reason: There were rules against it, perhaps an anti-cheat measure from long ago. Anyone who stayed in the air over a set time would lose access to the Great Shrine for a full day. Danblf had once attempted to use Air Step to take direct paths to each symbol. It came as a real shock when the second floor was still locked and a day’s effort wasted. Danblf later learned that it was specifically based on the total time one’s feet were not touching the ground. That was written in a book called *Guide to the Great Temple*, which was in one of the crystal ball towers.

After that painful experience, Mira had stubbornly calculated the total time that she’d be allowed to stay in the air and devised the optimal route to use Air Step for as long as possible without exceeding the limit. Despite the size of the city, the keys to the next floor were centrally located, making it easier for the route to remain fresh in Mira’s mind.

“Hrmm. Are they waiting for someone, I wonder?”

Near the decrepit Great Temple, not far from the center of a stone-paved site, sat a group of men and women. They were all casually dressed and didn’t look to be an adventurer group. Mira stared curiously until they noticed her and waved. This was getting confusing. Mira decided to wave back before turning toward the Great Temple and looking down at the five characters on her palm.

There were now those in the Ancient Underground City who would open the door for a modest price. Others, like Mira, had found optimal routes and had ways of swiftly collecting the symbols. High-ranked groups of adventurers had little need for the upper floors. Their time in the dungeon was limited, too, given the problem of packing enough food. They couldn’t afford to waste time in a place like this. That was where the door openers came in, and business seemed to be booming.

“Goodness, how nostalgic.”

To Mira, it felt as though her last visit was only a year ago. She chuckled to herself about how she’d caused so much trouble for her friends back then as she put her hand on the door. One of the symbols on her palm glowed, and the door began to open. Right after she stepped inside, it closed once more.

Mira beelined for the building up ahead, the Grand Cathedral. Broken stained glass and eroded statues littered the floor, indicative of the place’s long history. Mira evaded the debris and stood before the door in the back of the cathedral. She held her hand to it, causing another symbol to glow and the door to open. Beyond lay a long corridor with a white stone floor. There were no monsters, only white lights.

She proceeded onward and placed her hand on three more doors. Once the fifth door was open, all of the symbols on her hand glowed before fading away. Before her was a barrier device. Mira dispelled the barrier with her guild-issued permit and entered a large hall with stone walls. Within was a single group of monsters that normally spawned on the second level. In the game, they had been meant to send a message: “If you struggle against these, then turn back.” Naturally, they were hardly worth Mira’s time. One of her dark knights alone handled them with ease.

Thus, she arrived at the second level without issue.

The second level of the Ancient Underground City looked similar to the first, though it was only about half its size. This dungeon grew in difficulty as one descended, but it shrunk in size accordingly. Due to the first level's unbelievable size, though, even the bottom level was as big as a large country's capital. There was nothing small about this dungeon.

The flight limitation was removed from the second level onward. Instead, only fighting was forbidden near the Great Temple. If one violated this rule, they would be unable to open the door for a full day.

"Now, Pegasus, it's up to you." Mira summoned Pegasus the instant she was free to fly. The horse neighed as she straddled its back and lifted off, ready to obtain the symbols that would unlock the third level.

Thanks to Pegasus's awe-inspiring mobility, Mira could move much more efficiently than on the first level. However—perhaps by design—one needed to follow a specific route to collect the second level's symbols. The towers were also spread out over the entire floor. One had to begin in the north and trace the shape of a star in order to obtain the symbols. Pegasus made relatively short work of it. Mira and Pegasus weaved between the mess of crumbling bridges and towers, going far faster than one would with no means of flight.

Mira obtained a symbol at the fourth tower, hopped back onto Pegasus, and muttered to herself, "Just one more. Ugh, what a tedious setup..."

About six hours had passed since her arrival on the second level. She'd had a quick meal and a break, but almost all of that time was spent in flight. Because they were flying, they stood out more, attracting attention from flying monsters, like birds. These enemies did not add much time—Pegasus eagerly shot them all down with lightning. The real problem was the second level's construction.

"A bit more southwesterly, please," Mira ordered. Pegasus neighed in response, flying true to Mira's course. "Thank you."

They couldn't go too fast, however, because the towers and passages were

even more complicated than those of the first floor. Pegasus would have no trouble weaving through them at maximum speed, but that would risk throwing Mira off. That very thing had happened a mere ten minutes into the floor. As such, Pegasus prioritized safety now. And since that also meant more time with Mira, Pegasus was more than happy.

“It seems we’ll be ending our day with the completion of the second level.”

Mira checked the time. It was almost seven in the evening. By the time she grabbed the last symbol and reached the Great Temple, it would probably be close to nine. Doing the same on foot took an entire week, though, so Mira wasn’t going to complain.

“Hrmm, so this is the last one. I’m getting hungry...”

Eventually, Mira arrived at the final tower. She dealt with the monsters that had been lying in wait and climbed to the top of the tower to receive her fifth symbol. There, she looked over the dim city from above, awed by its size.

Once upon a time, countless people lived here. It’s an unthinkable place for a dungeon. Frankly, it’s unthinkable even for a city.

What sort of people had dwelled here? How had they lived? Why had they built a city underground rather than on the surface? Even Mira’s lore-loving friend had never found the answers to these questions. As she gazed at the scenery from atop Pegasus, Mira wondered where the mysteries of this city might be sleeping. Then, she found herself sympathizing with her friend, who’d so excitedly prattled on about this world’s history.

Just past nine, Mira arrived at the Great Temple as planned. Several door openers were scattered about, just as they had been on the first level. They seemed to glare at her, either because she’d descended with Pegasus or because they thought she might be a business rival. Of course, Mira had no idea about all this. She wasn’t even aware of the existence of this door-opening business.

Why’re they glaring at me?

Totally clueless, she opened the door to the Great Temple, where she'd be staying for the night, and fled their gazes.

Being under a roof was so much more calming. It seemed others had the same idea as Mira, as several groups of adventurers were there, relaxing in their own ways. They were probably only reacting to the door opening, but everyone turned to Mira at once, causing her to shrink back. To escape prying eyes once more, she hustled into one of the cathedral's side passages.

Though it was old, the temple was sturdy. Moreover, it was *big*; it had plenty of rooms that could be used for rest. However, the decaying doors meant that one couldn't lock would-be criminals out. Mira illuminated the dark hallway with Ethereal Arts, checking out each of her potential bedrooms. She'd accidentally ended up interrupting a couple of girls whispering sweet nothings to each other, but in the end, she found an acceptable room and settled down.

She put down her special sleeping bag instead of a mat, and lay on top of it, turning on the insect-repellant feature that had come with it. This sent all of the insects in the room scurrying away. Truly, Dinoire Trading's products were beautifully effective.

Yuri, huh? Ah, how I love yuri... Mira smirked madly. She then lit up her Ethereal Arts in the middle of the room and grinned even more deviously.

Mira rested for a while, owing to the chafing caused by riding Pegasus for so long. She took the opportunity to excitedly take a bunch of tools out of her Item Box.

“It’s time to have some fun!”

She produced her cooking set—which she'd be using for the first time—and various ingredients. Even as an experienced adventurer, Mira had a hint of admiration for such an *adventurous* thing as cooking in a dungeon. She was excited; no doubt this was the most adventure-like thing she'd done to date.

Tonight's dish would be Mira's special beef vegetable soup. She used her cooking set...though not quite skillfully. Despite the awkwardness, she managed to cut the veggies without injuring herself. There were carrots, cabbage, onions,

mushrooms—and the star of the show, beef. Their shapes weren't uniform, which meant that they would cook at different rates, but Mira cared not; she considered this part of the true adventurer's experience as she tossed them all into the pot. Then, she poured in water generated by Ethereal Arts and placed the pot on a miniature stove. By turning a knob on the stove, the heat activated. After that, she just needed to taste test and add seasonings until everything was fully cooked.

"Mmm, that smells good."

Mira added seasonings to the boiling pot at random, excited by the changing scent. She then scooped up a bit with a spoon and checked the flavor. "Needs salt," she muttered, pretending to be a master chef, and laughed.

She continued stirring the pot frequently and taking occasional taste tests. Eventually, Mira's first dish in this world was complete. She scooped up the beef vegetable soup with a wooden ladle, blew on it to cool it down, and ate. After chewing and swallowing, she smiled in satisfaction. "Mm! My cooking instinct isn't so bad after all!"

The veggies had softened, and the meat had turned tender. They were only seasoned with salt, but because she'd used mineral-rich, natural salt, it brought out a more complex flavor than expected. Mira paused to add pepper and butter, making it richer. For it being her first time, it was an enjoyable meal. That said, it was middling beef vegetable soup at best. But the situation was the most potent seasoning of all, making it a very memorable dinner.

After her meal, Mira cleaned up her cooking set and took out a bag. This was another item for adventurers that she'd bought from Dinoire Trading: a simple, technomancy-powered laundry bag that only required water to use.

She quickly shucked out of her outer clothes, tore off her underwear, and threw it all into her laundry bag. Then, she poured water in with Ethereal Arts and flipped the switch. She'd already installed the magic cell that would power it. Splashing noises came from inside the laundry bag. Somehow—though it was anyone's guess *how*—the laundry bag washed everything perfectly, no matter how or where one put their laundry in.

After putting on a change of underwear, she summoned a holy knight to guard the door and lay on her sleeping bag while listening to the calming sounds of water. Then, she began reading the *Encyclopedia of Skills* she'd received from Luminaria. There were many spells that looked like she'd be able to learn immediately, so she began practicing right away. Mira found herself relaxing much more than one might expect was possible in a dungeon.

Even though the Ethereal Arts spell that generated water also exhausted mana, similar to other mid-level spells, Mira used it as if it were nothing. This was only because she had trained her magic, obtained various blessings, and learned certain techniques that boosted her maximum mana capacity and recovery speed to outpace her consumption. This made Mira's camp very different from those of other adventurers. Had she done this in their presence in the cathedral, other groups would have begged her to join them.

Chapter 5

AFTER SPENDING A NIGHT in the Great Temple on the second level of the Ancient Underground City, Mira crawled out of her sleeping bag, still drowsy. Dressed only in her underwear, she threw her now-dry clothes over her head. Eventually, she managed to wriggle her arms through the sleeves and her head through the collar.

That was when she made eye contact with a man who'd been apprehended by her holy knight. "And...who are you?"

He'd been leering, but the moment she spoke up, guilt and embarrassment colored his face. "Um... You came in alone, so I was curious," he replied, as if trying to claim that he was worried about her. But his eyes were focused on Mira's bare thighs, and it was clear what he was really after.

"Ah. A simple pervert, then."

Mira was too cute, so she could see why he'd want that. Still, she had no intention of forgiving him, so she ordered her holy knight to teach him a lesson and then throw him out. Not long after, she heard him groaning from afar.

After that odd incident, Mira began making breakfast. It was simple, though; she snacked on bread, fruit, and some all-season au lait she'd bought at Isuzu HQ.

Once she finished breakfast and cleaned up, she left for the Grand Cathedral to head to the third level. Most of the people who were here last night had already left, making the place feel even bigger.

Mira's eyes happened to catch sight of a female adventurer party—specifically, a particularly beautiful swordfighter and an adorable mage. These were the two she'd accidentally walked in on last night. They happened to notice her at the same time and blushed, looking just a little terrified. The pair grasped each other's hands tight, almost pleadingly. Perhaps they thought Mira

would say something damning.

I'm cheering you on, girls! Mira simply nodded back at them and put her pointer finger to her lips. Then, she looked away and walked through the cathedral. Behind her, the girls breathed a sigh of relief and shared a smile.

Deep inside the cathedral was another door that would not open without the special symbols. Mira stopped in front of it and saw a five-person group having a strategy meeting. Based on the voices she heard, they were going to have to review their battle formations due to their front-line warrior not feeling well. He was the man leaning against a wall. When they made eye contact, he grimaced, and Mira glared back at him. He was the pervert from this morning. He'd spent all night apprehended by the holy knight before being roughed up for his trouble, so it was no surprise that he was in bad shape.

While the group began to discuss whether they should turn back for the time being, Mira offered a half-hearted apology for their conundrum and explained the morning's events. As a result, she received a sincere apology from his comrades. They forgave her for punishing him—in fact, the two women of the group even praised her for it. According to them, he was a habitual offender who'd caused many problems for them in the past. Then, they laughed it off with sighs because they'd known him since childhood. It seemed they were a group of old friends.

They decided to rest for another day before resuming their adventure. Mira left the group and opened the first door, backed by the man's screams as they exacted a little extra punishment of their own.

After passing through all of the doors, Mira arrived at the third level. It had similar sights and conditions as the second level. Though it came with some more complicated gimmicks, Mira and Pegasus had no trouble. She collected the symbols in four hours and went to the next level through the Great Temple, once again.

Now she was on the fourth level, which was set at D-rank by the Guild Union.

“I’d like to clear this one today,” Mira mused to herself.

Despite being deep underground, it was bright enough to see across the entire level. It was even brighter than the levels before it. The fourth level was half the area of the third, but it was still so large that the opposite end was distant and hazy. White mansions and palaces lined avenues that stretched endlessly, like the streets of a downtown business district.

Mira quickly summoned and boarded Pegasus before taking flight. She looked below and murmured, “Now that I can take another look, it’s so very different from the third floor.”

The fourth level retained its luster despite the decay and had earned two nicknames from players. Some called it the “noble district.” As the name implied, it was every bit as dignified as the places where the nobles of large nations currently lived. Even today, this level was reminiscent of that description.

“I believe I will begin with this palace.”

Some time passed before Mira arrived at an especially large estate on the eastern edge of the city. Mira’s skirt fluttered as she jumped from Pegasus’s back. She looked up at the palace, which rivaled the castles of small nations, and searched through her hazy memories.

The sun rises to the east. As I recall, I am meant to light all the torches in the palace.

The fourth level once again required adventurers to gather symbols to proceed to the next level. She only needed three now, but each individual one was harder to get than the last. The symbols were to be obtained in the northern, western, and eastern palaces. By solving the puzzles in each one, adventurers could open doors to the crystal balls, where they’d receive the marks.

“Now, let’s get this done quickly.”

With Pegasus by her side, Mira took a step toward the palace. As she set foot on the premises, she was swarmed. Countless skeletons leaped out of the desolate courtyard and attacked. However, Mira wasn’t phased. Lightning struck. Pegasus’s attack had turned the skeletons to ash.

The other nickname of the noble district was “the city of bones.” Each district was home to various skeleton-type monsters, making it easy for adventurers farming enemies to choose their ideal target. Necromancers, priests, and classes that were good at blunt-force attacks had an especially easy time.

The eastern district mainly spawned skeletons that moved swiftly. Even their speed was no match for Mira and Pegasus, though. Mira strode forward, prompting more and more skeletons to pop out, but Pegasus obliterated them all.

“Nyow, that’s a big catch!”

A familiar summon wove through the large courtyard cleared of skeletons. He was First Pupil, raising a sign that said, “Bones! Bones for days!”

Undead monsters were a stable source of magic stones. Items with “technomancy-powered” in the name, such as those from Dinoire Trading, could use magic stones. So, Mira had summoned First Pupil Cat Sith, who was busily collecting all of the drops.

He carried a big sack on his back, like a cartoonish thief, as he snatched up the stones. “I got the goods, boss,” he said, holding them out to Mira with a nihilistic grin.

“Mm, well done.”

Mira accepted the dozens of magic stones from her feline companion and smiled in satisfaction as she stepped into the temple. The skeleton spawns diminished as she approached the entrance. The interior was dim, the only light coming from the windows. Mira and her summons casually walked around the skeleton-infested area.

“There. Only one remains.”

She lit a torch in the fourth-floor hall with Ethereal Arts and began walking toward the large door at the very end. Bolts of lightning crackled behind Mira, turning any approaching skeletons into dust. She had asked Pegasus to deal with the monsters so that she could focus on handling the temple’s puzzle.

The skeletons in this temple were D-rank, but they swarmed in such numbers that they could annihilate unprepared C-rank adventurers. Most parties lured them in one by one from afar. However, that was only necessary for people of similar strength to the skeletons. As a one-man army, Mira had other business to attend to.

Pegasus vigorously drove off the monsters, proudly keeping them from bothering its owner. Meanwhile, First Pupil put on quite the performance, dodging lightning bolts by a hair's breadth as he collected loot. "Me-wow! That was close!" Unfortunately, nobody noticed.

Thus, Mira reached the final stage of the palace. Beyond the open door lay a large object akin to an Olympic cauldron, protected by three large skeletons. These skeletons, called the Guards of the Dawn Vessel, had auras quite unlike those of the skeletons Mira had trampled over so far. They seemed to notice her and her summons, but they did not move, seemingly prioritizing the protection of the vessel.

Despite this, she stepped into the room with zero hesitation.

"That is the last one," Mira said.

A malicious presence filled the room. The three skeletons took a step forward to attack. However, they would not take their second; the instant they directed their ire at Mira, they were blotted out with a rumble of thunder. The Guards of the Dawn Vessel turned into ash.

The moment Mira lit the torch, she heard what seemed to be the far-off sound of something heavy dragging across the ground—proof that she'd solved the puzzle.

"I believe that should have opened the door at the top."

Meanwhile, Cat Sith proudly brought over three large magic stones, as if *he* had slain the skeletons.

After returning to the hall, Mira went up the stairs and entered the room on the top floor. Instead of monsters, there was a single crystal ball. When she touched it, a symbol appeared on her hand.

“One down. Goodness, this is time-consuming.”

It had taken two hours to finish the eastern palace—proof of just how many torches there were. The palace to the west had nearly the same puzzle, and the route to the third palace alone took half a day to navigate. Mira rolled her eyes, annoyed by all the time spent traveling.

“Well, we do what we must,” she muttered as she left the palace and jumped onto Pegasus, lifting off to the western palace for her second symbol.

Her First Pupil sat on her shoulder and held up a sign that read, “El Dorado or Bust!” “Mew-hoo!” he shouted. “We’ve already found one legendary Ancient Underground City!”

The outer appearance of the western palace was the same as the last, but it had an underground portion that nearly doubled its size. Melee-type skeletons mainly appeared in the west, and the moment she stepped into the courtyard, they all attacked at once. Still, they were no match for Pegasus.

“This is certainly an ideal place to make money,” Mira murmured as she watched her First Pupil run around, collecting magic stones like a bandit.

She’d spotted more adventurer parties than expected during her flight. Only skeletons appeared here, and they always dropped magic stones. Devising a strategy to obtain these was easy. On top of that, the magic stones had a stable value. The demand for magic stones was increasing faster than ever thanks to magical tools and technomancy-powered adventuring goods. Any level-headed adventurer knew this was where the money was at.

How much money could *she* make from these? Mira smiled at her growing pile of magic stones, but then recalled her original goal and began her conquest of the western palace.

The sun sets in the west.

Snuffing out all of the flames here would open the door to the crystal ball chamber. Like the last time, she steadily continued onward and extinguished the flames with Ethereal Arts. Pegasus obliterated skeletons, and Cat Sith recovered the magic stones. It was a simple, if time-consuming, run.

Mira defeated the Guards of the Dusk Vessel, extinguished the flame, touched the crystal ball on the top floor, and obtained her second symbol without difficulty.

“This is little more than the opening act, after all,” she mused.

The third symbol was *much* more tedious despite being lower in difficulty. Mira thought about her coming task as she flew toward the northern temple.

Mira arrived at the palace, surveyed the many adventurer teams, and murmured curiously, “Well, this one is chock full of people.”

A single man approached her. “Are you clearing the palace too? All alone? Interesting lineup...” He looked to Pegasus and Cat Sith, then to the symbols on Mira’s hand and the bangle on her left arm, before smiling in satisfaction. “You look strong, though.”

Meanwhile, Mira had no inkling whatsoever of the situation. “What is this? Some sort of party?”

“Well, you see...”

The man grinned and explained that these parties were about to split up the work to clear the palace together. The northern palace had underground floors, just like the western one, but it was three times the size—big enough to swallow up some smaller dungeons. That was why it’d take half a day for Mira to clear it on her own. Allies could reduce that time. This man was the leader of an impromptu alliance formed by many parties. With this many people, they might be able to finish in just two or three hours.

Finding this the ideal opportunity, Mira quickly said, “I see... Then allow me to join you.”

“Yeah, of course.”

Mira and the man shook hands and introduced themselves.

“I’m Tryde. Nice to meetcha.”

“And I’m Mira. I look forward to working with you.”

They were about to begin a strategy meeting, so Mira joined in. Reactions were generally positive when Tryde announced her inclusion. However, many

of the girls looked at her jealously. It seemed Tryde was popular among the women. Unsurprisingly, Mira found the men to be especially welcoming.

Chapter 6

TRYDE HAD CLEARED this place over a hundred times, so the strategy meeting went smoothly. His answers to most questions were quick, clear, and concise.

Ten parties, ranging from four to six people each, were participating in this clear. The fact that most of them had User's Bangles meant that they would have plenty of firepower. It also helped that Tryde was an A-rank adventurer.

The strategy was simple. In order to open the top-level door that stood between them and the crystal ball, they first had to light fires beyond two other doors. Those doors would be opened via interacting with torches, as with the previous two palaces.

The problem was the sheer number of torches. A hundred were set throughout the enormous palace. Lighting all of them would open the first door. Then, the torches behind that door needed to be lit. Closing the first door would be impossible until every single one of those first hundred torches had been put out. Once that was done, the second door would open. Five guards were behind this door, and their five Vessel Cores needed to be placed in the cauldron. This would open the door on the top floor, allowing the group to obtain the third crystal ball's symbol.

Without sheer numbers, it was indeed a tedious puzzle. Mira did specialize in the power of numbers, but the torches still posed a problem. The size of the place meant the fastest way to complete the puzzle was to split up, but she wouldn't be able to perform the fine control needed to have her dark knights light torches—and even then, dark knights had no way to start fires. Mira had bought an item for making fires from Dinoire Trading. However, she only had one, and it was anyone's guess whether a dark knight would be able to use it well. Normally, she wouldn't need such a thing, thanks to her Ethereal Arts. The best she could do was order the dark knights to defeat enemies.

Summoning the Valkyrie Sisters was an option. They didn't have ways to light fires either, but she could at least trust them to use the item, which would

double her efficiency. Perhaps Alfina could even swing her sword fast enough to start fires. That would *triple* her efficiency. The fire spirit Salamander was rather smart, too, and a Valkyrie could potentially supervise it. As a wise owl who could wield magic, Wise Popot could do the job as well.

The list went on. Summoning hadn't been this flexible back in the game, but now that everything had a mind of its own, Mira's power in numbers might just work. That had been her initial strategy for clearing the palace. With so many adventurers present, however, it would be faster to just leave it to them.

Mira looked to the adventurers participating in the mission and reminisced upon the dungeon raids she'd once joined.

Tryde explained the most efficient routes for lighting torches, where skeletons appeared and their types, critical dangers, and the like. Once his detailed explanation was over, he began telling each party their position and role. He assigned members skillfully, taking into account several factors: above-ground and below-ground portions, as well as the kinds of skeletons that appeared on the optimal route, along with which parties could defeat them most easily. Long-range parties were formed to tackle magic skeletons, and so on. To Mira, who had some vague memories of this place, it sounded reasonable enough.

"As for Mira, could you join my group in fighting the guards?" Tryde asked. "It'd be nice to have another A-rank with us."

Each group had shared their fighting capabilities during the strategy meeting, for the sake of optimal placement. Mira had introduced herself as an A-rank summoner, attracting a lot of attention and surprise, but that had since died down.

"Hrmm, of course. I am more than enough on my own!" Mira replied with total confidence. The fourth level was merely a D-rank dungeon, so this would be child's play for her.

"That's a big help." Tryde laughed and replied, half-jokingly, "I'd love to leave it all to you, but you can't be careless when up against those guards. I may not be on your level, but I'll do my best to help."

The guards were the final boss of the fourth level and equal to C-rank

adventurers. And there were *five* of them. Tryde was right in saying that even veteran adventurers should be wary of them, but Mira hadn't been joking when she'd boasted that she could handle them by herself.

Hrmm... I think this is the perfect opportunity to show them the greatness of summoning!

Tryde's party included himself and three B-rank adventurers. They were a formidable party, to be sure. While people around them laughed at Tryde's joke, Mira smirked at this advertising opportunity.

As soon as they entered the northern palace, the parties proceeded to their designated areas. Mira and Tryde's party saw them off, then began walking from the entrance to the special door just below the top floor.

Since the entire party was B-rank or higher, they quickly dispatched any monsters along the way, giving Mira no opportunities to show off. However, she knew that her time to shine would be when they went up against the guards. She decided that they could have fun for now, as she'd get the bosses all to herself. The strategy had already designated Tryde and Mira's Pegasus as the assault force, while the others would focus on buying them time.

"How delightful it is that people form these joint parties," Mira mused to herself.

Left with nothing to do, she played with two box-like items Tryde had given out to each party during the strategy meeting. These allowed the parties to maintain rudimentary communication, even from afar.

"It's essential for large-scale expeditions and places where you need to split up and solve puzzles," Tryde replied to Mira's murmuring. He used his pointer finger to operate one of the tools Mira held. The other vibrated in response and displayed red, blue, and yellow dots on its surface.

The ones Mira was playing with were backups; they weren't involved in the current operation. One was a sender, and the other was a receiver. Signals sent by the sender would go to all receivers, while signals from the receiver would only go to the sender.

"This output reads 'northern palace,'" Tryde explained. "Though other adventuring groups have their own code systems."

"Fascinating. I suppose such a thing would be necessary."

Conveying information through arrangements of just three colors—it could be used similarly to Morse code. Messages were simple for this operation, though.

Once each party was done lighting the torches, the first door would open. Mira and Tryde's party would be waiting in front of the door, so they would go straight in and light the torches. That was when the communication devices came into play. Tryde would send a signal from his sender device stating that they'd made it through the first door, and each party would begin extinguishing the flames. When they were all extinguished, the boss battle would begin. While Mira's group fought, the other parties would make their way to the door on the top floor. This strategy put great focus on reducing the time necessary to clear the palace.

In the event of an emergency, the parties were to send a message via their receiver. Tryde had given them unique color patterns to use ahead of time. This would allow him to know which group was in trouble the moment contact was made. Groups had also been assigned to specific areas, which would make it easy to find them. Based on how prepared he was, it was clear that he had done this before.

They've certainly figured this out. Perhaps this is normal in reality, though. Looking back, the chat feature was essentially cheating.

The two boxes could only send simple signals, but adventurers could perform complex communication from afar by using them creatively. Mira gazed at the boxes as she recalled her old gaming days.

When this world was still a game, the chat system allowed people to converse from any distance. Timing, small talk, puzzle solving—they could discuss anything without any time lag whatsoever. If that still existed now, then she could chat idly with Solomon even as she cleared the northern palace.

Mira pondered the matter, then chuckled at the thought of all the demands Solomon would make if he *could* chat with her at any time.

The group made small talk as they traveled to the door.

“Whoa. Again?” Tryde stopped in place and moved to protect his comrades and Mira.

Just then, a slight creaking noise sounded all around them. It was another earthquake. And it felt even stronger than the one Mira had experienced at Dinoire Trading.

“I hear these earthquakes have become more common over the past year,” Mira said, taking his actions as worry.

Tryde replied that there was no need to be concerned because nobody had been injured by the earthquakes yet. “But it gets stronger the lower you go, so if you’re eating soup, you’d better be careful,” he added. Then he joked that scalds didn’t count as injuries. “Man, it sure feels like an injury, though.”

Now Mira knew the earthquakes grew stronger as one descended. There were rumors among the adventurers that something on the seventh level was the cause. Nobody was crazy enough to go that far down, though, so it remained a mystery.

They arrived at the first door a while later and discussed the coming battle as they waited for it to open.

“So, can we leave one of them to you, Mira?”

Five guards would appear, and Tryde’s group plus Mira happened to equal five. Tryde’s strategy was for them to each take on one enemy. The two A-ranks would deal with theirs swiftly so that they could aid the B-ranks. All five of the guards would be steadily defeated. Tryde would normally take on two himself, so he seemed glad to have a fellow A-rank on board.

“Why don’t you let me handle all of them?” Mira replied confidently.

Apparently thinking it a joke, Tryde smiled softly. “Yeah, sure. That’d be great. But we’re all here, so you don’t have to do any heavy lifting today.”

He hadn’t said *no*, Mira noticed. She imagined a future in which the Tower of

Evocation teemed with people again, as she smirked to herself.

After that discussion ended, they chatted idly until the first door opened. Then, a door as large as a castle gate opened with a rumble. It was imposing, and Mira found herself tensing up, but there were no enemies yet; there were only torches on the walls to the left and right, numbering fifty in total.

“Looks like things are going swimmingly,” Tryde mused. “Okay, let’s split up and get ‘em lit.”

He got right to work and ran over to one wall, where he began lighting torches. The other three started as well.

Seeing them, Mira recalled something. “It’s finally time to use this!”

The tools the others used to light the fires were just like the one Mira had brought. She faced a torch on the wall, and with sheer joy on her face, produced the item—a technomancy-powered mini torch she’d bought at Dinoire Trading. It was the same shape as a firearm. Ready to use the tool she’d gone out of her way to buy, Mira pointed the barrel at the torch and pulled the trigger. It created more fire than she’d expected. She was surprised for a moment—the fire was great enough to momentarily intimidate a monster, if needed. Then she laughed. “Oho. This is awesome!”

It had truly been made for adventurers.

From there, Mira lit torch after torch. The job could be done just fine with her Ethereal Arts, but she loved the way the fire just popped out every time she pulled the trigger.

After lighting the final torch, she blew on the muzzle of her tool like a wannabe gunslinger. “That ought to be all.”

“Just in time to wait some more,” Tryde said.

He confirmed that every torch was lit before using his box-shaped device to send the signal to all other parties. Then, the strategy worked in reverse; they would begin extinguishing all hundred torches throughout the palace. Once that

was done, it was time to fight the bosses of the northern palace: the Guards of the Midnight Sun Vessel.

While everyone prepared for battle, Mira leaned against Pegasus and relaxed. Pegasus fluttered its wings happily. Despite the fact that they were about to fight the bosses, Mira and Pegasus didn't look tense at all.

"Are you sure you don't want to prepare, Mira?" Tryde asked as he warmed up, baffled by Mira's total relaxation in the face of a boss battle. "It's a D-rank area, but our foes are strong. Don't let your guard down."

"Do not worry about me. My guard is up, I assure you," Mira replied comfortably before adding with a smirk, "Wait and see. You'll understand."

Due to their rarity, Tryde didn't know how summoners fought. But he did see that Pegasus had the bearing of a powerful warrior, so he assented. "All right, I won't bother you anymore. But if anything goes wrong, don't hesitate to ask for help."

Pegasus would be fighting on the front lines, so maybe it *was* right for the mage to rest.

Tryde had fought with a long sword on the way up, but now, he held a spear. It seemed he was very skilled with the weapon, and even for a warm-up, his handling of the spear was brisk and powerful. Mira could tell that his technique was a cut above the rest, just from watching.

"Incredible," she mused. "Incidentally, do you happen to have a title?"

"A title? Yeah, sort of. People started calling me the 'Blazing Rondo,' out of nowhere," Tryde said, bashful, without interrupting his work.

"Oho," Mira replied. "Very cool."

She smiled even wider. Having a title meant that he was famous. This was an even better chance to show off the power of summoning than she'd first thought.

Mira devised her own mental strategy, occasionally chatting with the others while they waited for the second door to open. Thirty minutes after the first door opened, there was a loud noise, and the door activated.

“All right, everyone. Form up.”

Tryde stood, carefully checked for his emergency potions one last time, and walked toward the door. His comrades followed suit.

“Now, impact is what matters most. Pegasus, the first attack falls to you,” Mira whispered to Pegasus as she trailed after them.

They strode into a room that was home to five large vessels.

Chapter 7

FIVE LARGE SKELETONS—the Guards of the Midnight Sun Vessels—stood in the center of the room. Unlike the previous guards, they each had a weapon: a broadsword, a halberd, an axe, a mace, and a sword-and-shield combo. Their fighting styles differed based on their weapons.

The party had already discussed this during their strategy meeting. Tryde's allies would fight the enemies they were best suited for, as planned. Mira and Tryde remained behind. Since they were both A-rank, they would fight the strongest guards.

"Mira, you take that one. If you need anything, just yell," Tryde said, as he confronted the strongest guard, the one with the sword and shield.

"Of course. Leave it to me!" With a smirk, Mira fearlessly confronted the halberd-wielding guard. At the same time, she scanned the room and set the stage for the rejuvenation of summoning.

After confirming that everyone was up against their assigned foes, Tryde ran forward and ordered, "Now, begin the battle!"

His comrades all ran together at once, closing in on their respective guards. The five guards moved as well. They readied their weapons and awaited the oncoming charge. However, the one with the halberd began to walk. Nobody was running toward that one, so it had decided to stride toward the slowly approaching Mira.

Tryde's party collided with their four enemies. They used a hit-and-run strategy. Due to their large size, the guards would still pack a punch, even if they were significantly lower in rank than the adventurers. The party didn't want to take any hits, so they took the safe route. Just as planned, they struck the skeletons with practiced blows before breaking away to put distance between them.

It was then that Mira took action.

“Pegasus... Deus Voltage!” Mira shouted for Pegasus and all the others to hear.

As if to make its presence known, her steed neighed heroically and covered its wings in dazzling electricity. Thunder boomed, and lightning flashed...and the halberd-wielding guard was blown away. Thunder continued to echo throughout the room. A light rattling could also be heard—the sound of the guard’s core falling to the ground. All other sounds then ceased. The jaw-dropping sight had made Tryde’s party forget they were in battle; they simply gazed at the place where the guard had once stood, awestruck.

Mira had waited for them to get clear of their assigned monsters, thinking that using the thunder might surprise them and leave them vulnerable to counterattack. Even if they *were* shocked and awed, it seemed that had been an unnecessary precaution. The sheer power of that blow drew the full attention of the four remaining guards toward Pegasus.

This is all too perfect. Once she’d confirmed that all eyes were focused on her, Mira smirked and began summoning.

“My assigned guard is down. As promised, I will now aid you!”

Helping the others once she’d finished off her target had been part of their strategy, after all, so Mira brazenly engaged all the remaining foes. She used the summoning points she’d set ahead of time to flood the room with over fifty dark knights. In order to summon an entire army, Mira needed her [Immortal Arts: Hermit’s Cursed Eye] to utilize the mana in nature. But for a simple platoon of the summons, her own mana alone would suffice.

“These knights...?! Is this summoning?!”

It was sheer power of numbers. One knight would have been enough against these guards, but since she wanted to put on a bit of a show, Mira had summoned a wave of dark knights to close in on them. They smashed the guards to dust in no time, heedless of their feeble resistance. The guards were not especially scary to the average adventurer, as long as they strategized, but the dark knights stampeded over them in a laughably one-sided battle.

When they witnessed this overwhelming power, Tryde’s party gawked in amazement as the black wave swallowed the guards. It took about ten seconds

total. The dark knights were then dismissed, and the room fell silent, the five cores still on the floor.

“And there you have it. Behold the power of summoning!” Mira declared.

“That was incredible, Mira! I had no idea summoning was so strong!” Tryde said, genuinely impressed, as he picked up a core.

“Isn’t it, though?” Mira replied, puffing out her chest with pride.

“Sure surprised me,” one of Tryde’s party members said.

“Thanks for making it easy for us,” another joked.

It seemed they now understood the untold potential of summoning and were deeply impressed; no doubt their perception of her field had changed.

Good. That’s one step closer to fixing our reputation.

Satisfied by their response, Mira threw the cores into the vessel. Once they were all inside, there was a loud rumble from up above. That was the sound of the puzzle being solved.

“There. The palace is cleared,” she declared.

“Sure is,” Tryde replied. “Let’s get going.”

Mira and the others walked upstairs triumphantly.

Unfortunately, Mira failed to realize that the new perception of summoning she’d instilled was based on the greatest summoner in the world. As a result, any summoner they ran into would fall well below her standards. But she would not come to realize this for quite some time.

“Man, that was a real surprise. Mira’s summoning was just amazing.”

After the entire alliance had obtained their third symbol at the top floor’s crystal ball, they headed back downstairs. Tryde still seemed shocked as he continued to heap endless praise upon the power of summoning. Mira’s efforts had worked even better than expected.

The man who’d been subjected to his gushing the most, Viz, frowned in annoyance. “Yeah, yeah, we get it. We knew we were in for a ride the moment

we saw that Pegasus there.” Despite being B-rank, Viz was extremely close in strength to A-rank. It seemed he’d realized Pegasus’s hidden power the moment he saw it—he had an eye for strength. Perhaps this was why Tryde was chattering at him specifically.

“That’s right,” Tryde said, continuing to talk his ear off. “That lightning was unbelievable. But I think what we saw right after was the real essence of summoning.” Though he kept changing his words, he kept repeating the same message.

“Yeah, you already said that. Blah, blah, simultaneous summoning.”

Viz had enthusiastically agreed the first time, but by the third time, he didn’t react much. And because of his weak reaction, Tryde only became more animated, hoping to elicit more of a response.

I think that’s enough now...

Mira began to worry that this might actually hurt summoning’s reputation. But Tryde talked on, even saying that it had changed his outlook on life altogether.

“I get it!” Viz was out of patience. “There’s power in numbers, yeah. But summoners aren’t the only ones who can do that. I mean, just last week, I met this insane necromancer,” he countered, launching into a passionate tale about what he’d seen.

It had all happened on the second level. After collecting five symbols on foot, Viz had made his way to the Great Temple. The shortest route teemed with monsters. Though they were all F-rank monsters, their sheer numbers alone were threatening. Even a B-rank would not want to run in carelessly. So Viz had hidden and watched the situation, searching for a detour. Then an army of golems rushed in out of nowhere and mopped up the horde of monsters in the blink of an eye.

“I think they were just there to clean up,” he said. “After that, a guy on a dead Bicorn—I mean, a Bicorn *skeleton*—appeared and just rode through the carnage. Just seeing it made me shudder. That was one hell of a necromancer...” Viz trembled at the memory. The other party members were speechless.

Necromancy was just another field of magic, but its unique traits naturally came with a rather dark impression. Perhaps that was why Viz had been terrified rather than awed by the stranger.

But there was one person who showed more interest than fear in his story's necromancer.

While everyone whispered about the encounter, Mira ran over to Viz and asked, "You said a Bicorn? Would that Bicorn happen to have had a broken right horn?"

Viz looked surprised for a moment before confirming that she was right. "How'd you know? Do you know him?"

Mira was certain: that necromancer must be Soul Howl.

"I heard a rumor that he was around," she said. "But to think that it's true..."

A Bicorn with a broken right horn. Once upon a time, Mira and Soul Howl had teamed up to defeat a corrupted Bicorn. They'd broken the Bicorn's right horn in the process, which Soul Howl *loved*, so he'd secured it as a catalyst for his necromancy.

Incidentally, "corrupted" referred to a process during which high-ranking beasts and other beings became monsters. The majority were extremely powerful foes; multiple people were needed to take them down. Running into one was rare. It was even rarer for a necromancer to be able to make them into a catalyst. That was part of what made Mira so certain.

She'd already known that Soul Howl *might* be here. Now Mira had eyewitness testimony of a powerful necromancer with a Bicorn that matched the one she remembered. It was extremely likely that the person Viz had seen was Soul Howl.

"Figures. You crazy-strong people always seem to know each other somehow," Viz muttered, amazed. Tryde commented that he certainly couldn't best Mira's summoning, prompting an eye roll and a sigh from Viz. "Guess that leaves me stuck with this guy."

They left the northern palace without issue. It was just after seven in the evening. The alliance had disbanded, but because most of them were headed to the fifth level, they naturally traveled together to the staircase. It would take some time, but they would go to the Great Temple and camp there for the night.

“I’d best go, then. Safe travels.” Mira was in a hurry to catch up to Soul Howl, so she got on Pegasus, said a quick goodbye, and lifted off for the Great Temple.

“Yeah. You be careful out there, Mira.”

Along the way, Mira looked down below and murmured, “Hmm? What is that voice?”

Pegasus slowed down in response, wary of their surroundings.

It was even quieter than a whisper, more like a faint presence than anything. She could make out neither the words nor the source, but Mira was certain that there was a voice.

“I know I heard something. Who is that?” While she had no idea who it was or what they were saying, she knew that she couldn’t ignore it. Heck, Mira didn’t even know *why* she knew that; it was just an odd, instinctual feeling. She pointed in the direction she thought it might be coming from and asked, “Pegasus, could you circle around there?”

Pegasus flew around the designated location in a slow circle. Mira gazed at the neat lines of mansions and palace ruins. After two laps, she pointed Pegasus to the next location. They repeated this process five times.

When they reached a corner of the fourth level, Mira heard that voice again.

“Hrmm?! Over there?!?” Mira couldn’t make out the words, but she had heard the voice more clearly this time. She reflexively turned her eyes toward a large mansion. “What is *that*? Something seems off...”

The simple, featureless mansion was constructed of sturdy stone. However, the more she looked at it, the more something seemed off. What was the source of this odd feeling?

Mira landed in front of the mansion, slowly approached, and circled around it.

From there, she put a hand on the door to check out the inside. Mira finally hit upon the source of her confusion and looked up at the building. “Of course! Why couldn’t I tell at first?”

It was unnatural because it was among these ruins. If one compared them, it became obvious. The other mansions and palaces had decayed doors and windows, but this one looked as good as new. It was blanketed in a layer of dust, but the windows were unblemished, and the intricate parts of the door were all intact. It was clear that someone was taking care of this place.

“Has someone been living here all this time?”

Monsters appeared here, so one couldn’t let their guard down, even in a mansion. Could some insane person possibly live here? Mira chuckled to herself with the realization that some of her tower scholars might be eccentric enough to do so, as she peeked into a back window.

“Deserted. No signs of life at all, in fact.”

There were no signs of people—or anything else for that matter—near the windows. If someone lived here, then there would be some traces of them. Or perhaps the resident was just a clean freak? After glancing through all the windows, Mira confirmed that there was no sense of the place being lived in.

But then, she heard that mysterious voice once more.

“Where? Where are you?”

The voice had definitely come from inside the mansion. However, they didn’t reply to her calls; silence enveloped the place.

“Better safe than sorry.” Mira had been careful to this point since she thought someone might be living there. There was only one way to find out, though, so she put a hand on the door. “It isn’t locked?”

She used just a little force, and the door opened without resistance.

“Coming in...” Mira called out weakly as she stepped inside.

She was first greeted by a large, empty foyer. The mansion sported a wide staircase, high ceilings, and long hallways. The fourth level was bright, even at night, so the light filtering in through the windows allowed her to see to either

end of the hallway.

While it was dingy, the mansion was still in a livable state. There was no furniture that she could find, though, and it lacked that lived-in feeling. However, it didn't look quite as dirty as a home that had been abandoned for centuries should have. Had someone been cleaning it regularly? There was no fathomable reason to do so, but there were all sorts of folk out there.

Just as the thought occurred to Mira, she heard the mysterious voice again.

“This way!”

Mira must have been getting closer, as she now understood the direction with ease. She ran up the stairs and toward the back of the mansion. Pegasus warily followed. Guided by the voice, she arrived at the top floor of the mansion and made her way to the room with the best view in the building.

“Could it be...?”

Something was just barely glowing below the window. The light was so feeble that it looked like merely touching the thing might destroy it. It was the first time Mira had seen anything like it. Though she knew what it was by instinct, she felt a touch confused. Based on what she'd heard, however, this wasn't impossible.

“Say, Spirit King, are you watching? This feels like an artificial spirit to me. What do you think?” Mira asked mentally.

A response came quickly. “*Yes, I agree.*”

Artificial spirits resided in things that people created and used for long periods of time. The Spirit King claimed that this mansion's former resident must have cared quite a lot about it. Its lack of decay was thanks to this spirit's power.

“However, it is badly weakened,” the Spirit King added. *“It will soon reach its limit. The voice you heard may have been this spirit's dying cries.”*

“Goodness. Is that it?”

Artificial spirits did not have free will; they responded to people's feelings. No doubt this room, with its lovely view, had been the lord of the mansion's

favorite. The spirit of the mansion had stayed there, quiet, slowly losing its light, as if hoping to spend its last moments there.

Unable to merely stand by and watch, Mira covered the spirit with her hands, as if protecting a weak flame from the wind. Then, she asked the Spirit King, “*Is there no way to save this spirit?*”

“*I had a feeling you might ask.*” His voice, unsurprised yet warm, echoed in Mira’s mind. At the same time, the marks of his blessing appeared all over her. “*I’m ready when you are, Mira. It’ll be just like last time. Form a contract with the spirit, and I will give it strength through that contract and my blessing. That should save it.*”

“*I see. Then I shall!*” Mira replied promptly.

She gently placed a hand on the mansion’s spirit and used Contract Forging. The mark of the Spirit King’s blessing instantly glowed brighter, and his power traveled through Mira’s body and into the spirit. The contract’s light swelled brighter and began to flow outward before condensing within Mira’s right hand. The light of the contract eventually faded, and Mira felt the mansion’s spirit within.

“I think...that worked.”

Unlike the primordial spirits that governed the natural world, artificial spirits resided in the contractor after a contract was made. Mira felt the addition of one more such connection and breathed a sigh of relief; she had saved the spirit of the mansion.

“*I thank you for your kindness. Take care of them.*”

“*I should be the one to thank you. Without the power of your blessing, I would not have been able to save them.*”

Before she knew it, the symbols of the Spirit King’s blessing had faded. Mira gazed at her arms and sighed; if only she could make them glow at will. That would be so cool.

Still, she smiled at the new connection she’d made.

Then, seeming to sense what was going on, Pegasus nuzzled Mira’s chest, as if

to remind her that *it* was her best friend.

Chapter 8

“WELL, WE’VE COME all this way. Why not spend the night here?”

It was ten at night now. Mira was getting hungry, but she first looked around the mansion in order to pick a room to stay the night in. Monsters might appear in the surrounding area, but she could summon as many powerful bodyguards as she wanted, so there was no real danger. Furthermore, the mansion was relatively clean, thanks to the spirit having maintained the place. No doubt she’d be able to rest easier here than in the Great Temple.

Suddenly, all of the windows shattered with a spectacular noise.

“Wha?! What was that?!” Mira asked, startled.

It was like a poltergeist from a horror movie. Strange things continued to happen. Cracks ran through the mansion with a dull noise. Mira and Pegasus were on high alert. Part of the mansion turned to rubble before their very eyes and fell with a thud. This signaled the start of the entire mansion’s collapse.

“This won’t do!”

Sensing danger, Mira jumped out of a broken window like an action film hero. Pegasus followed suit just before the well-kept mansion turned into ruins, just like its neighbors, with a loud rumble.

“That was close...”

Mira turned to the debris, whipping up a cloud of dust as she did so, and breathed a sigh of relief. Pegasus brushed the dust off of her with its wings, visibly relieved.

When asked about this, the Spirit King explained that the mansion had only maintained its shape thanks to the power of the spirit. When it had moved to Mira, the inevitable had happened in a flash. *He should have said so in advance*, Mira thought.

Mira had originally planned on settling down in the mansion for the night, but she now sighed.

“Well. I suppose we’re back where we started.”

Perhaps she should go to the Great Temple, after all. It would take under an hour to get there, thanks to Pegasus, so it wasn’t a *long* journey. But an hour felt so much longer at this time of night. Deciding not to cry over spilled milk, Mira got on Pegasus’s back. Then, she realized that the place she was in was bigger than she’d first thought.

They were currently in the mansion’s courtyard. Though decayed, it was big enough to build a whole second mansion in. Mira jumped down from Pegasus’s back with a child’s excited smile. After telling it she’d count on it again tomorrow, she dismissed the holy beast.

“I was thinking of trying this out once things had settled down, but there’s no time like the present. Why not take a crack at it?”

She had made a successful contract with the spirit of this mansion. That meant she could summon it.

During the contracting process, Mira had learned that summoning the mansion spirit would summon, well, a *mansion*. She’d wanted to try it out right away, but she was already standing inside a perfectly acceptable mansion. What was the point? It was something to try another time. But the mansion was now a mountain of rubble.

The only real problem regarding summoning a new mansion would be the lack of land to put it on. But here she was, on a suitable vacant lot. She hadn’t even needed to go looking. The conditions were perfect; how could she not try? Mira promptly began preparing to summon the mansion spirit.

It seems to be an intermediate summon, but the mana cost is exorbitant! It rivals even my dear son, Eizenfeld. Doesn’t that get the heart racing?!

Since this would be her first time summoning it, Mira organized all of the information appearing in her brain and carefully constructed the spell. This felt different from summoning her weapon spirits, the dark and holy knights.

The summoning process required designating a summoning point, choosing a

summon, consuming mana, and then giving orders to the summon. However, a mansion spirit did not really require orders; instead, there was a scale parameter before the mana-consumption step. Mira could not adjust the scale parameter yet, so she fixed a summoning point in the middle of the courtyard, left the scale at its fixed value, and continued the spell construction as usual. Satisfied, she finally activated the summoning spell.

[Evocation: Home Sweet Mansion]

A magic circle appeared in the middle of the courtyard, and the enormous amount of mana she'd spent condensed. Amid the glow, a new mansion took form.

"Ooh... This is the power of the mansion spirit. My new evocation!" Mira cried excitedly as she gazed at the building.

Its exterior was just as nice as any noble villa. Then, she excitedly ran over—but her expression turned downcast in no time. Once the dazzling light had subsided, the full form of the mansion spirit was laid bare.

"This is just a hut!" Mira screamed.

In the giant courtyard stood a "mansion" the size of a shed. Despite its disappointing size, the exterior was magnificent. If she put enough of them together, it might become a mansion that truly rivaled those of nobles. For now, though, it only looked like a child's playhouse.

Hrmm... I see. So this is what the "scale parameter" must adjust.

It was far from luxurious at first glance, but it was still big enough to rest in.

A freshly contracted spirit was essentially in a level-1 state. As they grew together, it was sure to become a glorious mansion. Holding out hope, Mira opened the door, which was far too gaudy for the building's size.

"Oho... I see. So, this is how it looks," she mused. It was a well-built, one-room building with a calming, elegant interior. "It may not be big, but it's certainly enough for a comfortable night's sleep!"

Lustrous wooden pillars and hardwood floors complemented white-painted walls and ceilings. A large window allowed a view of the outside, as well as a

way for light to flow in.

Mira lay down in the center and savored the comfort. *This mansion spirit is just fine; it's even more comfortable than the tent I found at Dinoire Trading!* Mira smiled, having won the war despite her past defeats. This wasn't an issue in an underground dungeon, but when she'd eventually have to camp outside, being able to summon the mansion spirit meant being safe from the wind and rain, while being even more comfortable than sleeping in the wagon.

"What a fortuitous encounter. Though we will have to do something about the...minimalism."

Mira sat up and looked around the room.

Because it was the mansion spirit she'd summoned, it had only created the *mansion*. In other words, there was no furniture. The space was barely seven-and-a-half square meters and as empty as a new home on moving day. If there was anything, it was the poor excuse for a kitchen. It looked like something meant for servants to cook for themselves. Had the level-1 mansion spirit recreated servants' quarters for Mira?

No matter. It didn't change the fact that it was a room in a lovely mansion. Being able to summon it anywhere was going to be ridiculous.

"I'm sure I'll have fun buying things for it at Dinoire Trading." Mira had no more complaints. In fact, she was already excited to see how much it would grow in the future.

She placed the special-made sleeping bag in the corner of the room. Suddenly, she realized that it looked like she'd just moved in, bringing a satisfied smile to her face.

"Hrmm... Doors?"

Just as she'd decided to get up and make a meal, Mira noticed that there were doors other than the one leading outside—two of them, lined up together, at that. They were painted the same white as the walls, making them much less conspicuous.

Drawn by curiosity, Mira first opened the left door. Behind it was an old-fashioned toilet.

“Could it be...?”

If there was already indoor plumbing, then that could only mean one thing. With hope in her heart, Mira opened the other door. When she saw the room, though, she cocked her head. It was just a compact room of white stone, with naught but a drain in the corner of the floor. She’d expected this room to have a bathtub, so it took a moment to understand what she was seeing. But when she looked up at the ceiling, she realized that it was a shower.

Hrmm. Maybe it’s still too early to expect a bath.

This wasn’t a bath but a shower. Depending on one’s perspective, this was still a luxury. If the level-1 spirit had this much available now, she could only imagine the mansion’s accommodations once it had grown.

Even more expectant now, Mira took this opportunity to take off the clothes she was wearing.

“Now, how do I get hot water?”

After so excitedly rushing into the shower room, Mira realized that she had no idea how it worked. There was a lever that seemed to be the key, but no matter how much she moved it, nothing happened.

Just then, the Spirit King spoke to her. The mansion spirit only served as a vessel, of sorts; the facilities it provided were unusable by default.

“Nrgh... I can’t use the shower, then,” Mira muttered dejectedly as she toyed with the lever.

The Spirit King’s voice echoed in her head again. Apparently, there was a way to make them work. When asked how, he answered that she should use the power of his blessing. *“My power is the power to connect. I am able to temporarily join the powers of my kin. If you wish to use that shower, then use my blessing to join a water spirit with the mansion spirit. Join a fire spirit as well, and you may use hot water. This will be useful training for my kin. Use them as you please.”*

The true power of the Spirit King’s blessing was Spirit Linking. Mira had acclimated to his blessing, allowing her to use it. By focusing on his blessing while summoning a spirit, she could have the spirits and blessings take care of

the fine adjustments.

However, it would take a lot of mana to use the facilities. She couldn't create hot water indefinitely; still, using the power of spirits would be much more efficient than using Ethereal Arts.

"How magnificent!" After listening to his rough explanation, Mira's first reaction was delight. As someone so specialized in magic, mana consumption wasn't a major burden to her. Far from it—being able to use the facilities with mana alone was convenient.

Mira got down to trying it. She summoned and linked water and fire spirits to the mansion spirit. She proceeded as instructed and successfully linked them without any problems.

The Spirit King, who'd watched the process from start to finish, spoke up immediately. *"I am surprised that you got it in one try. Even Forsetia, who could use my power freely, struggled at first."*

The Hero-King Forsetia had the Spirit's King Blessing, just as Mira did now. It seemed Mira had easily overcome a step that she'd stumbled on. Was it because she was a summoner, a class with a high affinity for spirits? Either way, she'd taken to the blessing well. The Spirit Linking technique could not succeed without strong bonds, yet Mira had succeeded on her first try, regardless. That was proof that spirits loved her. The Spirit King knew he'd selected the right champion, and he smiled happily at Mira as she struggled with the shower controls.

Hot water eventually rained down. Mira felt the blissful warmth of the water, savoring her shower. She was using soap and shampoo she'd swiped from the inns she'd stayed at up to this point. There was enough left to keep her clean for half a month.

"Having hot water to bathe with is so nice, even if it is just a shower..."

After enjoying it to her heart's content, Mira left the shower room and took out her big suitcase. From there, she retrieved a bath towel and a change of underwear.

She gently touched a nearby wall and murmured, “I’ll be counting on you from now on, friend.”

The air in the room seemed to become just slightly fresher. Was that the mansion spirit responding to her feelings?

“It’s a pleasure to work with you,” Mira said, grateful, and opened the door to the bathroom.

The power to link spirits, hmm? I’m sure I can find a myriad of applications for that.

For some reason, she found the bathroom calming. After doing her business, she thought idly about her new power and grinned at the ideas that came to mind.

After freshening up in the shower and bathroom, Mira treated the place like her own home and started making dinner, wearing only her underwear. Since it was now usable, she decided to cook in the kitchen.

“What should I make tonight?”

She laid out many ingredients and thought about what she wanted to eat. Veggies, meat, seafood—after staring at them in turn and thinking for a while, she decided on a meal and got right to cooking.

Thanks to the Spirit Link, water came out when she turned on the faucet. By adjusting the link, she could even boil water. Water coming from a faucet—such a normal, everyday thing was somehow still complicated.

Despite the inhospitality of a dungeon, Mira had found herself in an environment much like everyday life. She was aware of how blessed she was, now more than ever. Even through abundant use of Dinoire Trading’s products, one could not create such a comfortable space.

Places suitable for rest needed walls and a roof—in other words, they needed to be secure. The closer they were to one’s normal living space, the better. The natural representation of such a place was, of course, a house. However, one couldn’t bring a house into a dungeon. Even adventurers with the fattest of

purses could only reproduce the notion of a home with a tent. Yet, that was nothing compared to a real house.

Mira had managed it through this contract, though. It may not have been big...yet...but the inside of the spirit mansion truly had the sense of security of a real home. It was as if she were in her own room in the Linked Silver Towers. *Why, I could almost forget that I'm inside a dungeon.*

After preparing the ingredients, Mira looked around the room. The emotions welling up in her heart drew a smile out of her that soon turned into a smirk.

The ultimate environment was here, far beyond anything that even modern, high-class tents could replicate. She was in a place that no other adventurer could hope to reach.

Camping isn't so bad once in a while, but this...this is something else. I can be comfortable in even the harshest environments!

Feeling a sense of superiority, Mira tossed ingredients into the heated pot. Her meal today was amberjack hot pot. She'd bought the amberjack pre-cut, so it was easy for even this poor cook to make bite-sized portions. After that, she added seasoning and let it simmer. The dish was ready in a grand total of thirty minutes.

Mira took a few bites of her food. "Mm. Why, this is so good that I could sell it!" She was moved nearly to tears by the result of her efforts.

It did not occur to her that her appraisal of the meal had been artificially inflated by her hunger and environment. To her, it was a harmonious combination of all the ingredients. To anyone else, it was a hot mess. However, she enjoyed it, and that was all that mattered. After downing her meal with a smile, Mira lay back and savored the afterglow.

The cool floor was pleasant on her bare skin. She gazed out the window at the fourth floor of the Ancient Underground City before abruptly standing up.

"Hrmm. Neighbors seem to be coming for a visit."

Skeletons could be seen here and there in the ruined city. They began to gather in the area, either attracted by Mira's presence or the conspicuousness of the spirit mansion. However, she would not be shaken. After going outside

and checking her surroundings, she summoned a holy knight to protect the mansion spirit and two dark knights to crush any approaching monsters.

The holy knight stood guard, while the dark knights immediately got to ripping skeletons apart.

“My First Pupil will have his hands quite full in the morning.” Any skeletons that approached were cut down and turned to dust, dropping magic stones in the process. At this rate, there would be an enormous pile of them by the time she woke up. Mira smiled at the five magic stones already on the ground. “Ah, AFK farming. The dream is now reality.”

Depending on how many she got, she might even sell some to get funds for high-end adventuring supplies and replenishing her foodstuffs too.

Maybe I could even collect equipment again.

She had given her previous set of stat-boosting accessories to Cleos for the sake of training new summoners since she was already plenty strong without them. As such, she’d put off fabricating replacements.

That said, Mira believed that one could never be *too* strong. Now that she could afford it, she wanted to use her refining techniques to make more of these accessories. Even the weakest bonus effects could be turned into first-class boons with enough refining.

“Oh, the possibilities!”

Elated over her new goal, Mira went back into the mini-mansion and fantasized about market prices for magic stones as she prepared for bed.

Chapter 9

AFTER PREPARING for bed, Mira slipped into her sleeping bag in only her underwear. As if trying to prove that she hadn't forgotten her real goal, she murmured, "First things first. I'll have to get my hands on Soul Howl."

A few seconds later, she opened her eyes again.

I can't sleep with all this light pouring in.

She hadn't paid it much mind until now, but the spirit mansion was as bright as daytime due to the fourth level's innate lighting. Mira was the sort who turned all of her lights off when she went to bed. She stood up and looked at the window, wondering what she could do about this.

"I need curtains."

When it came to blocking light, curtains were the obvious first choice. But they were a part of interior design, so the spirit mansion—a mere vessel—was not equipped with them.

Hrmm. How do I block off the window? Hang up a towel or something, perhaps? Just as it occurred to Mira, things moved, seemingly in response to her thoughts.

"Ooh, it's pitch-black now!"

The window was equipped with shutters. Since they covered the window itself, they cut off light even better than curtains would, making the room so dark that the previous brightness seemed unreal. Mira couldn't even see her own feet.

So, I can give the mansion spirit orders, just as I can dark knights? This is magnificent.

Mira then hit upon an idea. She opened the shutters, slipped into her sleeping bag now that she had a little light, and then closed them again. This blocked the light streaming in the windows and created the ideal sleeping environment.

Now that I think about it, this is an unusual situation. It would usually be too dark to see; I'd want to make it brighter.

It was normal for one to sleep in darkness. The Ancient Underground City was a special situation; when staying in the spirit mansion anywhere else, Mira would need lighting until bedtime. She could use her [Ethereal Arts: Illumination], but Mira was unsatisfied with that answer.

“I’d like a light fixture that fits the mansion,” she mused.

A calming space needed a certain *vibe*. Instead of a dazzling orb of light, she thought a stylish, subdued light fixture would be much more relaxing. Remembering her room in the Linked Silver Towers, she muttered, “Other furniture and design features would be nice too.”

At this point in time, the mansion was just a building—a minimalist room. However, the word “mansion” brought to mind a certain lifestyle, level of interior design, and furniture. *Perhaps I should buy a table, chairs, and the like*, Mira thought.

The Spirit King’s voice echoed through her mind once more. He claimed that she could search for and contract artificial spirits of furniture and interior design elements.

“Artificial spirits are born through human emotion. There are sure to be items of furniture that were beloved and given life in this vast world. Find them, make contracts, and join them using my blessing. You may find your mansion becoming complete in no time.”

His words were music to Mira’s ears.

“Goodness... Artificial spirits of furniture? That is a marvelous idea!”

If she wanted illumination, she could contract with a light fixture’s spirit. If she wanted tables, she could contract with a table’s spirit. Doing this over time meant her now-empty mansion could be upgraded into a proper one.

Excited by the thought of searching for furniture-related artificial spirits, Mira fell asleep, fantasizing about finding a big grandfather clock spirit and dreaming of what her final mansion might look like.

After spending the night in the fourth level of the Ancient Underground City, Mira woke up and sleepily checked the time. It was past nine in the morning. She'd slept quite soundly, so she was in great shape.

While looking around the pitch-black room, she recalled the previous night and ordered the mansion spirit to open the shutters. Light flowed in, brightening the room again. She didn't know if this was ancient super-technology or some sort of magic, but the artificial light had the sun's warmth. Mira waited for her eyes to get used to the light, finally got out of bed, and began preparing for the day.

"Mm. What a lovely morning."

First things first: the bathroom. Then, she took off her single pair of undies and went to the shower room. After taking a hot shower to wake herself up, she set about preparing breakfast. Perhaps thanks to the spirit mansion's home-like comforts, Mira didn't bother dressing properly. Once again, she lounged around in her underwear.

"I'm in a mansion, so I might as well have a fancy breakfast."

It was only fitting that the meal should match the setting. Mira had a commoner's dinner last night, but she'd thought of a few things since then. She set her ingredients out in the kitchen and picked some things out: white bread, bacon, fried eggs, fruit, black tea.

As a result of Mira's biases and emphasis on appearances, it was a commoner's breakfast that resembled that of a noble's. However, she ate it while sitting on the floor in nothing but her underwear, like some sort of slovenly layabout. Details aside, Mira finished breakfast and quickly cleaned up. Then, she got ready to resume her adventure. After putting on her bra, which she still struggled with, she finally donned proper clothes. Then, while she adjusted her hem and collar, she thought to herself, *I wonder if there are mirror spirits out there too,*

One of Mira's aspirational idols had once said that a gentleman must know the importance of his personal appearance. That meant she would need a mirror. These days, she'd have to carry herself like a lady, rather than a

gentleman. Not that Mira cared—her aspirations never changed, and she aspired to be tasteful and dandy.

With her preparations complete, Mira left the mansion and turned around. It was still just a sturdy-looking little hut, but as it grew, it would someday attain a size rivaling a true mansion. The Spirit King claimed that the best way to make these artificial spirits grow was to use them according to their purpose. In other words, to make the mansion grow, she needed to make it her home. Mira wanted to see the completed mansion as soon as possible, so she planned to sleep in it every night from now on. She said as much to the mansion spirit before thanking and dismissing it.

The mansion disappeared, and her field of vision expanded. It was then that Mira remembered something and muttered, “Oh, right.” She had spotted the dark and holy knights she’d stationed as guards the night before—along with the mess of magic stones littering the ruined courtyard. “This is even more than I’d expected.”

She stared at the magic stones, of which there were far too many to bother counting, and smiled in surprise. This would fetch a pretty penny.

“Have no fear, for Supernyan is here!”

As planned, Mira summoned First Pupil Cat Sith to pick them all up. This time, he appeared wearing full-body, red-and-blue tights and a cape. The sign he bore read, “Faster than a speeding kitty, more powerful than a lion! He runs in to save the day without thanks or reward! It’s the heroic Supernyan!”

This was his most elaborate sign yet. Mira ignored it entirely and ordered him to start picking up stones.

“The world is in peril! But here comes Supernyan!”

Her energetic First Pupil calmly flipped his cape, ran, and jumped into the air. He was brought back down by gravity, naturally, but he pretended nothing had happened and started snatching up magic stones. Cat Sith was fastidious in the oddest ways; even though he couldn’t fly, he still had to act out the full action scene. Where had he even learned about superheroes? She was curious, but

Mira helped him collect magic stones instead of asking.

“This is huge, meow! You got 233 in all!”

They'd picked up every single stone and arranged them all in a pile. First Pupil Cat Sith had counted them as if odd jobs were his passion and danced around with a sign in hand. Mira couldn't read it easily due to how much he was spinning it, but it had notes left on it, probably from when he'd been counting. It read, “A lot + a lot + a little = ?”

Was that number right? Mira was dubious, but it did look like more than two hundred.

Mira deposited the magic stones in her Item Box. “Indeed, I didn't expect such a bounty.”

“Tonight's gonna be a real feast!” First Pupil piped up, his job done. Mira quickly dismissed him. As he faded away, basking in light he shouted valiantly, yet sadly, “A true superhero disappears when the job is done!”

“Now... I believe market price back then was 500 ducats at minimum.”

Back then. In other words, the smallest magic stones had fetched 500 ducats back when this world had been a game. Magical tools, elixirs, potions, powering equipment—magic stones were a necessity in various production processes, making them a high-demand item. Furthermore, goods for adventurers with “technomancy-powered” in the name used magic cells as their main power source. These magic cells were made from processed magic stones, which meant that demand for the stones was even higher now.

I should have checked market prices ahead of time.

Mira had looked into prices of weapons and drugs, but she'd overlooked this. There was no way that they'd sell for cheap these days, though. Certain of that, Mira decided to calculate the total using the minimum price, regardless of actual size.

Two hundred at 500 ducats apiece would be 100,000 ducats. A nice bounty, indeed.

This resulted in a nasty grin that Mira just couldn't wipe off her face. One couldn't blame her, though. She'd earned 100,000 ducats literally in her sleep. Wise Man or not, her sense of monetary value was as pedestrian as could be. She was naturally drawn to such an efficient money-making method.

The lower levels provided bigger stones, as I recall. Perhaps it's not unreasonable to think that I might make 300,000, no, 400,000 ducats in one night of sleep!

With such materialistic hopes and dreams on her mind, Mira decided to sleep in a place where monsters spawned more frequently. She then excitedly summoned Pegasus.

"I'll be counting on you!"

Mira seemed to be in unusually high spirits. As someone who loved her, Pegasus was happy to see it. It neighed joyfully. She jumped elegantly onto Pegasus's back. Once it was sure she was secure, Pegasus spread its powerful wings. They flapped proudly, as if to express joy, and Pegasus took flight.

Mira's first destination was the Great Temple, which housed the staircase to the fifth level. It was close enough that Pegasus could reach it in under an hour.

In the ruined cityscape below, Mira spotted adventurer parties fighting skeletons here and there. There were quite a lot of adventurers in the Ancient Underground City, just as she'd been told.

"I suppose it's no surprise that this place is bustling."

On closer inspection, each group fought neither too close nor too far from one another. She would later learn that this was their way of both ensuring crowd control *and* staying close enough to help each other if needed. Simple alliances and secure, safe ways to earn money were first popularized a few years ago.

"Now, I wonder how much these folk earn in a given day." Mira wallowed in a sense of superiority, remembering her accomplishment from this morning. Just then, she noticed a clearing teeming with skeletons. "Oh. That was near the Crematorium, I believe."

The Crematorium was a name used among former players. It wasn't big; it was a simple plaza laid with large, white stones. But for some reason, it attracted an unusual number of skeletons.

Undead monsters, including skeletons, were naturally attracted to the living. They were even more drawn to people who were struggling the most to live—that is, people near death. Players who enjoyed reading the world's lore had claimed that the undead didn't resent the living; they admired them. As such, *something* incredible and relating to life must lay dormant in the plaza. In the end, it had remained a mystery. The players found the white stone the most suspicious, but no matter how much they looked into it, they always came back empty-handed. The riddle went unsolved. If they'd exhausted every means they had, then that must mean there was nothing there. Maybe the skeletons simply had a habit of gathering in the plaza. Research-loving players came to this conclusion and dispersed in search of more fruitful mysteries to unravel.

Eventually, the plaza became a popular place to farm materials by using area-of-effect magic to burn down all of the skeletons at once. Thus, it was called the Crematorium.

Now Mira knew of the existence of angel's barriers, which could make places imperceptible to humans. *Maybe it'll turn out there's actually an angel's barrier here!* she joked to herself. If that were the truth, then it would be best to let sleeping dogs lie—after all, if an angel went out of their way to hide something, then it should remain hidden.

"Still, that is an impressive crowd..."

Skeletons continued to gather at the Crematorium, one by one. There were already more than fifty. With Mira's strength, she could kill them all in ten seconds flat. Fifty magic stones in ten seconds—that was a lot of money for so little effort. But Mira passed by the Crematorium without a second thought.

Money had been falling into her hands with minimal effort. The best money was the kind that one received and spent with ease. Her perceptions of value and wealth might have become a little skewed.

"Ooh, it seems someone's already on the case." Mira spotted a party heading straight to the Crematorium from the Great Temple. There was a single warrior

—probably a tank. The rest of the party were all mages.

Burning Soul, Flame Wand, Evil Blaze... That's all fire-bolstering equipment.

The Crematorium had just the right number of skeletons. It seemed like its reputation was still thriving to this day. Mira recalled how Luminaria had made her join her in a farming run there before. She saw off the procession while she recalled the good old days, happy that some things hadn't changed.

Chapter 10

THE GATHERED SYMBOLS appeared on Mira's palm, and the door in the back of the Great Temple opened. After traversing down a long staircase, she arrived at the fifth level of the Ancient Underground City. A tunnel opened into the face of the northernmost cliff on the level.

"Another slog..." She grimaced at the sight before her.

Unlike the fourth level, the fifth was filled with thousands of giant towers, as far as the eye could see. Perhaps it was more apt to call them "pillars supporting the ceiling." Either way, it was an extremely awe-inspiring sight. With the floor far below and the ceiling far above, it felt otherworldly. However, an extraordinary force gave off a grave aura. The eeriness didn't stop there. Skeleton-type monsters inhabited this floor as well.

From the fifth-level entrance, an enormous staircase descended for what seemed like forever. The proper route involved going down these stairs, but Mira had no intention of doing so.

"I'm counting on you again, friend." Mira jumped onto Pegasus's back and flew through the fifth level. She was on her way to a conspicuously slender tower on the northwestern side of the floor.

From above, the bottom of the fifth level looked murky and dark, despite the ceiling's lightness. Countless towers were connected by passages in a spiderweb-like pattern, making it impossible to fly in a straight line. This reduced their speed considerably. But even when it needed to rotate slightly to fit through spaces, Pegasus was always careful to never throw Mira off.

A while later, Mira landed in front of her objective, dismissed Pegasus, and summoned two dark knights.

The fifth level of the Ancient Underground City required the collection of symbols to proceed to the next floor. It didn't help that Pegasus's added

efficiency was also halved by the labyrinthine towers.

I really think they should give you a shortcut once you've cleared the dungeon...

Mira stepped into the tower, her dissatisfaction plain on her face. She needed three symbols on this level. She would have to enter towers to the northwest, northeast, and south. Specific pathways had to be followed both through each tower, as well as to the other towers. Then, she'd finally reach the crystal chamber where each symbol could be obtained.

She could try to enter through places other than these three fixed towers, but she would be unable to reach the crystal's chamber. Taking shortcuts was also impossible because the passages connecting towers were tube-like. People had considered opening holes in the walls, but the towers and passages that led to the crystals' chambers were all impenetrable. In other words, there was no speeding up the process. So Mira pressed on with low expectations; maybe if she were lucky, she'd be on the sixth level by evening.

Will-o'-the-wisp-like lights graced the tower's interior, so it wasn't too dark. However, there were no windows or gaps for light to filter in, making the three-meter-wide passages feel especially claustrophobic. To add insult to injury, skeletons also attacked, making it quite the un-fun dungeon.

While the dark knights took the lead and crushed all the skeletons in their path, Mira picked up a fallen magic stone and conversed with the Spirit King to pass the time.

"Say, Spirit King, why can't this tower be destroyed?"

"It may look like mere stone, but it's actually an alloy. Knowledge of its manufacture has been lost to time. As I recall, it was called algorest alloy."

"Oho, that is a fun fact."

Casually asking him questions yielded the answers to so many long-lost mysteries. Now that she really thought about it, Mira realized he was like a cheat code. But there were still things that even the Spirit King didn't know; when asked where the other Wise Men were, he could not offer a useful response.

“How long has this Ancient Underground City been here?”

“I can’t answer with precision, but it’s old enough to have firsthand accounts of legends of the Age of Myth that have long been passed down on this continent from the distant, distant past. Rest assured that it’s old.”

“Legends, hmm? Yet it remains intact. That’s ancient technology for you,” Mira replied vacantly, gazing at the lights that still continued to provide luminescence to this day.

She asked more questions, but the results were mixed. She didn’t know if the Spirit King was keeping secrets or if he really didn’t know, but most everything she learned from him was minor trivia. She loved minor trivia, though, and she arrived at the crystal room in what felt like no time.

After obtaining the first symbol, Mira used the menu to check the time. It was just before three in the afternoon. “Hrmm. Two hours and change.” Giving up on being done by evening, she entered the magic circle in the corner of the room.

Getting here was a pain, but at least leaving was easy. The magic circle glowed, and she was warped back to the first tower.

“Say, Spirit King, how exactly does this teleportation magic circle work?” Mira asked, not expecting to get any real answer. The Spirit King typically didn’t tell her much about special technology like this. Still, how convenient would it be for this technology to reach the modern world?

This time was different, however. He answered that it was a special magic circle that used the power of the god of space-time.

“The god of space-time?!” Mira was surprised that such a high-ranking being was involved, and excitedly pressed the Spirit King with more questions. He avoided giving her any details beyond one thing: typically, this was a taboo act.

Teleportation could be made possible by manipulating space-time, but doing so was permitted only to gods. It wasn’t meant to be in human hands. The fact that it was used here meant that there was a special contract applied to the magic circle. The contract limited the magic to work in a very narrow set of conditions. Only when the start point and destination were prescribed, such as

“from the top of the tower to the entrance,” was it possible.

“*You would need to be blessed with incredible luck, but if you ever meet the god of space-time, you should try asking for permission to use teleportation. When that time comes, I will do my best to help you persuade them,*” the Spirit King laughed, half-joking and half-serious.

“I had no idea that was possible... But it’s definitely exciting!”

Mira wondered just how small the probability of meeting a god was. Could such a thing even happen? She was conversing with the Spirit King, however, a being comparable to gods. Maybe it was more likely than she thought!

I’ll just have to ask!

Overjoyed at this new hope, she summoned Pegasus and departed for the next tower. And since Mira was in such a good mood, Pegasus was, too.

Mira continued to chat with the Spirit King as she collected the second and third symbols. She then went to a plaza where skeletons frequently spawned. It was just after nine p.m., which meant that the fifth level had taken her all day. She was exhausted, so she summoned the mansion spirit right in the middle of the area.

“Time for some well-earned rest.”

While murmuring about how hard she’d worked today, Mira summoned her two dark knights and a holy knight before opening the door to the mansion, excited for tomorrow.

In the midst of bleak ruins, she had a peaceful living space. Mira took off her clothes, feeling like she’d come home, and refreshed herself with a hot shower. After cleaning up, she looked out the window and saw approaching skeletons being cut down mercilessly by her dark knights.

“Oho, hard at work already.” Mira smiled at the scene, mentally calculating her earnings. At this rate, she’d have 200,000 ducats by morning, maybe more. “It’s like a skeleton parade out there. Money’s marching right into my pocket.”

So little effort, so much profit. Certain that this was the ideal way to make a

fortune, Mira thought of buying a technomancy-powered cooler to deal with the coming heat. Then she wondered, *Will this mansion spirit be able to air-condition itself with spiritual power?* It should be possible. She'd been able to heat the room as much as she wanted by linking a fire spirit. By linking an ice spirit, she should be able to cool it as well. She could even make ice or chill food through the same means.

She'd missed the optimal timing, but after getting out of the shower, Mira poured herself some ice-cold sangria and giggled in delight. "Ahhh... This is just too much luxury for one girl!"

An air-conditioned room, a well-equipped living space, and a perfect drink to top it all off. Mira lay down in the middle of the room, wearing just her underwear, so intoxicated by the comfort of the space that she started to forget about her mission.

"I used to take this for granted, but goodness, what luxury..." she murmured to herself.

After so much time spent with modern trappings, one could easily forget just how much of a privilege they were to have. Perhaps because she'd made a living space just like the one in the world in which she had been born, Mira suddenly remembered those times. Grateful for the present, she began making dinner.

After dinner, Mira was tipsy enough that she spilled the beans to the Spirit King about *Ark Earth Online*, the video game that had taught her about this world.

"Well, well. From another world, you say?"

"That's right. I was floored when a world that was once a game became reality. Say... You don't sound so surprised."

A game had become reality. Fiction had become fact. To the Spirit King, a resident of the fictional world, that should have been a shocking revelation. But his voice was calm, betraying not a hint of surprise. Mira found herself a little disappointed at his lack of reaction.

"I recall Forsetia saying something along those lines. She'd come from another world too."

"Say what?!"

The Spirit King claimed that the Hero-King Forsetia, who had saved the world long ago, was also a visitor from another world. He might not have been surprised, but Mira certainly was. She asked for more details, but his answers were as vague as always.

However, she learned two things. First, visitors had come from other worlds all throughout this world's history and continued to do so to this day. The second was about Forsetia herself: apparently, her closest friends called her Yuina.

What does it all mean? Does that mean there were players so long ago too? Or were they taken to the past, just as I was brought thirty years into the future? Maybe she wasn't a player at all. It's possible that she came from a different world entirely.

This world was now reality, and former players were scattered all throughout it. Even if Forsetia was from another world, it didn't guarantee that she was a player, though; she may have come from somewhere completely unlike Mira's world. There was no reason to assume Forsetia had even come from Earth. This was a full-blown fantasy world, so the possibilities were infinite. In fact, it might have just been her set character background. Given the number of possibilities, merely thinking about it would yield no answer.

Having learned more about the Hero-King, rather unexpectedly, Mira pressed on with more questions. "Did she happen to say anything about the world she came from?"

She wasn't trying to discover Forsetia's true identity; she was mostly just curious. It was natural to be intrigued about famous people, whether they were in the same world or different ones.

"Hmm. I'm afraid she wasn't willing to discuss that, so I don't know the details. I apologize."

"No, it's fine. I apologize for pushing so much."

It seemed he had no more information on Forsetia. Or rather, they hadn't spent much time together. He'd merely lent her the strength necessary to defeat a great evil, toward the end of Forsetia's regular exploits. In other words, the Spirit King only knew Forsetia just before she became the hero she was now known as. Anything before or after would be more easily found in historical documents or oral tales.

"But to think that you are another visitor from the beyond. It seems like more than mere coincidence, doesn't it?" the Spirit King said softly, the words heartfelt as he remembered the distant past.

"I think you may be right," Mira agreed with a smirk. She was sure that their partnership would be a long one.

Thus, with her interest in the Hero-King Forsetia stronger than ever, Mira decided she ought to research the subject more as she finished her dinner and went to bed.

The next morning, Mira ate a quick breakfast and departed the spirit mansion, excitement clear in her eyes. As soon as she saw it, her lips curled up into a wicked, vulgar grin. The magic stones lay in heaps.

"I can't stop smiling!"

Undead monsters became more active at night, while adventurers typically slept. This allowed the skeletons to grow in number and increase their range of activities, leading them to Mira's life force in the plaza. The dark knights waiting there culled them, resulting in a mountain of loot. And because this level's monsters were stronger than the last, the magic stones were bigger too. If she sold all of these, it would result in jaw-dropping amounts of passive income.

When average adventurers camped or took breaks in places like this, they used technomancy-powered barrier devices like those sold by Dinoire Trading. These had effects that jammed the undead's ability to detect life. They weren't perfect, however, so parties often set up a watch rotation—but these devices were treasured for their ability to allow said watchmen to relax a little. Mira would probably never need to use it, but she'd bought one just in case.

Mira looked around in satisfaction, then summoned Cat Sith to address the situation at hand.

It took time, given the sheer number of drops, but since Mira had ordered the dark knights to limit their aggro range, the labor was minimal. The holy knight's tower shield could also push the stones around like a bulldozer, allowing them to finish the work in under ten minutes. Then came the best part: counting. Like yesterday, the First Pupil counted the stones in no time. His final tally was 342 magic stones.

"Insane revenue without so much as lifting a finger. You can never have too much money."

Mira gleefully deposited the stones into her Item Box. She was strong enough to earn millions to tens of millions of ducats in a single day if she put her mind to it. This was essentially pocket change. She was obsessed with the effortless trickle of money. Her working-class roots meant she was always on the hunt for a lucrative side hustle.

"Now we're *really* gonna eat good tonight!"

Cat Sith hopped around, likewise excited by the pile of loot. Mira retrieved a cut of fish, handed it to the cat fairy, and dismissed him. While he was bathed in light, his voice echoed, "Cobalt king tu-nya?! Thanks for the grub, bub!"

He acted like a single cut of fish was a luxurious feast. Maybe he found pleasure in simple luxuries as well.

Chapter 11

AFTER COLLECTING the magic stones and dismissing her mansion, Mira rode Pegasus to the Great Temple. They wove through the mess of towers and passages for thirty minutes before finally arriving.

Some adventurer parties were still in the Great Temple. The fifth level was designated for C-rank veterans, and the people here were clearly stronger to show for it. Their equipment stood out; all of them had high-class mithril equipment. Some even had spirit gear.

Their eyes gathered on Mira, who'd come by herself. Her breathtaking beauty alone was enough to draw their gazes, but most watched her out of pure curiosity; why had a lone girl come to a C-rank dungeon?

Mira approached the largest party among them. "Excuse me, may I ask you a question?"

"What is it?" a man who was no doubt their leader replied, curious. The other groups fell silent.

"Have you seen a necromancer around? He would be riding a Bicorn with a broken right horn."

Mira had already heard one eyewitness's testimony, so surely others must have seen him. The last time someone had mentioned Soul Howl was a week ago, on the second level. Another sighting might help her gauge how quickly he was moving.

Due to the raw size of the dungeon, most of one's time was spent traveling. Regardless of how strong you were, there was a limit to how fast you could go. Furthermore, she'd heard that Soul Howl was riding a Bicorn. There were plenty of intricate paths and obstacles in the way. Soul Howl must have picked the Bicorn for its maneuverability, but it couldn't possibly be as fast as Pegasus, who ignored all of those obstacles without issue. With luck, she'd be gaining on him.

The man crossed his arms in thought, then shook his head. “Hmm... Can’t say that I have. Sorry about that,” he answered.

The rest of the party didn’t seem to have heard anything either.

“Hrmm, I see... Apologies for interrupting.”

Mira had figured that a larger group would have the highest chance of at least one of their members spotting Soul Howl. Parties moved together, though, so they probably all saw the same things. However, she did not give up. She moved on to another party and asked again. The second group hadn’t seen him either. Then, just as she asked the third...

“Hey, kid. I might’ve actually seen that guy.”

A man spoke up after hearing Mira ask the others. When she turned around, she saw a lightly armored man waving at her. She ran over eagerly and looked up at him.

“Ooh, really?! When? And on which level?”

He blushed for a moment, but he cleared his throat, gathered himself, and plastered a cool grin on his face. “I couldn’t see the head from behind, so I dunno if it was exactly a Bicorn. But I saw a guy riding a horse-shaped skeleton here on the fifth level, three days ago.”

A few of his friends murmured in agreement.

“He was too far for us to get a good look.”

“Creepy, right?”

They’d only seen him for a moment and didn’t know any details. However, they were certain that he had been riding something skeletal. Given the circumstances, it was probably Soul Howl.

“Hrmm... Three days ago.” Mira doubted it for a moment; had she closed the gap between them by that much?

A week ago, he’d reached the second level. Three days ago, he’d reached the fifth level. It normally took a full month to reach the seventh floor of the Ancient Underground City, and most adventurers already considered that fast. But Mira was clearing it much more quickly than that, and Soul Howl was her

peer. Was the difference between land and air travel truly this great? The thought of it made her shudder at the sheer size of the city once more, though she was grateful for Pegasus's presence.

Of course, she also had to boast to herself, "Now that's the power of summoning for you."

Based on these reports, she was certain that she'd be able to catch up. Mira thanked them for the information and handed the man a random restorative as thanks. Adventurers who put their lives on the line for money could never have too many of those.

Just you wait, Soul Howl!

Now in a better mood, Mira ran through the Great Temple to make for the sixth level. The excitement of being reunited with a friend filled her heart.

There was nearly a riot in the temple after Mira ran off.

It started with the restorative she'd handed over, one of many she'd ordered from her alchemist friend. She had placed this order before attempting to solo the biggest raid battle in the game, but she had been brought to this world before she could attempt it. She still had the full stock in her inventory.

As one might expect of a restorative meant to be taken to the hardest raid battle, just one was worth hundreds of thousands of ducats. It was far too great a reward for a little eyewitness news. The man now had both the envy of his group and the ire of others. He was so surprised that he was unsure whether he should even accept it.

The sixth level of the city was, once again, half the area of the previous level. Towering structures filled it from end to end and top to bottom, making it impossible to see into the distance. The towers of the fifth level had been tightly packed, but the sixth was even denser. Countless box-like structures that were both tall and wide intertwined to form a motley castle. Rooms, corridors, foyers, atriums, ballrooms, covered passageways, stairs, and slopes overlapped irregularly to create a hodgepodge city. All the thick cables and metallic pipes

running through the city made it look more modern than fantasy.

I can see why people call it Kowloon Walled City...

Long ago, when players first saw this sixth level, they'd compared it to that somewhat lawless city that had once existed in real life. Mira noticed the similarity too.

Despite how ancient this city was, odd signs of past life could be seen in its decaying streets. At first, everything looked unstable, like it was all a pile of building blocks. But the structures, made of an unknown metal, were sturdy and showed no signs of collapsing. Structures overlapped each other, occasionally connected by unstable-looking scaffolding. Whenever an adventurer went down one narrow pathway, it split into several more.

The spectacle filled the entirety of the sixth level. The dungeon shrunk in area with each level, so the sixth level was modest in size compared to previous levels. But due to the construction, the total surface area, including all floors, was comparable to that of the third level. On top of that, it contained B-rank monsters, making it the most annoying level in the entire Ancient Underground City.

“I suppose I’d best get going.”

Once again, she needed to collect three symbols to get to the next level. They could be obtained in small crystal chambers inside temples on the upper, middle, and lower tiers of this level. However, to enter what players referred to as the tiermasters’ rooms, she needed yet *more* corresponding symbols.

Mira summoned dark knights in front of and behind her, idly wondering how many days it would take her to get through here. This time, Pegasus would get to rest. Flight was useless here. The sixth level’s narrow passages and low ceilings were far too complex for that.

“Now, where was it?”

What sorts of technology had they used when this city was made? The lights shining here and there lit everything perfectly, heedless of the city’s density. This made the place feel less claustrophobic, even tickling some people’s

adventuring spirits. The girl who'd just come to this floor was one of those very people.

The sixth level still had many working facilities, with rare flowers and trees being cultivated. However, there were rumors that there were more undiscovered areas, which brought many adventurers here in search of them despite the level's difficulty. Having heard those rumors from someone she'd passed along the way, Mira found herself inspired by the adventurers who pursued them.

"I think if I go this way... Or was it this way?"

Mira had underestimated the floor because she'd convinced herself that she had the route memorized. She wandered down a corridor, desperately fishing through her memories, and peeked into a small atrium. *I was just here. That means I got lost going that way, so...*

Mira gazed at another corridor on the other end, a mere five meters away.

"If I'm here...then over there... In other words...up!"

She traced the route in her head and calculated her current position. She was directly under the correct route. After leaning out of the corridor, she used Air Step to dance through the air and up to a walkway between buildings.

"Whoa!"

A skeleton stood exactly where she'd meant to land. Mira reflexively kicked at it without worrying about her fluttering skirt. Thanks to her momentum and the surprise attack, she launched the skeleton away with a spectacular kick. However, it was a B-rank monster, and a weak mage's muscles could not destroy it that easily. It stood up and shook off the blow. But it was *only* a B-rank monster, and no match for the ultimate summoner. A black sword appeared out of thin air and turned it to dust.

"Oh... You startled me. That was just a reflex."

Skeletons were creepy, no matter who you were or where you came from. Having one suddenly appear right in front of your eyes would startle anybody.

Well, except for Soul Howl, Mira grumbled, mentally.

She picked up the magic stone. Then, gazing at her legs, she muttered, “Now that I think about it, kicking ought to work.”

To this point, she’d only used her hands in close-quarters combat, a habit from her Danblf era. Mira often prioritized form over function, and at the time, she’d always worn robes—especially her ultimate equipment, the Wise Man’s Robes. They were all so long that her legs would get tangled up. This made it difficult to use kicks, so she let her fists do the talking instead. But now, she realized that a short miniskirt left her with enough mobility to freely use kicking techniques.

Mira dismissed the dark knights she’d left in the corridor below, summoned new ones next to her, and decided to use them as test dummies for her kicks. Though she hadn’t used kicks before, Mira had learned some basic martial arts from Wise Man Meilin. She unleashed her previously sealed kicking techniques to her heart’s content.

Despite how refined her technique was, Mira lacked the physique to put any real force behind her kicks. They were only a tiny bit stronger than her fists, and the dark knights took no damage at all. However, she could bolster the power of her kicks with Immortal Arts. After practicing simple moves, Mira rejoiced at her new close-quarters combat option and continued her trek, excited to learn more later.

If only Mira had an unbiased observer—or any feminine sensibilities at all, or even if someone had walked in on her practicing—maybe she would have realized what would happen with her undies when she kicked in a miniskirt. But she either did not notice or did not care. She simply proceeded on with unabashed confidence, proud to have unlocked a new technique.

“Everyone knows you need steel plates in your shoes too.”

When Mira made the enemy reel back with a flying kick, she’d have her dark knights finish them off. She repeated this process multiple times along the way, blamed her equipment for the low damage dealt by her kicks, and thought of ways to fix the problem she’d created for herself. Steel-toed shoes might make her kicks hurt more, but it would also make her less mobile. Her lack of strength was her real problem, so heavier shoes would only exacerbate the issue. As

such, the best solution was to work on refining equipment like she'd thought about the other day.

But that was a problem for later; she was too focused on her new options in battle for the time being.

At the top tier of the sixth level, Mira defeated a giant skeleton in a large building and received the symbol needed to enter the crystal chamber.

"I think I'm getting the hang of this."

Throughout her journey through the sixth level, she continued practicing her kicks. She'd occasionally misjudge the angle and kick a skeleton with her shin, making her scream and bringing tears to her eyes. But she was becoming much more consistent. She gave up on trying to deal damage after a while and used leg sweeps to trip enemies instead. This worked well. Even without much strength, she could find success just by being more precise with her sweeps. Her enemies were skeletons with exposed joints, too, so they were the ideal training targets.

"Well, I think that's a good stopping point for today." Mira had overdone it a bit, to the point of hurting her hip joint. She limped clumsily toward the crystal chamber.

The dark knights fought so well that Mira didn't really need to help. She followed them instead, picking up magic stones along the way, and—not at all discouraged by her injury—thought of how to combine her kicks and Immortal Arts.

Meilin used flying kicks to make things explode. How'd she do that?

Mira's martial arts teacher, Meilin, had countless techniques. Kicking moves were naturally among them, and many used Immortal Arts. However, because they didn't have much time to train and kicks were harder to use, Meilin had only taught Mira moves that used her hands. When it came to kicks, Mira only knew the most basic ones and a few others that she'd seen Meilin use the most.

I've learned a fair few of the Immortal Arts, so those should work well enough...

Mira, mind wandering from adventuring to thinking about martial arts, followed the correct route without detour. She went down paths, climbed stairs, through rooms, and across bridges as if on autopilot. She eventually went through a hallway with a view of the floor below, proceeded down a large street, and found a clearing with a small temple at the very end of it.

“Ooh, we’ve made it.”

Skeletons jumped down from above to ambush Mira, but her dark knights reacted swiftly and crushed them before they could even touch the ground.

Meanwhile, Mira gazed at the unusually shaped temple. It was a perfect sphere that was sunk into the ground, and it seemed to be made of metal. The surface was smooth and reflective, like a mirror. It was a pearl-like temple in the midst of a jumbled mass of building blocks. Was this a display of piousness from the people who’d once lived here? The orb-like temple had a special aura compared to its surroundings, as well.

“No matter how many times I see it, it’s still uncanny.”

Mira entered through the sole opening in the exterior.

“Up the stairs by the altar, I believe.”

Recalling the location of the crystal chamber, she went straight through the temple.

Compared to the outside, the inside of the temple was surprisingly normal. There was a chapel with pillars that were perfectly crafted, despite their current decay. Holy statues lined the walls. Though they had different facial expressions, they all depicted one being that seemed both demonic and angelic at the same time.

The Trinity was the main religion on the continent in modern times, but Mira’s history-loving friend had told her that each region and race had had their own pantheon of gods in the distant past. The gods worshipped in the Ancient Underground City were forbearers, of a sort.

Even gods have history, Mira thought to herself as she got a closer look at the impressive statues along the wall. Then, she proceeded up the narrow staircase.

Chapter 12

“PHEW... Well, that’s one down.”

At the top floor of the spherical temple, Mira opened the door to the crystal chamber and put her hand on the crystal. This turned the symbol on her hand into one of the three necessary to reach the final level. That was the main quirk of the sixth level: the key symbol for the crystal chambers would turn into those which opened the Great Temple’s doors, meaning that one needed to know the locations of both the key symbols and the Great Temple’s symbols. Unlike previous levels, only one person could go through at a time on this level. It was impossible to piggyback. Given the additional effort, one could see that the seventh level’s security was strict.

Furthermore, the time needed to clear the level had increased exponentially. Superior mobility was meaningless due to the mess of buildings. It was easy to get lost in the maze of streets, and even if one *had* memorized the entire route, they still needed to constantly check their position.

As such, Mira had begun her trek before noon. It was already eight p.m. by the time she had the first symbol. She’d made some detours along the way—stoking her adventurous spirit, practicing her kicking abilities—but collecting the keys and their corresponding symbols took six hours at minimum on this floor, no matter how much one rushed.

Common knowledge said each symbol took three days for the average adventurer party. Despite all her curiosity and detouring, Mira was still going extremely fast. Part of that was thanks to her constant use of Immortal Arts, but her stamina was reaching its limit.

“Argh, my legs are stiff. I can’t walk anymore...”

Mira sat along the white wall of the crystal chamber and sighed, massaging her tired legs. The lack of Pegasus on this floor was a real burden. *But I was able to get the first symbol in one day, so I think that’s reasonable progress.*

The sixth level was the most troublesome by far. It could take normal

adventurers two whole weeks to clear it. This was because they'd have to move as a unified group, *and* they didn't have access to Immortal Arts for movement, like Mira did. Furthermore, they'd have to exhaust their stamina on endless skeletons and take regular breaks, unlike this summoner, who made her dark knights do all the fighting. All of that time added up.

The first time I came here, I think it took a week. I've certainly gotten stronger.

Mira fondly recalled her first visit. This world wasn't like a video game, where you didn't have to worry about physical fatigue or food. Feeling a mix of exhaustion and pain in her legs, Mira laughed at how she'd once considered it *fun*.

"I must hold out a little longer..."

Monsters wouldn't approach the spherical shrine, so it was a good place to spend the night. Regardless, Mira forced her exhausted body to stand up, dragged herself out of the crystal chamber, and left the structure. When she looked around, she noticed the shrine was built on a rather large site. She walked around and found that the backyard was perfect.

"I think this will do." Mira summoned the mansion spirit behind the shrine.

She'd prefer to be able to sleep—and have her dark knights farm—in a place where more skeletons gathered. Unfortunately, the sixth level had few places where the mansion spirit could be summoned. The only other spaces large enough were far away. That said, her main goal was to use the mansion spirit as much as possible to induce growth. Not earning money in her sleep was fine as long as she was in a place that allowed her to level up her summons.

Summoning dark knight guards, just in case, Mira went into the mansion and took a deep breath, as if she'd just come home. "Ah, now this is comfort." The mansion spirit's power was mysterious; despite the interior and exterior being entirely different, it was just as calming as if she were in her own bedroom.

Mira surrendered herself to the feeling, stripped naked, plopped down in the shower room, and let the hot water wash over her.

"How soothing..."

Finally able to relax her exhausted body, she bathed in the flowing water for some time.

After a rather long shower, Mira put on a pair of panties and lay in her sleeping bag in the corner of the room.

“I wonder if there are any massage chair spirits out there,” she grumbled, rubbing her overworked legs while her body was still warm. Master Meilin had taught her that this could make a huge difference in how she felt the next day.

After massaging herself as instructed, she made a late dinner. Mira was in the mood for a hearty meal, so she cooked a thick cut of meat with salt and pepper. At the same time, she made a salad and got out some bread to go alongside it.

“Perfection.”

A lovely scent wafted up from the sizzling meat. Mira’s stomach grumbled like mad, so she picked at her salad and waited impatiently for the meat to finish cooking. Soon, she’d accidentally devoured the entire salad, and the meat was beginning to look just right.

“What luxury!”

Mira got straight to eating. When her teeth sunk into the thick, chewy meat, a relaxed smile spread across her face. She then put the half-eaten steak on a roll, made a special sauce by using the leftover grease in the frying pan and extra seasonings, and added some cheese to the sandwich.

“I’ve always wanted to try this. Behold, a steakburger!” Mira chomped on the steakburger with a huge smile, her dream finally coming true. “Mm, delicious!”

After a fulfilling dinner, Mira cleaned up and drifted off to sleep while reading the *Encyclopedia of Skills*.

Mira woke up to face her second day in the sixth level.

“Mm... Youth is a wonderful thing.”

She woke up at eight a.m., amazed to find that she was fully rested, thanks to

either the massage or her youthful form. A slight pain twinged from her thighs down to her calves as she stood to walk a lap around the room, however.

“Muscle pain the next morning... That’s more proof of youth too.”

They said that as one aged, the pain hit later and later. She didn’t know if this was true, but she took the dull pain in her legs as proof of her youth. Though there was some pain, it wasn’t enough to hinder her movements.

After having a fruit for breakfast, Mira dismissed the mansion spirit. Her goal today was to get the second symbol.

As she looked around a little expectantly, she muttered, “Oh. Figures.”

It seemed the grounds around shrines really were safe. There were no signs of monsters having approached, and no magic stones littered the ground.

The sixth level spawned B-rank monsters. If she could get hundreds of magic stones from here, in one night, she’d be raking in the cash. While disappointed, Mira departed for her destination.

Given the muscular fatigue, Mira decided to go from the top to the middle tier without training her kicks this time. Shortly after noon, and just before her arrival at the middle tier, she deviated from her route slightly.

“Ooh, there it is. Now that’s a harvest!”

She jumped out of the corridor and ran through the air with Air Step. At the end of a long, disconnected corridor that seemed impassable, she reached a room overflowing with greenery. Indeed, this was one of the still-functioning facilities.

The room looked like a theater overgrown with grass and flowers, the center of which contained a single large tree. Red fruit hung from the ends of wide branches. This was the nameless fruit that had been selectively bred into what was now known as the Queen of Hearts, one of the Four Major Fruits.

Here, she again remembered her history-loving friend. Long ago, an adventurer had found this fruit and brought it back with them. A farmer cultivated and selectively bred the fruit under the sun. The result of their efforts

was the Queen of Hearts, the ultimate fruit. At the time, Mira's friend had told her the story while chowing down on the ancestral fruit from the dungeon—not that he could taste it, since it was in-game. The nameless fruit did have an effect, though: quick recovery from status ailments and a temporary increase in mana regeneration. Mira had even been given a few as a gift. She remembered how they'd both laughed over their shared desire to actually taste it.

When she opened her Friend List, that friend's name came up white. That meant that he was still alive and somewhere in this world.

"I wonder if he's already eaten one."

Mira picked up a single red fruit and gazed at it nostalgically. Then, she grinned; she'd thought she hadn't listened to him much, yet she remembered that time so well.

After putting the nameless fruit in her mouth, Mira puckered her lips with a frown and writhed in agony. "Nnnrgh! Too sour!"

The fruit was just big enough to fit in the palm of her hand, and the skin was like that of a peach. The flavor was akin to lemon, with the barest hint of honey, but it skewed heavily to the "extremely sour" end of the spectrum. It was like a drink you'd dilute with water, but somehow even more intense.

"This fruit is no joke. You can practically taste the wildness of it." With tears in her eyes, Mira took another bite. "Aaack!" She writhed at the intense sourness but smiled nonetheless. The summoner looked like an old man drinking strong liquor.

Taking an interest in the harsh, vivid, yet addictive taste, Mira picked a few more to take home to Solomon and Luminaria.

She returned to her route and continued along at a good pace. Easily trouncing any skeletons that appeared, Mira stopped by still-operating facilities and collected several other kinds of rare fruit. After a little over four hours in the middle tier, she obtained the key symbol from the crystal chamber. Then, she headed to the middle tier's spherical shrine and obtained the second symbol. By this point, it was already late in the evening.

One more symbol had been collected today, just like yesterday. “Well, that’s fine. All according to plan.”

The spirit mansion was summoned behind the spherical shrine, and Mira relaxed, making plans for tomorrow. Her third day on the sixth level would hopefully end with her having obtained the third symbol on the lower tier. If possible, she’d also like to start heading toward the Great Temple, if time allowed.

“Who came up with this awful structure, anyway?” Mira muttered to herself.

Key symbols and their corresponding shrines were positioned in opposite locations—north and south, east and west, and so on. And since key symbols overwrote each other, she couldn’t collect all of the key symbols first. As such, Mira had to go through many intricate routes in order to reach the seventh level.

After dinner, Mira flipped through the *Encyclopedia of Skills* as she rested in preparation for a new day.

Chapter 13

ON MIRA'S THIRD MORNING in the sixth level, she rushed through prepping and got right to dungeoneering.

First, she would have to descend to the lower tier. Given how complicated the sixth level was, her route to the destination would change greatly depending on where she descended from. This was another thorn in Mira's side; if one went directly from the shrine to the lower tier, they would have a very roundabout way to the next key symbol. By changing where she descended, however, she could greatly shorten the distance. Much scrutiny and planning had led to the optimal route, which Mira soon followed. She mentally thanked the volunteers who had devised this route so long ago, as she continued on her way.

There were other kinds of routes through the Ancient Underground City as well. One was especially dependable. Another took longer but avoided as many monsters as possible. A third went through the working facilities, and the last one was the optimal, time-saving route that used as many shortcuts as possible. Mira took the latter.

Early in the afternoon, Mira descended to the lower tier and obtained the key symbol. She sat down on the spot—monsters wouldn't appear here, so it was a safe place to rest.

"I'm famished. How about a little break?" She took out bread and cheese for a simple lunch.

Back then, I'd have logged out and gone to grab food, Mira thought nostalgically as she ate.

She was pleasantly surprised to learn that the cheese she'd bought was rich and flavorful, so she made a mental note to buy more later.

After lunch, Mira resumed her quest with vigor. It would take four hours, at

minimum, to reach the spherical shrine. About halfway into her trek...

“Hrmm? What a familiar feeling...”

Following after her dark knights, Mira picked up magic stones with a big smile until she suddenly heard—no, sensed—a voice. The sensation was just like when she’d found the mansion spirit days ago. There might be another atrophied spirit nearby.

“Well, best not ignore that.”

She deviated from her route, relying on the sensation to lead the way. After circling around a corridor and entering an alleyway, she peeked into the small living spaces within. The presence was extremely weak, so she only knew that it was in the general vicinity. She’d have to search with a fine-toothed comb in order to find it.

A street tightly lined with buildings containing various shops culminated in a dead end. From there, a staircase led down to an abandoned home. Another slope spiraled upward, with buildings piled up high alongside it. There were so many bizarre sights that she wouldn’t have seen if she had only stuck to the optimal routes.

Mira stopped in the midst of it all and focused on the auras around her. When it was too weak to grasp, she moved and refocused. She repeated this process several times.

At the end of the spiraling slope was a featureless chamber, perhaps fifty square meters, at the very bottom of the lower tier. Upon arriving, Mira encountered a Skull Dragon that seemed to be trapped in the chamber. The moment she set foot inside, there was a ferocious, deafening roar.

“You spawned here, of all places?”

The Skull Dragon was a rare monster that occasionally popped up somewhere in the sixth level—a sort of mini-boss. Its strength was on par with A-rank parties, making it difficult for most who farmed on this B-rank floor. Furthermore, it only dropped one big magic stone; it might have been worth thirty of the other magic stones found on this floor, but it was easier and safer to just fight thirty skeletons. The Skull Dragon’s size only allowed it to appear in

particular locations, often hidden in empty chambers like this one.

It was a famously disappointing monster to run into.

Hrmm... Unfortunately, I have bigger priorities.

The Skull Dragon was formidable, but only for the average adventurer. Now that she was obsessed with making pocket change, Mira only saw thirty magic stones. But she was more worried about the atrophied spirit than her side hustle.

“I just wish I knew which direction it was in...”

While the Skull Dragon continued to roar intimidatingly, Mira turned back to the narrow path and left. She closed her eyes and focused on her surroundings. According to the Spirit King, she would be able to locate spirits once she was much more accustomed to his blessing. For the moment, it would remain difficult. He also struggled to search Mira’s surroundings through her, for he could not perceive things that she could not. She was on her own.

Roooar!

It was clear that she was closer than when she’d first noticed it. The vague presence was becoming more tangible.

ROOOAR!

Mira focused more deeply. She still couldn’t grasp where it was, but that was her most fruitful search yet. An even more vivid image came to mind, and the fuzzy outline of a spirit came into view. It seemed to be a primordial spirit, as it had a humanoid shape. However, its face was still too hazy to make out.

“Where...? Where are you?”

As far as she could tell, it didn’t *look* atrophied. That was a relief, but the spirit looked sad and lonely, so she tried to speak to it.

RRROOOAR!

Just then, the spirit perked up—perhaps noticing Mira’s presence or hearing her voice. A hazy face turned toward her. She felt a tenuous connection between them. The spirit might be found by tracing that connection, so she focused on it even more.

GRAAAAORGH!

“Shuuut uuup!” Mira shouted back at the ever-echoing roars of the Skull Dragon.

Its incessant roaring was ruining her concentration. If only she could focus a little more, she might have found the spirit already—but *someone* had to go and ruin that. This lit a fire of animosity within her. She stopped her search for the spirit and moved to eliminate the problem.

Mira returned to the chamber and found the Skull Dragon still glowering at the sole entrance. Upon her reappearance, it let out a ferocious roar as if in anticipation.

Seems someone has some anger issues.

A red glow appeared in the empty eye sockets of the menacing Skull Dragon. Was it mad at Mira, who’d so boldly returned after walking away from its rage before? Or was it furious at its own captivity? Did it only *look* enraged? Whatever the case, it finally ceased its roaring and began a silent stare-down with Mira.

“Well, I’m already wasting my time on you. Might as well use you to experiment.”

Mira hadn’t fought such a large foe since the battle against Chimera Clausen. As such, she hadn’t had the opportunity to try out useful, new techniques she’d thought up along the way. And here the Skull Dragon was, begging for a fight—a suitable target, indeed.

As it was a dragon, it was over ten meters long. Mira faced it warily, glancing at her surroundings. She was fixing summoning points.

Now, how much can I damage this giant oaf? Let’s find out!

Her motions were masterful, fixing over a hundred summoning points in midair in the blink of an eye. This was only one-tenth of her army summoning. However, summoning an army was an unprecedented technique that required Immortal Arts to perform. Summoning even one-tenth of her complete army of dark and holy knights would come close to depleting even Mira’s mana.

But what about a partial summoning, with its reduced cost?

Apparently growing impatient at Mira's eerie smile, the Skull Dragon let out a bestial roar and charged. Its fangs and claws were deadly weapons, and its size alone made it dangerous if it collided with her.

As her looks suggested, Mira's physical abilities were lacking. She would be in real danger if she took a hit head-on. However, she had fought countless enemies stronger than the Skull Dragon. She'd never tank an attack like that; instead, she evaded with simple footwork and prepared for her turn with a glint in her eye.

"Now, take this!"

A hundred magic circles appeared in midair. Each one materialized a dark knight's arm, sword in hand.

The Skull Dragon struck the wall, shaking the chamber. Before it could regain its balance, the dark knights' arms swung down mercilessly. They hadn't merely swung their arms, though; they had thrown their weapons, a hundred black swords shooting from their hands like spears. Black swords rained down like hail. Each one was thrown with the perfect time delay to account for their various distances from the dragon.

There was a boom just as loud as the dragon's previous roars. The dark knights' arms and swords disappeared without a trace. Only the marks they made remained.

"Incredible. Just incredible." Mira gazed at the Skull Dragon, which had turned from dragon to rubble in mere seconds. That dragon could stand toe-to-toe with A-rank adventurer parties. It couldn't make someone as strong as Mira struggle, but it would take five minutes or so for six dark knights to fight it head-on. This time, it had lasted only seconds.

Partial summoning required only one-tenth the mana of regular summoning. In other words, Mira could near-instantly kill a Skull Dragon with the mana required to summon ten dark knights.

The Skull Dragon debris turned to dust and disappeared. Mira picked up the giant magic stone that had been left behind and smiled at her results.

“This is surprisingly effective!”

It required preparation, as many summoning points had to be designated ahead of time, but since she had done so tens of thousands of times already, it didn’t take much effort. Partial summoning was also based on her best skill, so the rain of black swords didn’t take much time to activate, for all the power it had. As a means of attack, it was, indeed, effective.

Gladdened by her new power, Mira made another mental note: “I’ll have to think of a cool name for it!”

The incessant roaring was gone now, so she stood in the center of the chamber, ready to continue her hunt without disturbance. She focused, searching for the spirit’s presence.

Focus. Focus.

Now that she had no distractions, she was able to feel the connection to the spirit more strongly. As a result of the distance between them, her mental image of the spirit was hazy and indistinct. But when she used their connection to call out, the spirit reacted. It turned to Mira’s voice longingly.

Wait there. I will find you. I promise, she called out, and focused more. Quietly, slowly, she reeled in the connection. *Good, good. Over there.*

Twenty minutes after she’d started concentrating, Mira finally managed to strengthen the connection until she could tell which direction the spirit was in. Height and distance separated them, but she could feel the spirit strongly enough that she’d only have to keep calling out to it. The spirit felt her through their connection as well, just as she felt the spirit. It answered her call again.

“My word!” she gasped at the response. Then, she ran to the other end of the chamber and looked up at the big, white wall. “You say you’re on the other side of this wall?”

Indeed, the strong connection placed the spirit’s location at the end of the Skull Dragon’s chamber, blocked off from Mira by a white, sooty wall.

Mira knocked on the wall and furrowed her brow. “Well, this is a problem.”

The white wall had no apparent doors or holes, which meant she'd need to find a different route to the other side. But she was already in a corner of the sixth level, far from her planned route; she had no way of knowing how to get to the other side. Worse, some places in this sixth level could only be found by going in from the tier above or below. If the spirit were in such a place, it would take quite some time to find. All Mira's efforts would go to waste if Soul Howl finished his work and departed.

But she couldn't simply abandon a spirit.

"If only I could open a hole in the wall..." Mira knocked a little harder on the wall. Almost all of the buildings and walls in this level were unbreakable, like those of the fifth. Because they were so close to the deepest part of the dungeon, the builders had made liberal use of algorest alloy. "Still, I'm amazed that there's another space behind this wall," she muttered. Mira desperately pushed on the wall, looking for any sort of switch that might open a hidden passage.

As this place was down a spiral staircase from the lower tier, it was probably at the very bottom of the sixth level. She found it odd that there *would* be anything else here. If there were another route, it would have to be a path leading to this same depth.

I would think that the most empty-looking spaces should be the most likely to contain secrets.

Some of this was Mira being hopeful, of course, but she naturally doubted places that seemed meaningful yet looked empty. What if these dead ends were only known as places where Skull Dragons spawned as a means of concealing the truth?

Mira suddenly recalled a map of the sixth level that volunteers had once made. The maps had disappeared along with the floating islands, but there was a very noticeable feature among them: the halls at the ends of spiraling stairways were *long*. Now that she knew there was space behind the wall, it would be stranger if there *wasn't* something in there. Knowing this, Mira began searching the entirety of the wall. Was there no spot on the wall that could be pushed, or a hollow for something to be slotted into?

While Mira proceeded from the middle to the left, and finally to the right of the wall, the Spirit King spoke up. *“Mira, touch that spot again.”*

“Ooh! Understood. Around here, correct?”

How handy it was for the Spirit King to speak up every time she needed him.

She didn’t know what would happen; she just obeyed his instructions for the time being. When she touched the spot he’d indicated, the symbols of his blessing appeared on the back of her hand. The sensation told her that he was analyzing the wall through her. After several long moments passed, the symbols thinned and faded.

“Did you figure anything out?” Mira asked expectantly.

After a moment, he replied, *“This is a shock.”* When pressed further, he first stated that this was the birthplace of primordial humans. He then explained the reason for his surprise: The wall in front of her was definitely algorest alloy, which was nearly unbreakable. However, the spot she’d just touched—and that spot alone—was made of a different material.

“A different material? I certainly can’t tell the difference.” Mira squinted at that spot and then another one, but their appearance and texture were exactly the same. She’d never have figured this out on her own. Mira stared down the white wall. *“So...what is it made of?”* she asked, hope evident in her voice.

“Divine mineral,” the Spirit King replied with a measure of pride, happy to see her this way.

“Divine mineral? The very same kind used in the sealed oni catacombs? In that case, would this be...?”

Divine mineral was a substance created by divine power. The catacombs where oni—such as the one that had formed Chimera Clausen—had been sealed had been built with the same substance, so the memory of it was fresh in Mira’s mind.

Could there be oni sealed behind this wall? The thought concerned her.

“You don’t have to worry about that. I still remember the locations of the catacombs, and there are none nearby. More importantly, the divine mineral’s

presence is proof that whatever lays beyond here is enough to earn the attention of the gods.”

Gods were beings that watched over humanity; they didn’t interfere with the world unless absolutely necessary. The mineral that remained as proof of their interference was right in front of Mira.

What could be sealed behind this wall? Was the spirit itself what was locked away? Something powerful was nearby.

Mira didn’t know what it might be, but she asked, “*Hrmm. Spirit King, are you able to open this?*” She felt through the Spirit King’s blessing that the spirit beyond would not be harmed. As such, she wasn’t about to leave the spirit in such a strange place.

“Yes,” he answered after a moment’s pause. “*Though it will take some time. Are you sure you want to do this, Mira? We don’t know what we may find.*” His voice bore genuine concern for Mira. She answered simply that she couldn’t abandon this spirit.

He’s right, however; it may be dangerous. Mira was confident in her strength, but she knew well that there were things in this world that even she could not defeat. If such a thing lay beyond this wall, fighting would be reckless. However, she wouldn’t give up; she would regroup and devise a plan.

Instead of destroying the spirit mineral, was there any way to open it like a lid so that it was usable again? After thinking as best she could, Mira suggested, “*Spirit King, if something terrible lies behind this wall, we may need to seal it again. If possible, I’d prefer to open it so that it can be closed again right away.*”

“*The fastest way would be to turn the divine mineral into mana, but you do have a point. Very well. We’ll give it a try,*” the Spirit King replied.

He directed Mira to touch the portion of wall again. Mira obeyed, and the symbols of his blessing covered her once more as her skin began to gleam. His power ran through her body, flowing from her hands and into the divine mineral. He first seemed to analyze the crystal. Unlike the catacombs, he had not been involved in this wall’s creation, so he needed to scrutinize it first.

Twenty minutes passed. Even the Spirit King couldn’t quickly destroy a

substance made by gods; Mira felt his immense focus through the symbols of his blessing. Once thirty minutes had passed, the blessing shone suddenly brighter, and a tunnel large enough for Mira opened in the wall.

“Ooh, it really is a hidden passage!”

When the divine mineral had disappeared, a tunnel through the algorest-alloy wall opened. It looked as if someone had dug a hole into it.

As a result of much trial and error, the Spirit King had managed to turn the mineral from a physical substance into a sort of spiritual one. He proudly explained that, if the situation called for it, he could quickly close the tunnel by changing it back from spiritual to physical. Mira half-ignored his detailed explanation, but all this was apparently made possible by the special traits of divine mineral. Either way, once she’d confirmed that he *could* change it back, she stepped foot into the tunnel.

“A dead end?”

“*So it seems.*”

Ten meters into the tunnel, the path ended abruptly. There were no side paths along the way—just a straight shot. Mira hadn’t missed any intersections, yet here she was, at a dead end. However, this place was clearly suspicious. It couldn’t possibly end here. There must have been something hidden. Mira was certain of this as she faced the white wall before her.

“*Spirit King, what of this wall?*” Mira asked, feeling around for any hidden switches. Perhaps there were two layers of divine mineral.

While Mira pushed and knocked on the wall, the Spirit King offered his thoughts based on what he felt. “*This is simple algorest alloy. I can’t find any—*” But before he could finish the sentence, he interrupted himself and said sharply, “*There. Right there, Mira.*”

“*Right here?*” She excitedly touched the spot on the wall she’d just felt.

“*Exactly. I’m certain of it,*” the Spirit King replied, prompting the symbols on Mira to light up once more. Then, incredibly, a small hole appeared in the dead-end wall. A hole about 20 centimeters in diameter opened at waist height. When she looked inside, Mira saw a protrusion at the back.

I'm starting to feel like Indy! Remembering old movies she'd once seen, she reached her hand into the hole without hesitation. Then, she seized the protrusion and pulled. The rock wall quietly slid sideways, revealing yet another hallway.

"Just as I'd expected!" Mira puffed out her chest proudly.

"This is quite the cautious design," the Spirit King mused, impressed. Having solved this puzzle, they triumphantly continued through the hallway.

Chapter 14

THEY ADVANCED ONWARD, dealing with many other cleverly designed passages —hidden staircases in the floors, concealed side corridors, and the like. An hour had passed before they knew it. It was then that Mira finally reached their destination.

“I...don’t know what to say.”

“*This is definitely unusual.*”

Push or pull, the final door would not budge...until Mira grasped the doorknob and slid it sideways.

A paradisiacal world unfolded before her eyes. Countless blooming flowers were covered in particles of light. The lush grass was like a rainbow-colored carpet, every bit as colorful as the flowers. The trees, overgrowing with leaves, shone gold and silver. In the center was a great tree with snow-white flowers that illuminated the entire room. Anyone could tell that this was a mysterious, sacred place, one full of solemn divinity beyond even that of the Elder Tree’s Forest of the Devout.

Though a little overwhelmed, Mira was still driven by curiosity and stepped inside. She was amazed when her foot sank a little into the soft ground. Mira looked down in confusion and found something incomprehensible: the ground beneath her feet was an unknown substance, one beyond even the Spirit King’s knowledge.

“*The world is full of mysteries.*” The flourishing, shining plants were also unknown to him. The Spirit King was excited to have found things even he’d never seen in his long life.

Is this a land from fairy tales or dreams? Mira wondered, before remembering her reason for coming: searching for the spirit.

Inside this colorful jungle, she used her connection with the spirit to confirm

that she was getting closer and pressed on fearlessly. After pushing through the brush for ten minutes, in a direct beeline toward the spirit, she reached a small clearing. There, a large mass clad in vines and flowers stood.

“What could this be?” It looked out of place, and Mira had an odd sense that the spirit was right there. What was this mass? Why did the spirit’s signal come from within? Whatever the case, she’d have to figure that out in order to meet the spirit.

She warily approached the mass until she was right next to it. It showed no signs of moving. Mira circled around it as she examined it closely. First observation: it was about ten square meters wide and six meters tall.

After getting a good grasp of the outside, it was time to search within the vines and flowers. Mira pushed through the colorful flowers, but they were surprisingly dense, so she had to squeeze into the opening she’d made in the mass. Inside the meter-thick layer of flowers, Mira found a glossy, white wall with a door made of black lumber. She began to understand what it was.

“I see. So, that’s it,” she mused. Indeed, this mass was a home that had been encased in vines and flowers over countless years. “Mmgh... It won’t move.” The thickly overgrown vines kept Mira’s weak arms from opening the door. Worse, they began to tangle around her, making it difficult for her to move.

Now what? There was no apparent way into the house, but she was certain that there was a spirit inside. How had this happened? After a moment’s thought, Mira decided to take a different approach. She knocked on the door.

Shockingly, someone replied from inside. “Who’s there?”

“Uh... Er...” Mira was taken aback by the answer, which was all-too-normal for a place hidden deep in a dungeon by the power of a god. “Right. I’m Mira, and I am a summoner. I sensed a spirit’s presence nearby, so I came to check on it.”

“So you’re the one who called out to me earlier!” the spirit replied happily from within. It was now clear that the connection Mira felt was linked to the person behind that door. She was relieved by their energetic voice. The vines and flowers around the door began to part like a curtain. “It’s been so long since I had a visitor. Please, come in.”

The door slowly opened. A floral scent wafted from the building, the mysterious aroma even thicker than the floral scents of the colorful sanctuary around it.

Mira entered as directed, amazed by what she saw in the home.

“This is incredible.”

The house itself was an ordinary stone-and-lumber building, but the inside was all a garden, save for the space around the central table. Moreover, it wasn’t a hodgepodge of colors like the outside; it was sorted by color, in perfect order.

“I’m glad you like it.” The spirit smiled at Mira. Her beauty put even the gardens around her to shame.

Mira was struck speechless by her beauty for a moment, but she managed to squeak out a greeting. “Ah, er, thank you for inviting me in.”

The spirit bowed in response and introduced herself with a kind smile. “I’m the progenitor spirit, Martel. I govern all flora. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Goodness, *all* flora? I’m honored.”

Mira had met flower and tree spirits before, but Martel claimed that she governed *all* flora. She’d expected this spirit to be high-ranking, given the difficulty in reaching her, but Martel was at the very top. However, the surprises did not end there.

“Hmm? A progenitor spirit? How does that differ from primordial spirits?”

Just as spirits who resided in man-made goods were called artificial spirits, those who governed nature were called primordial spirits. But Martel had called herself a *progenitor* spirit. Was she something different, or was it merely a difference in human and spirit terminology?

“As you know, Mira, those who govern flora are also primordial spirits. It’s natural to be confused.” When those words echoed in her mind, the Spirit King’s blessing glowed all over her. Then, right next to her, a human-sized image of the Spirit King himself appeared out of thin air and began to move freely, thanks to his blessing upon Mira.

"You just love to appear without warning..." Mira muttered in annoyance.

"Well, I have much to explain. Forgive me this once." But the Spirit King laughed her off, guiltless. In truth, Mira didn't mind the Spirit King's interruption. He was a more casual conversation partner than she'd ever expected, and his bountiful wealth of knowledge was a major boon in her adventures. "It's been too long, Martel. The limited information fed to me through Mira made me wonder, and it seems I was right. I'm happy to be able to see you again," he said, relieved.

"Thank you, Sym. I felt your presence, but I'm surprised that I got to meet you this way," Martel replied, smiling joyfully at their reunion. Sym was surely a pet name based on his full name, Symbio Sanctius—and proof of their bond.

Hrmm... I can't help but feel like this is no mere reunion.

They had both said that they were glad to *be able* to meet again; did that mean that they had thought they *wouldn't* be able to? What were the circumstances behind that, and what of this sealed place? Mira watched the reunion curiously.

"Sym... It's been so long since anyone has called me that," he mused.

"Oh? Have they stopped using that name?"

"Yes. Some call me Your Majesty, some Symbio. Others use the full name and title."

"My, my. Things have certainly changed since the old days."

"They sure have..."

The Spirit King chatted happily with Martel. Clearly, they had a lot to catch up on. Mira wondered just how long ago those "old days" might have been as she listened to their conversation.

The Spirit King suddenly perked up after a while and turned to Mira. "Ah, whoops. I was so steeped in nostalgia that I'm chattering away. Sorry, sorry. About progenitor spirits..."

"It's been ages, hasn't it? Don't worry about me," she dismissed him.

It must have been hundreds, maybe even thousands of years since the two had last met. Mira sat a short distance away as the pair conversed. She was happy for the excuse to relax and snack on cookies and all-season au lait.

“I’m happy just knowing where she is. Besides, I’ve come to enjoy playing the part of a wise man and answering your questions for you.” The Spirit King smiled cheerfully, relief evident on his face.

Mira laughed at his joke, and Martel smiled at their relationship.

According to the Spirit King, primordial spirits and progenitor spirits were similar but very different. Multiple primordial spirits who governed flora, as Martel did, certainly existed. They were among the top of the spirit world, and there were primordial spirits governing flowers, trees, and the like below them. The progenitor spirit Martel was not only a primordial spirit but also the origin of all other primordial spirits of the plant world. In other words, she was the *first* spirit to govern flora. Furthermore, she had created the Gopher Tree, the progenitor of all trees. The beginning of the plant world, and the mother of all flora—that was the progenitor spirit Martel.

“My word... It’s unbelievable.”

The sheer grandiosity of the story, rivaling that of mythology, suddenly made Mira feel distant from the Spirit King and Martel. A distance that could only be made up for by the closeness of their hearts.

The Spirit King was delighted by Mira’s shock. Martel struck a rather silly pose upon being introduced as the top of the top.

Though spirits lived a tremendously long time, they all had feelings and personalities, just like humans. Mira felt a complex affinity with these two, who overflowed with humanity despite being such great beings. It was as if the distance between them had closed a little.

“That isn’t the only difference, though,” the Spirit King added, once he was satisfied with Mira’s surprise.

Martel urged him to get on with it. “You haven’t changed, Sym.”

It seemed the Spirit King had a knack for drawing things out. Martel smiled at his immature glee and stood in front of Mira. Though she complained, she looked just as excited to surprise Mira. She was clearly the expressive type.

Mira stood firm, challenging them to amaze her.

Martel looked at the cookie in Mira's hand. "If you want snacks, I have plenty. What is your favorite fruit, Mira?"

A flash of realization ran through Mira's mind. *That's it. She's the progenitor spirit of flora, so I'm sure she plans to produce whatever fruit I call my favorite. Heh heh, I've seen through your trump card. You will fail to amaze me!*

"Favorite fruit, hmm? I know... Those snow-white peaches from Alisfarius are a strong contender." Mira had visited the Holy Kingdom Alisfarius in her search for clues about Soul Howl. Their specialty good, snow-white peaches—purchased from a classy inn in a station town—had left a real impression on her taste buds.

She grinned as if to say, *Let's see what you can do.*

Martel grinned at Mira's words. "Snow-white peaches, hmm? Those are one of my favorites too. I'm glad you like it." A vine stretched out before her, bearing a beautiful white bloom at the end. The petals of the white flower parted and swelled, turning into a snow-white peach. "Eat up."

A snow-white peach fell from the vine. It was a mystifying sight, but Mira had expected this from the start. She caught the fruit, unmoved. *Just as expected. This will not be enough to amaze me!*

"Bottoms up, then." Maintaining her calm, she dug a nail into the peach.

When she did, Martel added, "Thin-skinned, so you can eat it without bothering to peel it."

"O-oh. I see. Well, here goes."

So she's able to make easy-access peaches, Mira thought to herself, somewhat impressed, as she chomped directly into the unskinned peach. That's the progenitor spirit of flora for you.

The instant she bit down, a mellow aroma spread through her mouth, and the

sweetness of the flesh flooded in. The snow-white peach Mira had eaten at Alisfarius was from a classy inn, so it was a carefully selected, first-class item. But this one was so exquisite that it completely blew away the one from back then. It was like the climax of a hunger-sating euphoria.

Though she'd thought herself ready for something delicious, she reflexively piped up in amazement, with a gleeful look in her eye, "Mm, delicious! What is this?!"

Mira devoured the snow-white peach like a woman possessed, even licking up the juice from her fingertips. When she recovered, she glared at Martel and the Spirit King, who grinned smugly at her. "I clearly underestimated you..."

"Hee hee, I'm glad you like it. So glad, in fact, that I'd be happy to fill a second order. Are there any other fruits you'd like to eat? I'm also willing to give you another peach, of course."

Her words rung in Mira's ears like a lewd dream's seduction. She could eat another of that fruit, the manifestation of pure pleasure—or she could choose a different fruit and experience another flavor of paradise.

"I see... Maybe you're—" Mira stopped herself before she could be lured into begging for another snow-white peach.

No... Not yet. I haven't lost yet! Despite the overwhelming sense of bliss, the shame of defeat quelled her growing lust. Then, she calmly analyzed their previous bout. *The snow-white peach was probably the deciding factor in my defeat.*

Martel had said that the snow-white peach was one of her favorites, which would mean that it was among her strongest moves. That much was clear now, too; Mira couldn't hope to defeat a progenitor spirit, a being with wisdom far beyond human ken, in a fair fight.

She was fighting in enemy territory. But not anymore; this time, she'd draw the enemy onto her turf. It was up to mankind to muster its wisdom and stand strong, even when faced with the power of nature. That was how humanity had survived this harsh but beautiful world.

Steeling herself, Mira challenged her foe to their next bout. "Then, next, I

would like a Queen of Hearts!"

The Queen of Hearts was the ultimate fruit, the crystallization of human toil, the result of thousands upon thousands of generations of selective breeding. It was proof that humanity's ingenuity had overtaken nature's power...or so Mira convinced herself as she indulged in human narcissism.

Would her strategy to best these two work? Maybe, maybe not.

After a moment, Martel cocked her head curiously. "What is a Queen of Hearts, exactly?"

"It's the first I've heard of such a name," the Spirit King added.

They were long divorced from the outside world—spiritual shut-ins. They knew nothing about fruits that humanity had bred and named on their own.

What sort of fruit was the Queen of Hearts? When asked, Mira replied that she had no way of telling them, for she'd only heard the name. One might expect the bout to fizzle out at this point, but in Mira's hand was the original fruit—the progenitor of the Queen of Hearts. The battle had only just begun.

Chapter 15

MIRA WHIPPED the nameless fruit out of her Item Box to show it off. “The Queen of Hearts is the result of the blood, sweat, and tears of a farmer who made it their life’s duty to selectively breed this fruit!”

She held up the Queen of Heart’s ancestor. While the Queen of Hearts was delicious, this nameless fruit was nigh inedible. The sheer difference between them made Mira certain that Martel simply fiddling with the flavor would not be enough to make up for it.

When she saw the fruit, Martel was surprised. “My, my. That someone must have toiled greatly to improve this.” It seemed she admired the farmer’s efforts. Despite having had nothing to do with it, Mira grinned smugly.

However, the Spirit King seemed bemused. “Martel made that for a punishment game a long, long time ago. I still remember the horror of its taste. It was awful! Just awful. There must be some strange folk among you if they bothered to use that.” Remembering the too sweet, too sour taste of it, he pursed his lips and grimaced. So, he had eaten the nameless fruit on a dare, of all things.

“Oh, don’t be rude. The spirits of dawn love it; they say it’s the perfect wake-up call in the morning.” Martel smiled proudly at the Spirit King, who only muttered that it was “awful.” No doubt she was happy as long as she could help someone, anyone, in whatever way possible.

Mira was horrified. She had learned a most unexpected truth in the most unexpected of situations: the fruit that had been developed into the Queen of Hearts, one of the Four Major Fruits, had been created as a prank. And yet it had become one of the Four Major Fruits. History had deemed it a success. This was a difficult pill to swallow. Mira put this concerning truth in a deep corner of her mind and imagined the taste of the Queen of Hearts.

Just then, a single vine stretched out before her.

“Would it be...like this?” Martel said, prompting a single red fruit to grow at

the end of the vine before falling onto the table. When Mira picked it up, Martel smiled as if challenging her. It didn't look different, but she seemed to think she'd improved it.

"I'll be the judge of that." There wasn't any point in thinking about it. Ready to see just how much she'd improved that awful taste, Mira brought the fruit to her lips. Then, after taking just a single bite, her expression softened, exactly as Martel had expected. "Ooh... What a sweet flavor!"

The fruit's flesh melted as she took a bite, allowing juice to flood her mouth. A moderately sour taste first treated her palate, followed by mind-melting sweetness. It had a balanced flavor second to no other fruit Mira had eaten thus far. It was sweet enough to put all of what humanity called the Four Great Fruits to shame. The pinnacle of all fruit's potential lay in her hands. Mira was grateful that she was here to bear witness to its flavor, and quietly savored each and every bite.

"So, it seems you like it?" Martel smiled happily at her, and the Spirit King watched with just a hint of envy. He was clearly interested in just how much that awful fruit had been improved.

After devouring it, Mira finally said, "I admit defeat."

Such was the power of a progenitor spirit; even countless generations of selective breeding could be matched as naturally as breathing. And no doubt the flavor of it was even better than any farmer could muster, even after hundreds of years of labor. She hadn't eaten a real Queen of Hearts yet, but Mira was certain that it could not compare to this. That was just how striking the red fruit's flavor was.

Mira laughed at how they'd succeeded in amazing her, before taking her half-consumed all-season au lait in hand.

Just then, the Spirit King spoke up, "And to think, that was only a taste."

"Come again?" Mira believed that Martel had shown off her awe-inspiring power in full.

That was only a taste? What was her true power, then? What could come

after the perfect pinnacle of fruit, the ultimate flavor?

As Mira racked her brain, Martel turned her focus to the summoner's hand. Mira held an all-season au lait, a blend of four fruits, representing the seasons, mixed with milk and honey for flavor. She had said nothing about it, yet Martel managed to list all the fruits used in it, just by leaning in to smell it.

"That drink has four fruits mixed with milk, right? And...flower nectar?"

Incredible. Even when they're mixed to this extent, she's able to discern the plants involved, just by scent. I've heard world-class chefs can do the same, though, so this fails to fully amaze me.

Mira had accepted defeat, but only once. The Spirit King's claims began a second round, and she was ready to win this time.

"Are you still hungry?" Martel asked the stubborn Mira.

"Of course. I can fit plenty more!" Mira left their contest aside and replied promptly, obeying her appetite. Every fruit that Martel made was sublime, but Mira put up a stubborn resistance, hoping to surprise them with her stamina.

Another vine stretched out and left one fruit for Mira: a white, oval-shaped fruit.

"Give it a try." Martel smiled sweetly.

Taking this as a new challenge, Mira bit into the fruit nonchalantly. "How can this be?! This is...!"

The tastes of all four seasons filled Mira's mouth. There was a gentle sweetness, as well as a refreshing tartness. A powerful scent stood out, too, yet it somehow served to harmonize it all. This white fruit tasted like strawberry, cherry, plum, and apple—all four flavors used in the all-season au lait. But it didn't end there; it even replicated the richness of milk and sweetness of honey. In short, this white fruit was all-season au lait.

"Someone looks amazed. *This is Martel's true power.*"

"Does it please your palate?"

The Spirit King and Martel looked proud. The flavor itself wasn't especially shocking—Mira was quite used to the taste of all-season au lait—but the fact

that Martel could so easily produce fruit that matched the flavor was mind-boggling.

“I had no idea. But, well, I suppose that is what makes you the progenitor.”

Understanding Martel’s true power, Mira shuddered at the possibilities that lay within. It wasn’t as if there was a fruit out there that tasted the same as all-season au lait; this white fruit was a new breed that Martel had created here and now. That was what mattered. However, she was only using her power to amaze Mira.

Now that the young summoner was amply amazed, the Spirit King—master of even the progenitor spirits—began to answer Mira’s questions in more detail.

There was Martel, the progenitor spirit of flora, and the primordial spirits beneath her. Primordial spirits of flora were able to freely create any and all kinds of plants, but *only* those that already existed in the world. The sublime, snow-white peach that Martel had created used the power of evolution, while the red fruit she’d made utilized the power of change. Both were only adjustments to existing fruits—such was the power given to primordial spirits.

Martel also had the power of creation, however. She alone could create new breeds. This was the most important distinction of all, the Spirit King explained.

“The creation of new breeds... That is an incredible power.”

What would happen if she used this power to create a plant with high fertility and survivability, which spewed poison that could easily kill people? If Martel wished, she could destroy the world with ease. The progenitor spirit’s power was akin to that of a god’s. However, Martel was peaceful; she’d never think of doing such a thing.

“Ha ha ha. Amazing, isn’t it?” she giggled, looking quite proud of herself.

“Indeed. I never expected to experience something so amazing down here,” Mira answered honestly, gazing at Martel’s sunny smile. At the same time, a question crossed her mind: “Why is such an amazing spirit locked down here, anyhow?”

While she couldn’t imagine it, based on how the woman currently acted, maybe she had been too much of a prankster back in the old days. Perhaps

she'd offended the wrong god and had gotten herself locked up or something.

Surprisingly, the Spirit King had the same question. "I've been wondering that myself. I've been behind in world affairs since I got stuck in my Spirit Palace, and I can't imagine how you ended up here."

Long ago, the Spirit King's power became unstable—probably due to the taboo violated during the oni war, long ago—leaving him trapped in the Spirit Palace. While it was called a "palace," the Spirit Palace was essentially just a fancy jail that even progenitor spirits could not reach. As such, the Spirit King knew nothing about what had happened to his kin after his imprisonment. He could see the world through Mira and the spirits she contracted with now, though, and he used these connections to gather information. Unfortunately, he'd yet to hear anything about Martel.

The last time they'd met was when humanity fought the king of monsters, during Forsetia's time. Humankind had mustered its wisdom to develop a device that would wield the Spirit King's unstable power. During the decisive battle, he had appeared on the planet's surface, blessed Forsetia, and led the charge. Martel had used her power to the fullest in order to save humanity.

The battle had ended with humanity's victory. At the same time, the device controlling the Spirit King's power had reached its limit and went out of control. Forsetia was able to suppress it because she'd happened to be nearby at the time, but the device was left useless. This meant the Spirit King was unable to say goodbye to his kin, who'd worked so hard for this victory, and became stuck in the Spirit Palace once more.

"Forsetia told us what happened to you. We were all so sad that we couldn't see you again, Sym. Me included, of course." Martel turned away theatrically and pouted.

The Spirit King was clearly a pillar of support to all spirits. Just when they'd thought they would receive words of congratulation and gratitude for their victory, it had been ripped away. Needless to say, they were dejected.

"It was all too sudden. Forgive me," the Spirit King replied.

Martel smiled in response and said, "Forgiven." Then she added, "Anyway, hmm... First, let me correct the record on one thing. I'm not trapped here." The

passage leading here had been sealed many times over, using divine mineral, but Martel said that it wasn't meant to keep her from leaving—it was meant to protect her from the outside.

"Really? You seemed lonely, so I misunderstood," Mira replied. When she'd sensed Martel's presence from afar, she'd seemed miserable, making Mira think she was trapped. However, it seemed she was here of her own volition.

"I'm sorry for being misleading. Maybe I felt that way because I sensed traces of Sym."

However, being here of her own will and being lonely weren't mutually exclusive. Martel's happy smile made Mira glad that she'd bothered to come all this way.

"So, Martel. Why *are* you here?" the Spirit King urged, as if trying to hide his own feelings.

"You never change, do you?" Martel smiled. "Maybe I have something to protect."

An item protected by a progenitor spirit, of all people? I sense untold treasures! Mira quickly let her imagination run wild. That was only to be expected—a room hidden by gods, deep in a dungeon that was home to a progenitor spirit... What could they possibly be protecting? Surely, anyone would expect something incredible, especially those who loved fantasy.

The Spirit King looked around. "Something to protect? I'm afraid I can't see anything that fits the part," he said.

They were in a single house in a large clearing, covered by layers of vines and flowers. This would be the ideal candidate for a hiding place, but...for what?

"Hee hee. Did you think you'd find it so easily?" Martel puffed out her chest and added that the flowers and trees around this house were able to deceive all powers of exploration and scouting. She was confident that she'd hidden the item in a way that would make it impossible to tell just by *looking*.

"You're quite thorough. That will only make finding it all the more worthwhile!" Excited by the prospect of a treasure hidden with the full power of the progenitor spirit, Mira began searching all around the room. The Spirit

King, too, began poking around, if only to spite Martel's smugness.

Martel watched the two run around with equal parts entertainment and joy. "Warmer? Colder? I dunnooo..." she said, decidedly provoking them.

After searching for over ten minutes and finding not so much as a clue, the Spirit King decided to commit an outrageous offense, while Mira was off searching in another room. He looked directly at Martel and asked, "So...what is it that you're protecting, exactly?"

"Aw. Don't you want to keep looking?" Martel asked, triumphant. Asking for the solution was essentially admitting defeat; it would mean that the Spirit King had surrendered.

"In this state, I don't stand a chance against your power," the Spirit King replied, sullen. "In this state" meaning "manifested through Mira's blessing." The Spirit King's perception was based on Mira's, and even Mira could not match a progenitor spirit's full power.

"Aw. Sore loser, Sym?"

"For now. But Mira will continue to grow—enough to surpass Forsetia. I know this. It's only a matter of time until she will be able to see through your tricks," the Spirit King said confidently to the grinning spirit. Though Mira did not know this, he held her in high regard.

"Really, Sym? She must be quite promising, then."

"She is. And above all, my kin connected to her have told me just how much she loves us."

Only fate bonded Mira and the Spirit King more steadfastly than love. Even while she searched for hidden treasure in the other room, he felt their connection and smiled in her direction, despite not being able to see her. The Spirit King hadn't been able to leave the Spirit Palace until now. His world had broadened thanks to Mira.

Remembering how he used to be, the corners of Martel's eyes crinkled in a relieved smile. "Well, that's lovely."

Mira peeked into the room. "Did someone call for me?"

They weren't speaking loud enough for her to hear, but it seemed she'd sensed something going on. Was this a result of their bond too? The Spirit King and Martel had to laugh at the poor girl, for she was covered from head to toe in flowers.

Chapter 16

MIRA WAS ASTOUNDED, finding herself faced with weapons used by heroes, magical tools created with ancient technology, and even a pile of elixirs said to cure any and all ailments.

“Good lord... They’re all legendary!”

Beneath the flower-covered floor was a hidden staircase. At its bottom was a dizzying treasure trove. It wasn’t just one fortune either. Not only could one’s family live in luxury for multiple generations without ever lifting a finger, but there was even enough to build a country or two.

Mira’s eyes sparkled lasciviously as she charged inside and began searching about. The Ethereal Arts known as Itemization allowed items to be Examined, and Mira used this to check each and every treasure.

One could hardly blame her. These were items that she’d never gotten to see during the height of her fame as Wise Man Danblf. They were so extraordinarily rare that it was impossible to tell when they’d last had a wielder. And because Martel had offered to let Mira take one home with her, it was impossible for her to not go crazy.

Of course, Martel was also happy to explain just what each one did.

“Ooh, a sword. Every treasure trove needs holy and demonic swords, of course!” Mira murmured, taking a sword in hand.

The sword was called Nihility’s Relapse. According to Martel, it was the ultimate anti-elemental sword that could tear through any elemental power and turn it to zero. Magic used by fiends, dragon breath, and many other kinds of magic, even natural disasters—all could be rendered powerless through its overwhelming power.

Solomon would beg for this like a baby.

Solomon loved his six elemental swords. Their opposite, Nihility’s Relapse, was simply a sword that harbored the power of the nihility element. This

element was used by top-tier fiends and ancient dragons. Solomon would practically die to have a sword with that power.

Sorry, friend, not today.

She could only take one thing home, and no idiot would decide to pick a *gift*. Mira accepted her own selfishness as she continued searching. Martel even gave her permission to try out some of the items, prompting her to search even more fervently.

Mira took a magical tool in hand next. This was the Dragon Leyline Spirit Vessel, an item that could accumulate vast quantities of mana in a single day. The user could withdraw mana from it to restore their own at any given time. It was like an extra-large mana potion that could be used repeatedly on a long cooldown. Most mages would drool over it. As someone with an abundance of mana restoratives, however, Mira found it wanting. She put it back and reached for the next one.

There were many more where that came from—a treasured staff that greatly powered up the user's spells, a great axe that could cleave through mountains, a spirit bow that never missed its mark, a demonic spear that could pierce the most powerful barriers, a dagger that could freely change the user's weight, an extremely large sword that obliterated monsters. All the weapons were terribly powerful.

There was an awe-inspiring stock of armor too—a full suit of armor that dramatically increased all of the wearer's stats, a helmet that could perceive everything in a wide radius, robes that greatly reduced mana costs for spells, a great shield that reversed the momentum of physical attacks, a gauntlet that allowed even a weak user to carry super-heavy weapons, a crown that gave the user resistance to all elements, shoes that gifted one with the power of flight, and more. All of this armor was extremely rare.

"What a variety. It's hard to choose." Such opportunities were hard to come by. Mira checked the stats of each item until her curiosity was fully sated.

The magical tools included a vessel with limitless restorative water, a jewel that could emit a light that instantly killed monsters once per day, a bracelet that nullified all status ailments, a necklace that allowed the wearer to breathe

underwater, and many others.

While searching through the many treasures, Mira found her eye drawn to a single ring. "What could this be? It's oddly enticing."

As far as she could tell, it was a simple ring of dull silver with no jewel and some kind of geometric pattern on its face. It seemed out of place, making it all the more conspicuous.

Mira reached for the ring. "Its appearance isn't giving me any clues..." The fact that it was here must have meant it contained great power. She took it in hand and cast Itemize on it, upon which she learned that it was called the Ring of Parting.

When asked what it did, Martel said, "You actually noticed that? Hmm... Maybe you really are tied to us by fate." Then she explained exactly what this Ring of Parting was.

The Ring of Parting was a tool that temporarily distorted reality to create the perfect defense. It folded the continuity of space between the user and their assailant, allowing the user to protect themselves from even a god's attack.

"But given its strength, it consumes an enormous amount of mana," Martel added.

Magical tools could be roughly divided into those that used a built-in pool of mana, and those that used the user's mana. There were also some that absorbed and used mana from the world around them, but those were almost all legendary tier.

Just how much mana did the Ring of Parting use? When Martel offered to let Mira try it, she readily accepted and put it on her finger. Its usage was simple; she just had to put mana into it. Mira had done this many times by now, so this was the method she was most accustomed to.

"Goodness... This is unbelievable!"

When she activated the Ring of Parting, Mira was shocked to find that nearly half of her maximum mana had been consumed. Martel was right; that was a serious cost. Once Mira's mana had been drained from her, a thin membrane surrounded her. It looked like a rather unreliable barrier, but she quickly

realized just how powerful it was. On the outside of the barrier, Martel began thrusting at her with a spear that could pierce even the strongest of barriers. Finding it funny, the Spirit King took a nearby sword and struck the barrier with it.

“I’m impressed, Mira. You use it perfectly!”

“This is really something. Even when I strike with all my power, I feel nothing.”



According to Martel, the Ring of Parting chose its wielder. The mana required to use it was the cost—but more important was the *compatibility*.

“I don’t understand it one bit, but I am impressed,” Mira mused.

The Spirit King and Martel attacked pretty fiercely, but the barrier held. When Mira moved, it moved with her. Such items often came with limitations, but it seemed this ring was an exception. If one ignored the mana consumption, it offered flawless self-defense.

Apparently finished with testing it, Martel put down the spear and touched the barrier in admiration. “I thought you might be compatible since you noticed it without me saying anything, but this is a surprise.”

Due to the distortion of space-time, it was normally impossible for people to perceive the ring unless they looked very carefully. Those who were compatible with it had an easier time, and the level of compatibility led to a serious difference in its effectiveness.

Also finished with his own testing, or perhaps just tired of swinging, the Spirit King put down his sword and smiled. “I’d expect no less of Mira. She and my kin are linked by fate.” What did this have to do with her relationship with spirits? Curious, Mira decided to ask outright. With a tinge of sadness, he replied, “That ring has the power of the progenitor spirit who governs space-time.”

“It is also one of his lingering regrets,” Martel added.

The progenitor spirit of space-time was named Rieslein. He had once fallen in love with a human woman. She was a shrine maiden who served the Trinity, which meant that she was forbidden from love. As such, Rieslein was forced to content himself with just showing up once in a while to chat with her about trivial things.

On one such simple but happy day, however, Rieslein was stopped from visiting her by the knight who guarded her. The knight said that she didn’t want him to visit anymore. Why? When asked, the knight answered that the maiden was in love with Rieslein.

Rieslein was happy, but love was forbidden for shrine maidens. Everybody knew that. But that was only a human rule; as a spirit, Rieslein didn’t think it an

obstacle. Unfortunately, the spirit world also had a rule against interfering in human customs. As a result, their love ended the moment it became mutual.

In the following years, Rieslein put distance between them in an attempt to let his feelings go. It was then that someone who called himself the Monster-Ruling God appeared. This led to a great war, long before Forsetia's time. Human settlements devolved into chaos, and the aftermath of the conflict affected the spirits as well.

The monsters of that time were much like those found today, but when led by the Monster-Ruling God, they were far more powerful and looked very different. Martel said it was as if new species of monsters had appeared out of nowhere, like they'd been brought from somewhere else entirely.

Given the dire situation, humanity and spiritkind banded together to face the Monster-Ruling God. Spirits' powers were seen as especially vital in protecting the world, so they were spread evenly through all countries. This left the spirit world understaffed, so the progenitor spirits, with their absolute power, took over to protect it. Naturally, Rieslein and Martel were part of the war.

Martel explained that Rieslein had worried about the town where his beloved lived. He'd tried to keep his distance in order to let his feelings fade, but the heartbreak was still vivid and painful. Just one look at him told Martel the depth of his love and grief.

Tragedy struck. Unprecedented natural disasters occurred all over the world, caused by the Monster-Ruling God's special power. They were too great for the spirits to fully fend off.

The war ended with humanity and spiritkind barely eking out a victory. However, Rieslein was informed that the shrine maiden's town had been devastated by a natural disaster. As humanity tried to clean up the damage, he ran to the temple. There, he found her corpse, along with that of the knight who'd protected her to the very end.

What if he'd told her his feelings without worrying over silly rules? What if he'd convinced her to run away with him? What if they'd become a couple, or even married? If only he could be by her side, then he wouldn't have had to be so sad. Love had turned into tragedy, a wound in his heart that could never fully

heal.

Not long after, he drifted off into an eternal sleep. A single ring was left behind. Made from special stones found in the spirit world, it was the crystallization of his regrets and sorrows—the lingering questions of what might have been if he'd only told her the truth. The ring, home to all of Rieslein's sorrow, could protect its user from any and all kinds of calamity with its ultimate defense, as if trying to grant his wish.

"Ever since that day, he has remained asleep. I don't know if they're related, but sometimes, that ring's presence becomes so tenuous that even *I* can't find it. But *you* did. Isn't it strange?" With that, Martel gently touched Mira's hand as she held the ring. Her smile was soft and filled with emotion.

"I say you should pick that one," the Spirit King earnestly urged her. "The power in that ring is so great that it could be called the incarnation of Rieslein. You're compatible with it, too; I'm sure you can bring out its power to the fullest. Go on."

"I think that would be lovely. What say you, Mira?" Martel smiled at Mira with expectant eyes.

"Goodness, aren't you two getting pushy?"

For some reason, the Spirit King and Martel were set on Mira taking the ring. Mira didn't know what their true intent was, but now that she knew the story behind it, she felt bad accepting it. She took it off.

Martel and the Spirit King seemed flustered.

"Oh? Do you not like it?"

"The mana consumption is an issue, but if you use it well, it means that you can escape death simply by spending mana. I think you'd be happy to keep it by your side."

Really, what were they after?

"That may be, but doesn't it hold Rieslein's sorrow?" Mira protested. "I would feel far too guilty using something like this, especially when I never knew the man."

This ring had been meant for the shrine maiden Rieslein had loved. Was it right for someone else to use it? Mira thought not. However, the Spirit King and Martel disagreed.

“This ring symbolizes his wish to protect what he cared about. Nothing will ever be protected at all if the ring stays here forever.”

“Your compatibility with the ring means that you share his wish. I think that he would want to protect whatever it is that you want to protect. Please, let him help you.”

Rieslein was heartbroken after his failure to protect the person he loved. Even after all that pain, the true power of the ring was the desire to never let such tragedies happen again, and the need to keep others safe. While the Ring of Parting was the manifestation of sorrow born from loss, it was also a symbol of determination to never lose anyone else.

The two great spirits pleaded their case.

“To be frank, we also hope that if you use the ring, Rieslein might eventually wake up. Could you give it a try for us?”

“He’s right. It might just work. Please, Mira? Consider it saving him, okay?”

“Yes, yes, fine,” Mira replied. “If that’s what you’re after, then I suppose I will take the ring off your hands.”

It would be a grand favor to the Spirit King and Martel. Knowing that it was for Rieslein’s sake, Mira accepted and put the Ring of Parting back on. This ring was as good as, or even better than, all of the other legendary items here. And if Mira was compatible with it, then its only real drawback was its mana consumption. Given Mira’s training, however, she had a large enough pool and enough mana-recovery speed to keep that from being a fatal flaw. As long as she used it carefully, it was a very practical means of defending herself. There were plenty of good reasons for her to take it.

That wasn’t all, though. Martel was so happy that Mira had accepted the ring that she customized a new breed of plant and made a necklace for her.

“Thank you, Mira. Here’s a token of my gratitude.”

With a smile, Martel clasped a beautiful, green necklace around Mira's neck. Made of woven vines, it used a small amount of heat to absorb mana from the atmosphere. It could be powered by one's body heat, and the mana it absorbed would travel through Mira's skin and into her body, accelerating her mana recovery even more.

"This should make it easier to use the ring," Martel explained. "When the time is right, don't hesitate to do so."

"Ooh, now this is useful!"

A mana-recovery boost—even putting the ring aside, this was always a welcome boon to mages. Mira rejoiced at the unexpected gift, and Martel smiled at the ray of hope that had come to her.

Chapter 17

THE NECKLACE'S EFFECT definitely worked; Mira could feel her mana recovering faster. Suddenly, a question came to mind.

"By the way, this...Monster-Ruling God, was it? I'd like to ask some more questions about it, if that's okay."

The Monster-Ruling God had come up casually during their talk of Rieslein. It had led monsters that were stronger than any known at the time and had ruled over monsters none had ever seen before. Mira found it even more unusual than the Defense of the Three Kingdoms.

The Spirit King and Martel recalled those times to help answer Mira's questions. They muttered to themselves—seemingly mystified—before revealing everything they knew.

"Looking back, what *was* the deal with that?"

"Right? There are many strange aspects to it, now that I think about it."

First off, the Monster-Ruling God was a being whose identity remained unknown. They were a mass of darkness with a humanoid figure. It was as if a shadow had split off from a person and taken form. The god led powerful monsters and used their own special powers to create natural disasters.

After defeating countless monsters, the Spirit King and humanity's champions had reached the god. But a single blow from one champion was all it took to slay the Monster-Ruling God...a real anticlimax. Once the monsters had lost their leader, they'd fallen into disorder and had been swiftly dealt with.

"In a way, I think the Monster-Ruling God was already near death," the Spirit King said. "The mana I'd sensed from it was feeble. But those mana pulsations were like nothing I'd ever felt before. Looking back, I wonder... Humans and monsters should have similar mana, but that god and the monsters it led were all different than the usual."

"I felt that too," Martel agreed. "It was as if they'd come from a different

world..."

That was the long and short of it. The main takeaway seemed to be that the Monster-Ruling God was an unusual being with an unclear goal.

"So many questions, yet no answers..." Mira mused.

Just who was the Monster-Ruling God? And what were the strange monsters they led? Martel's claim that it seemed like they'd come from a different world hit especially hard for Mira, who had come from another world herself. However, there was no way to explain it, for the time being. The mystery only grew murkier.

Thinking about it on her own would help nothing, though, so she quickly gave up and switched her focus to the ease of use of her new ring.

"That's one of Martel's myriad treasures for you!" Mira was amazed by its features—the deployment speed and effective range of its ultimate defense, how it reacted when there were obstacles in its deployment range, and the like. It activated instantly. If there was anything in the way, the barrier itself would change shape. It had the power to push weapons away, too, perhaps as a result of Rieslein's intense feelings.

While Mira experimented with the ring, her companions conversed.

"This isn't all, is it, Martel?"

"Well, well. I can't deceive you, Sym."

What was the Spirit King referring to? What did Martel mean by "deceiving" him? Mira looked at them curiously.

Martel gazed back at Mira. She thought for a moment, then murmured, "I suppose you can't be left out of this now that you have Sym's blessing." Then, she resolved herself and told Mira the truth.

The treasures here were but a decoy; she was protecting something much more important.

"I assumed as much," the Spirit King said. "The items here aren't valuable enough to appoint a progenitor spirit to guard them. So what is your real duty?"

It seemed he'd always known that these treasures were a sham; this wasn't

enough of a treasury to be worth her guardianship. Mira was obviously impressed with the treasures guarded by the progenitor spirit, but when the Spirit King said that, she put on a smug face to act as if she'd been suspicious as well. Unfortunately, her bluff didn't work; they just rolled their eyes at her.

Dejected, Mira confessed that this was an effective ruse. She remembered how she'd heard of a similar scheme not long ago. Specifically, the treasure trove found beneath Nebrapolis. If one deviated from the normal route and went through several hidden doors, they would eventually reach the treasure trove. However, there was a mysterious chamber further beyond it. According to Solomon, the treasure was a ruse; they'd hidden what really mattered in the chamber.

This place seemed to work much the same way. Deep in a dungeon, beyond an intricate, hidden path, one of the highest-ranking spirits protected a treasure trove. Any other adventurer would be fooled into thinking this was the real treasure. But this time, there was someone present who truly knew Martel. He would not be deceived.

However, if this mountain of treasure wasn't worthy of being protected by a progenitor spirit, what was? *Could it be a divine item?! An artifact?! Could divine weapons or artifacts be sealed here?!* What could be worth more than legendary treasure? It would have to be either a divine item with a god's power within it, or an artifact with the power to achieve humanity's dreams. Mira's heart was full of excitement as she thought about merely *seeing* such an object, even for just a moment.

"I'm protecting the vessels of gods. The vessels of 'the three,' actually."

Mira's excitement swelled even more. Immediately after, she felt that something was wrong. She'd understood "vessels of gods" as "divine items," but the way Martel said it bothered her. Would one say "the three" when referring to divine items? While questions came to mind, the truth was revealed.

"The vessels of gods? You don't mean..." The Spirit King must have had an idea of what Martel meant, as he was clearly shocked. That was enough to make it clear to Mira that she'd misunderstood.

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. The three gods most closely tied to this continent have entrusted me to protect their vessels. These vessels are necessary for the gods to reappear in this world."

The Spirit King paused, then nodded in understanding. "I see. That's important enough."

Mira was stunned by the sudden grandiosity of it all, but she managed to grasp some meaning from the exchange. Vessels necessary for the descent of gods were common enough in fantasy stories. In fact, she had heard of them so often that the gravity of the situation didn't hit her right away.

When it came to three gods who were closely related to this continent, they must have been referring to the Trinity. The Trinity were the most divine of all gods. Their vessels were indeed far more important than any other divine item or artifact. Indeed, they were truly worthy of being protected by a progenitor spirit.

According to Martel, they were hidden in the trunk of a large tree outside of her home. If humanity were ever brought to the brink of extinction, the Trinity would descend to become a pillar of support, to rescue them from their dilemma, and to prevent humankind's end.

The Spirit King added that, like spirits, the Trinity were especially fond of humanity.

"Oh, I'm sure you know this already...but don't tell anyone what I've just told you," Martel said, putting a finger to her lips with a playful smile, despite the gravity of it. This was more than a national secret—it was an existential secret. Perhaps because of the Spirit King's trust in her, she was aware that Mira was trustworthy.

Mira knew just how serious it was, so she immediately responded, "Of course. I'm well aware."

The existence of godly vessels meant that there was a possibility that the Trinity worshipped by humanity could descend. If the Church of the Trinity knew about this, it could become an uproar that would envelop the entire continent. Depending on how events unfolded, they might even move to recover the vessels. That would be the worst idea, regardless of their intent.

If the locations of the vessels were known, they would become the perfect target for hostile forces when a war for humanity's survival began. Foes would naturally try to stop humankind from using their trump card, and those efforts might not be preventable. If they lost the vessels of the gods, they would lose their final hope. Humanity would have no future.

The vessels would be safest here, in a tightly secured place under Martel's guardianship, with humanity ignorant of its existence.

"That is an important mission...and you must carry it out alone, all the way down here..." Martel had spent so many long years protecting these vessels. "Don't you get lonely?" Mira asked, genuinely concerned.

"Hmm, not really. We old spirits have lived so long that we've stopped counting, so it's kind of like time isn't real to us," Martel replied with a smile. She wasn't just trying to assuage Mira's worries; she honestly didn't seem to care.

"You get distracted, and then hundreds of years have suddenly passed," the Spirit King added. "It's more common than you think."

It seemed spirits, especially those like the Spirit King, who'd lived since ancient times, had a weak grasp of time. Martel nodded in agreement. Apparently, it was just part of being nearly immortal.

Mira was exasperated at their boundless patience. Suddenly, the Spirit King looked to Mira with a joyful smile.

"But now that I've met Mira, I can feel the world through her, making every second of every day more exciting. Much has changed since the age I knew, but at the same time, so many things remain the same. This world is full of so many new, fun things that I've never experienced before."

The Spirit King spoke to Martel with both childish pride and fatherly tenderness. He felt the world through the blessing he'd given to Mira and heard stories from his kin through her contracted bonds. The stories were especially helpful in understanding the current situation of spirits. The Spirit King laughed and added, again, that much had changed.

"Is that so? Well, that's wonderful." Martel smiled. Then, with just a hint of

envy on her face, she confessed one thing: though she didn't feel distinct loneliness, she had enjoyed meeting Mira, being reunited with the Spirit King, and chatting with them.

"Martel, make a contract with Mira. I will permit it."

"What?!" Mira gasped, shocked at the Spirit King's sudden proposal. Neither spirit seemed to notice her surprise.

His offer was too sudden for Martel, leaving her perplexed. "A contract? Is it right for me to be part of such an important bond?"

But the Spirit King laughed that off. "Yes, of course. Mira cares about us spirits. I haven't known her for long, but I know that much. And that means that she wouldn't dare abandon you!"

He enticed her mercilessly. Perhaps due to insight cultivated from living for eons, he had already intuited Mira's feelings for Martel, just from her words and attitude. And he was right; though Martel had said that she felt no *real* loneliness, Mira understood that meant she felt *just a little* lonely. She'd definitely feel lonely if left all alone here, perhaps without even realizing it. Knowing this, Mira had wondered if there was any way to keep her from being all alone.

That was when the Spirit King suggested a contract—perhaps his words were directed at Mira, too, and not just at Martel.

"Mira has my blessing. You know what that means, right? If you contract with Mira, you can use that new link to learn about the modern world. You said it yourself: chatting with us has been fun, right? I feel the same way. We're finally reunited, so let's continue our idle chats."

The Spirit King's blessing had the power to link spirits in many ways. If Martel formed a contract with Mira, this new link would let her speak with the Spirit King, as well as communicate with all the other spirits Mira had contracts with.

Martel's duty to protect the vessels meant she could not leave this place. But if she made a contract with Mira, she'd be able to see the world through Mira's eyes.

It's like a spirit Internet... Mira joked to herself, as she waited with bated

breath for an answer to the Spirit King's offer. She had no reason to object; if Martel agreed and made a contract with her, she'd be able to fix Martel's loneliness issue *and* learn a new summoning technique. While her excitement for the latter was starting to overcome the former, this was still a win-win for Mira.

"I've never seen you be so forward, Sym," Martel said teasingly.

"Was that forward?" he replied, remembering his remark. After a moment, he finally said, "Hmm. I guess so. That must be thanks to Mira expanding my horizons. I'm getting nostalgic for the old days, when I could feel my kin by my side."

Before, when he could leave the Spirit Temple, the Spirit King had existed in this world and felt unified just through links to other spirits. No matter how far they were, he could feel the safety of his beloved family. There was nothing more reassuring than that.

He had been hopelessly far from it all in the Spirit Palace. But now, he could feel their presence through Mira, though only partly. That was the Spirit King's greatest joy. He also added, with an awkward smile, that he'd feel more comfortable with Martel at his side—even if only through the link.

A summoning contract was often proof of a strong trust and relationship, but a strong bond could also be tied by force. Was it right to form such a bond with someone she'd just met? Martel worried. But if that was no problem, then she would be glad to make a contract.

"I understand. Mira, if you're willing to have me, I would like to make a contract with you."

The Spirit King turned toward Mira expectantly and waited for her response.

Of course, there was no problem with it. Though they'd just met, Mira already felt a strong affinity for Martel. And most of all, she had a profound trust for all spirits.

Mira accepted her modest proposal, beaming. "Please. I should be the one to ask you! Let's get started!" she said, partly because she was excited to form a contract with a progenitor spirit, but also because she was glad that Martel

hadn't chosen solitude.

Quick, before Martel changes her mind, Mira thought to herself, rushing over. Then, she gently took Martel's outstretched hand and activated the summoner skill of Contract Forging. The faint light of the contract abruptly turned into a blinding glow that surrounded Mira and Martel, sending rays of light running through the room.

"Nnh...! Progenitors are unusually flashy, I see!"

This reaction was even stronger than when Mira had contracted with the Spirit King's own daughter, Sanctia. Her expectations grew even greater.

Enormous spiritual power burst and flowed from their hands. The power—so thick that it was visible—gradually melted into the light of the contract and overlapped with the current. Once the light and power had become one, flowers of all colors bloomed around them, filling the room. It was like a geyser of blossoms. Mira was drowning in floral arrangements. Immediately after, the flowers changed into particles of light, swirled around in a whirlpool, and were absorbed into Mira's hand.

Ooh, it worked! The information for summoning her is flowing into my mind!

When summoning contracts were completed, information necessary to use it appeared in the summoner's mind through unknown means. It was a strange sensation, as if it were information once seen in a dream but then forgotten. Then, it became a memory so vivid that it seemed to have been in one's mind from the start, never to leave it again.

Mira expectantly recalled the memory. The first thing that came to her was astonishment. Her newly acquired technique, [Evocation: Plant Mother], was even more difficult to summon than Eizenfeld, and that required four summoning circles. It was classified into a new category: Transcendent Evocation.

Transcendent Evocation... What could that be?

That was a technique unknown to even the greatest of all summoners. All that she could glean from the name that had popped into her mind was that this power was unprecedented. She was also instructed that she needed Astra's Ten

Rings, the sublimation of ten Marks of the Rosary.

How am I meant to learn that?!

Mira had thought she already knew the highest level of summoning, so of course, she didn't know of any summoning circles that might go beyond that point. She tried asking the Spirit King and Martel, but it seemed they didn't know the details themselves.

I'll just have to figure it out myself, Mira resolved as she read the incantation. It was longer than that of any summon she'd used so far—as one should expect for a progenitor spirit. However, what really astonished her was the mana cost. *This is just absurd...* The necessary mana to summon Martel was, shockingly, over one million. That was two hundred times Mira's maximum mana value, even with all of her specialization. It was staggering.

Progenitor spirits were second only to the Spirit King, whose power rivaled gods. That was too much power for humankind. Even the strongest mages, the Nine Wise Men, were beneath Mira; they could not wield her magic to the fullest.

But what if I could pay the fee? Think of what would be possible!

Despite her surprise, Mira was delighted by the immense mana cost. As with most spells, higher mana costs typically equaled stronger spells. Even Eizenfald only cost about 2,000 mana, making Martel five hundred times more expensive. Who wouldn't expect great things from that?

What mattered most was that Mira had a way to generate enough mana to suit the cost. If she used her Hermit's Cursed Eye, the technique necessary for her to be the One-Man Army she was, she could drag more than a million mana out of nature. However, the mana alone wasn't everything. While Hermit's Cursed Eye effectively meant that the user did not consume mana during its duration, it meant the user utilized the mana around them as their own. *Would there be enough mana around her to pay that cost?*

I may not be able to summon her yet, but this is one more trump card added to my collection. I'll gladly take that.

This wasn't a game; it was a world where death was real. Having another last

resort in a life-or-death situation was always a good thing. To this point, Mira's last resort was overwhelming power in numbers, but this new ability was the exact opposite: a single, overpowering presence in the form of a progenitor spirit. She couldn't use it yet, but once she learned Astra's Ten Rings, her adaptability would see an explosive rise. This made her both happy and grateful.

Excited by the vastness of the natural world, Mira focused on the connection being made between them.

Chapter 18

THE CONTRACT'S LIGHT condensed, and the room regained its calm. The Spirit King's satisfied voice broke the silence. "Seems it worked. So, Martel. Do you feel it?"

"...Umm, yes, actually. This, right? It's as if your presence is closer than before, Sym."

Through the contract, she was linked with Mira. By extension, she was tied to countless other bonds through the Spirit King's blessing. After slowly focusing on them, Martel was able to feel them. Her smile was mysterious yet soft.

Martel felt the connection between them. "*Goodness... Wasra...is that you? It's been so long.*"

Mira was lost for a moment, but it didn't take her long to realize that a new conversation was taking place. It seemed Martel had met the spirit of quietude, Wasranel, through their linked bonds. Apparently, they were acquainted.

"Yep, I made a contract with Mira too. I was just checking out those links that Sym mentioned. This is incredible, isn't it? I'm amazed that I get to talk to you again, Wasra." Martel talked excitedly, showing Mira a new side of herself.

She was so into their conversation that the Spirit King had trouble getting a word in edgewise. Seeing him left to wait, Mira was made aware of just how amazing the progenitor spirits were.

"Yep, I'm still doing the same work. Sym's power allowed her to break through the seal. Oh, by the way, weren't you protecting San? How's she doing?"

Martel paused.

"Huh? Wow, San made a contract with Mira too? Um... Oh, there you are. I found the link to San—oh, absolutely! Mira is definitely something else. Oh, San, hello! It's been so long. I'm glad you're doing well."

There was another pause.

“I’m sure he’s fine. Give me just a second, and I’ll ask.”

Martel spoke with Wasranel and Sanctia like a businesswoman on a conference call. Then she turned to Mira and asked, “San’s worried her daddy is bothering you. Is he, Mira?”

“Uh, well...” With the conversation suddenly turned to her, she spoke truthfully. “I’ve never felt annoyed by his presence. He’s a very convenient source of trivia.”

“Source of trivia...” the Spirit King repeated dejectedly, though nobody paid him any mind.

“She says he’s fine. Sym’s helping her out.”

She paused.

“Yes, of course. I’m going to do my best to be as helpful as you, San. Oh, how nostalgic... Ah, if Was and San are here, that should mean Tine is, too, right? Hmm, that’s strange, though. I can’t find a connection to Tine.”

Again, Martel paused.

“Oh, really? She didn’t contract with Mira? Why not? Oooh, Mira has a water spirit already... Well, that happens. Shame, though.”

When she said Tine, she must have been referring to the water spirit Anrutine, who Mira had met alongside Wasranel.

“How long do you think she’ll be?” Mira asked as she watched the seemingly endless conversation.

“Nobody can stop Martel once she’s got to talking,” the Spirit King replied, raising his hands in surrender.

“And I’ve given her the power to talk as much as she wants over my connections...” Mira chuckled. “This may get noisy.”

“Well, it’s been thousands of years. She’ll calm down, given time. Hopefully...” He didn’t sound too confident, despite his claims.

“I hope so...”

While Martel enjoyed her lively conversation, Mira found a place to sit and

relax as she waited for her to return. However, as an old progenitor spirit, it seemed she had a lot of spirit acquaintances. Mira also had many contracts, and before she knew it, Martel was greeting *all* of them, one by one. This could take a while.

The fact that Mira could hear Martel's voice was actually a result of the link being so new. Once they got used to it, her voice would stop leaking to Mira's side, over time.

An hour and change after Martel had started talking with the other spirits, she finally found a stopping point and turned to Mira with a satisfied smile. "Sorry, I got a little carried away. But this is really something else."

"I'm happy that you're happy."

She'd waited patiently, but this place was full of so many surprises that it was easy to pass the time. Just looking at the many new breeds of plants here and there was entertainment in itself. As such, Mira and the Spirit King were in the middle of looking at various incomprehensible flowers when Martel finished her chat.

"It's strange, though," Martel mused. "You feel even closer to me than before, Mira. And there's this really soft, warm feeling... Is this how it feels to bond?"

On top of their new tie through the summoning contract, the Spirit King's blessing created a special bond. Emotions passed through the bond, so Mira experienced Martel's unabashedly tender feelings.

"I'm happy to be working with you, Mira," the progenitor spirit said, pulling Mira into a forceful hug. Was she moved by witnessing Mira's emotions, or did she really miss human contact after all? To an onlooker, they might've looked like mother and child—though, despite Martel's matronly figure, she could act a little immature.

A sweet, floral scent tickled Mira's nose. Though a little sheepish, she tightened the hug and replied, "Indeed. The feeling is mutual."

This was the ideal relationship between humans and spirits. The Spirit King

smiled paternally at the sight.

“There are so many out there who see you as a mother. All of them are happy and healthy. Thank you, Mira.” Many of Mira’s contracted spirits, like Salamander, had been under her care since their birth. It seemed Martel knew their circumstances through the links she’d used. Mira replied with her own gratitude for all of their help.

Just then, there was a dull rumble, and the room shook—another earthquake. Irregular, ripple-like tremors shook beneath their feet. Perhaps because of how deep underground she was, Mira found this one felt bigger than the previous ones. “Shaking again... I hear this is common here of late. What could it be?” she muttered aloud.

“Yep, that’s right,” Martel replied. She sounded as if she knew something more.

Surprised by her tone, Mira whipped around. “Come again?”

Martel looked at her earnestly—pleadingly, rather than discerningly. “Mira, I have to ask a favor of you. Would you do it?”

Mira braced herself for an outrageous request—after all, it came from a progenitor spirit—but the seriousness in Martel’s eyes made her straighten up.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I need you to save a wolf,” Martel said with a sorrowful look.

It all began a year ago. A single wolf had come to the Ancient Underground City in search of his lost little brother and sister. He was no mere wolf; he had real power and intelligence. The wolf had sensed something akin to its siblings in the dungeon. But after some time, he underwent a change. He started to slowly lose his grasp on sanity. Realizing his own deterioration, the wolf came to Martel. After some discussion, he asked Martel to seal him before he lost his mind.

The wolf was very strong. There was no telling how much damage might be done if he fully lost his senses. So, Martel acquiesced and sealed him here. After

he was sealed, the wolf descended into madness and trapped himself in a cycle of struggling and resting.

“It was really hard for me to fully seal his powers. Whenever he struggles, everything shakes, just like it did a moment ago.”

Martel told the story without any drama, but when Mira heard it, she shuddered. A progenitor spirit had sealed the wolf, yet he could still create earthquakes just by struggling. How much of a monster was he? But at the same time, she found herself interested.

Was the wolf a spiritual or holy beast? Though he’d lost his mind for the time being, he must have been a very clever being, long ago. He’d objectively analyzed his situation and asked Martel to seal him in order to avoid casualties. It was clear that he had a good heart.

Perhaps...I could even form a summoning contract! Mira dared to dream. However, that would have to wait until the problem was resolved. The most pressing issue was that the wolf had lost his mind.

“You ask me to save it, but is there a way to do so?” she asked.

That was the first thing they had to work out. Martel’s explanation lacked a clear reason *why* he had lost his mind; that would be a critical clue to allowing Mira to reverse the process. Why had he ended up this way? Mira racked her brain, but Martel had already investigated the matter.

“Well, I have a...rough idea.”

The reason the wolf had lost his mind was an unidentifiable power he had been feeling. Martel didn’t know the details, but when she looked into the sealed wolf, she found many mysterious powers had mixed in with his existing power. She figured that this was the reason for his spiraling.

“It seems like that same mass of power is always here, deep below.” Whatever powers stripped the wolf of his sanity could always be felt beneath the Ancient Underground City. She didn’t know their true identity, but she knew that they must be the cause.

“In other words, you’re asking me to expel whatever is below. Correct?” If she eliminated the cause, she could save the wolf.

But Martel had something slightly different in mind. “That would be a huge help, but let’s try something else first,” Martel said. She held out a pure-white fruit to Mira. When asked what it was, she explained that she’d fine-tuned it to expel the dark powers inside the wolf.

“Goodness... You never cease to amaze.”

She’d somehow made a fruit that would bring the wolf back to his senses. Amazed, again, by the potential of the progenitor spirit of flora, Mira accepted the fruit. But then, why couldn’t Martel have given it to the wolf already?

“That was my plan at first, but things took a *little* turn for the worse,” Martel answered.

The wolf had transformed. When he lost control, the power originally contained within him was released, mixing with the unknown powers. As a result, the special plant cage Martel had created to seal the wolf was corrupted by the sinister powers, making him impossible to control. Even worse, Martel had revealed herself as an enemy to the dark power by trying to control the wolf.

Martel’s seal had been compromised. If she approached, she could fall victim to the same evil. On top of that, the original seal had transformed into a maze that had grown into a three-level labyrinth. All she could do was cover the labyrinth with another seal from above, in order to keep it from spreading.

“That’s more than just a ‘little’ worse...”

Mira’s eye twitched. How much worse could it get? She had to feed this fruit to a being that could create earthquakes just by struggling? That could corrode a progenitor spirit’s seal and turn it into a labyrinth? Mira could only imagine that *she* might wind up as the snack instead of the fruit.

Despite Mira’s worries, Martel was surprisingly optimistic due to her new connection with Mira. “I’m certain you can do it! Come back safe!”

Summoning contracts were tied by fated bonds, and these bonds had the potential to become extremely powerful. That was why Martel could feel Mira’s strength—and why she was certain that the summoner would be just fine.

“The wolf has great power...but don’t worry. I can strengthen the seal from

the outside. If you meet the wolf, I'll dial it up to maximum power; that should give you an opportunity to feed him the fruit."

Martel trusted Mira deeply, even beyond the initial trust that had come from the Spirit King's appraisal of her. And when someone pleaded this much, Mira didn't have it in her to refuse.

"Understood. I will undertake this challenge! Besides, we never know what might happen until we try!" she replied with gusto. Besides, she just couldn't refuse after being given such valuables as the ring and necklace.

Chapter 19

AFTER ACCEPTING Martel's request to save the wolf, Mira entered the seal-turned-labyrinth.

The place where the wolf was sealed was further back from Martel's home. The outer seal, covering the corrupted part, looked like a large tree trunk but was actually an entrance to another dimension. It was an incomprehensible place, as if the tree's hollow had fused with a forest. Perhaps as a result of the seal's corruption, it was all decayed. That only added to the uncanniness of it.

"This is...even worse than I was told..."

The wolf Martel had spoken of had considerable power. Mira had heard that he'd turned Martel's seal into a labyrinth recently, but it *looked* ancient. She then considered that, when tackling a labyrinth, she normally had friends to rely on. She summoned an indispensable ally for the task.

"Water or fire, heaven or hell, labyrinth or not, he scampers onto the scene! It's me, your reliable cat thief!"

The cat's-eye-shaped summoning circle glowed stylishly, and from it came First Pupil Cat Sith, who could do everything a rogue could—scouting, lockpicking, mapping, trap-disarming, and more. He made a flashy appearance as usual, proudly bearing a sign that read, "I'm getting so much screen time this season!" He was dressed more like a phantom thief than a regular thief or rogue; it seemed this was his favorite of late.

Despite his dramatic appearance, these weren't the mysterious ruins he'd been expecting. Faced with this terrifying labyrinth, he began to quiver in fear as he looked around. "This place is too scary for li'l old meow..."

"Well met, First Pupil."

While he was flustered by his flubbed entrance, Mira caught him and explained everything she knew about the labyrinth ahead.

Now that he had a grasp of the situation, he straightened up. “Nyaow, that’s a big job! You mean that wolf’s future is on our shoulders?!” Cat Sith normally lived in the moment, but he knew how to get serious when the time called for it.

However, the sign on his back read, “Top-Tier Fruit Forever!” This mission’s reward was Martel’s special-made fruit, and she and Mira had already agreed to the terms.

“Now, we’re going to be exploring an unknown labyrinth. Prepare yourself!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

After finishing this routine exchange, Mira and Cat Sith stepped into the labyrinth. Two holy knights went with them—one ahead and one behind—to guard them in case of emergency.

Mira’s destination was the wolf, but she didn’t know the route. So, she made use of First Pupil’s rare mapping ability, having him search ahead to check the construction of the maze. Though it had been rapidly made, it was truly a full-fledged labyrinth. Despite their surprise, they proceeded onward cautiously. In the process, they checked the route and the situation of the decayed forest.

“Meow meow meow... I feel something scary. Right in the middle of that...” Cat Sith said fearfully, faced with a small forest clearing. “Hmmeow... A trap?”

Persuaded by that series of meows, Mira warily checked the place. At first glance, it didn’t look any different from the rest of the forest. But despite how much her First Pupil goofed off on other assignments, he was no slouch when it came to scouting. If he believed that there was something dangerous up ahead, then she had every reason to trust him.

“I’ll try my paw at it,” Cat Sith said quietly. He took a card from his cloak and threw it sharply at the center of the clearing. Of course, he had to strike a cool pose once it was thrown.

The card only flew about two meters before it suddenly lost its momentum and fell to the ground.

“I’ll try my paw at it,” he repeated, pretending he hadn’t just said that. He threw another card. This time, it struck near the middle of the clearing, despite

being slightly off-center. “Meow?!”

“Oh?!”

Countless vines appeared out of nowhere, wrapped around the card, and yanked it to the ground.

A trap, indeed. According to Martel, who watched things from Mira’s eyes, that was one function of her seal. Whenever anyone approached, it would drive them away—though now that it was corrupted, it seemed to be more... dangerous.

Things really have changed for the worse. There might be other functions that had turned into traps as well, Mira realized, so she asked Martel for more details.

As a result, she learned that there *were* others. However, none of them had the power to kill; most of them would return her to the entrance. Martel believed the labyrinth’s traps weren’t *too* dangerous, but now that it had been corrupted, she couldn’t be certain. The wolf’s power might have turned them into different things or made them more powerful. As such, the only option was to proceed with caution.

Mira and her First Pupil carefully took things step-by-step as they continued on. After walking around for an hour, they found a familiar place.

“There don’t seem to be any monsters around...but this is a problem,” Mira mused.

“It sensed our intent to intrude...” Cat Sith shuddered.

Because this labyrinth was made from an altered seal, they found no monsters inside. However, the labyrinth itself was the problem; on top of being complicated, Cat Sith said that the paths themselves were changing over time. They’d ended up going around in circles and had wound up back at the entrance.

“As I recall, there must be some rule to it,” Mira said.

“I couldn’t tell just from looking...”

Martel had told Mira that intruders would get lost, returning them to the

entrance. She'd claimed that there was logic to getting through it, but thanks to the corruption, it was unknown to her. In other words, the duo was on their own.

When Mira had gone to the dungeon under Alcait Academy, she was beyond fortunate to have Hinata, a puzzle master, on her side. Unfortunately, the current pair lacked the mental faculties that would prove valuable in this endeavor.

"It seems we have no choice but to use the full formation."

Most labyrinths required intuition and insight to discern traps and gimmicks. Sometimes, one needed pure intelligence to unveil the hidden mysteries. When a labyrinth had puzzles, Mira and Cat Sith alone would almost always end up defeated. That didn't mean she was unprepared, though. She often cleared dungeons solo, so she'd learned some evocations to keep herself from getting stuck when she didn't have smart companions.

"Meow?! Meowstress, you're not gonna summon *him*, are you?!" Cat Sith, who'd been staring into the labyrinth to this point, panicked upon hearing Mira's words.

"I am. We're hopeless otherwise."

When Mira and her First Pupil alone couldn't clear a dungeon, they summoned a certain brainiac as their trump card. In contrast to her First Pupil, who used his sharp intuition and experience, this one used deep intelligence and theory. They were true counterparts.

[Evocation: Cu Sith]

A small summoning circle appeared. From it hopped a shih tzu-like pup, who promptly tumbled over onto the ground. The pup stood up, brushed the dirt off of his clothes, and gasped at the sight of Mira. He'd quickly realized that it was her. Though surprised, the Cu Sith bowed respectfully. "Mr. Owner? Oh, woof! It's been so long!"

The dog wore a black coat and hat, as if trying to dress like a detective, and acted like a gentleman. However, he didn't *look* the part of a gentleman, due to being a dog. Despite his best efforts, cuteness defeated dapperness by a

landslide.

“That it has, my dear Woofson.”

Mira couldn’t help but smile at him. Overjoyed to see her again after so long, the Cu Sith ran over, his tail wagging madly—then he fell over again. This was another thing that set him apart from Cat Sith; while he specialized in brainpower and magic, his dexterity was devastatingly bad. However, he never gave up and kept right on running. One might even call it peak adorability. Mira caught the desperately running Woofson and petted him to her heart’s content.

Cat Sith glared at Woofson like a jilted lover, but nobody noticed.

They sat in front of the labyrinth’s entrance and held a meeting. Holding Woofson in her arms, Mira summarized their predicament and the labyrinth itself. She was especially detailed regarding the wolf, the corrupted seal, and the changed traps.

After quietly listening to Mira’s explanation, Woofson proposed nullifying the trap as their first priority. “First things first. We’ll need to deal with that route-changing trap.” The other traps were all localized, but this one affected the entire labyrinth, so they either needed to disable it or understand its rules.

“Yeah, *duh*. We already know that. The problem is *how*.” Cat Sith plopped down in Mira’s lap and shrugged his shoulders in annoyance. They already knew that much after an hour of wandering around, and discussing how to deal with the problem was frustrating.

“Woof course, I already have the answer to that,” Woofson replied smugly to First Pupil’s challenging words. And he wasn’t just boasting; his voice was full of confidence.

Though taken aback by Woofson’s assuredness, the cat snapped, “Well, I’m sooo excited. Let’s hear it then, buddy.”

“No need to rush. I’ll explain it so simply that even a kitty can understand,” Woofson said, stroking the bushy fur around his mouth like a detective.

“I’m not your average cat. Don’t start that with me!”

“Oh, you’re right. You’re far *below average*.”

Sparks seemed to fly between Cat Sith and Woofson. Perhaps they weren’t on the best of terms... Though they both specialized in recon and investigation, their approaches were entirely different. A sort of rivalry had developed.

“Leave it, you two. We must proceed. Woofson, please tell us the way.” Clearly used to this, Mira petted both of them and asked how to get to the depths of the labyrinth.

With his tail wagging like mad, Woofson proudly began. “I’d be glad to!”

Woofson’s strategy was bold yet secure, made possible only by his ability to track scents. He didn’t track things like a normal dog, however; his magic was a special tracking method. After smelling any scent once, Woofson could find its spatial position with precision. He could even analyze how long it had been since the smell was left. And now this labyrinth had the faint scent of Mira, after her hour of wandering. In other words, by using his magic to find the smell, he could tell how the labyrinth had changed with their movement.

“The labyrinth is moving a lot, for sure. But the key to it is already in my paws!”

Incredibly, Woofson had used his magic *while Mira told him the problem* and had already unraveled the mystery of the labyrinth. It must have been reset when they returned to the entrance. After offering that hypothesis, Woofson added that Mira’s scent seemed to jump here and there in the labyrinth, in random places.

“This differs from what you told me, but it seems like there’s a loop-style trap set here too,” he analyzed. According to Woofson, there wasn’t just a seal that changed the labyrinth and returned them to the entrance; the corruption had also added a loop. If they’d assumed that it was only the former and rushed to find a solution, they could have gotten lost in an unsolvable labyrinth forever.

“I see... They’ve thrown that in too. Well done, Woofson!” Mira thanked her excellent colleague and petted him all over. He’d acted rather pretentiously before, but the moment Mira’s hands touched him, he happily barked and wagged his tail. He might have had real knowledge and brainpower, but his behavior was still that of a puppy. And that was exactly why Mira loved him so

much.

“Your praise honors me, woof!”

Subjected to this sight, jealousy burned in Cat Sith’s eyes. Unfortunately, nobody paid him any mind.

The labyrinth had become more difficult than Mira had thought. But thanks to Woofson’s uncanny ability, they’d had a breakthrough. As such, the labyrinth’s schemes were laid bare. Or at least, Woofson had a working hypothesis and could seek out decisive proof to be sure. Once that was done, though, he boasted that he would be able to conquer the dungeon’s traps once and for all.

His claims were very persuasive, and the labyrinth expedition team stepped into the maze once more.

Chapter 20

CU SITH WOOFSON had revealed the rules of the morphing labyrinth, but he was not satisfied with conclusions alone; he charged through the labyrinth, yearning for proof. Of course, he let Cat Sith take the lead as a cat shield.

“Turn right there, woof,” Woofson ordered. Ever the contrarian, First Pupil turned left. Woofson said nothing, for he had made that order knowing that Cat Sith would defy him.

Woofson’s objective was to go a different route than Mira originally had, and return to the entrance once more. By doing that, he would be able to identify exactly where the loop occurred. In a way, it was like checking his answers.

“Left there, woof.”

The cat fairy turned right.

It’s incredible how well they’re doing, despite everything... Did this mean they worked well together, or poorly? Mira simply followed after them, chuckling at their odd relationship.

“This is a trap!”

Not willing to let Woofson take all the credit, Cat Sith fired off a card. When it reached a certain, seemingly empty spot, vines reached out and dragged the card into the ground. Woofson could not sense these traps; they were Cat Sith’s specialty, as he excelled at intuition.

Thirty minutes had passed. Through their teamwork(?), Woofson’s hypothesis that the loop trap was connected to the entrance was confirmed. That meant that he now had a complete understanding of the labyrinth’s changes and the loop trap’s location.

“My hypothesis has been met with proof. Now, I’m going to get us out of this trap,” Woofson said calmly, keeping himself from sounding smug.

Mira’s First Pupil was visibly confused—how had anything been proven when he’d gone the opposite way every time?

Regardless, they proceeded with rules in hand. Their third expedition lasted only fifteen minutes. Thanks to Woofson's leadership, they arrived at a place that felt distinctly different.

"The character of this place has changed," Mira mused. Before, it had been like a decayed forest in a tree hollow. But now, they were heading to what seemed like a cavern full of dead grass.

"Meow?! I don't like the looks of this..."

Based on looks alone, one might think that the visibility here was better. But First Pupil said that the area up ahead had the stench of a different trap. To this point, the only traps they had interacted with were the changing labyrinth, loop, and vines. But he declared that the traps up ahead were nothing like the ones they'd seen so far.

"Don't do anything reckless, woof. Tread carefully." Woofson urged prudence.

But Cat Sith roused himself and cried, "Leave it to me!" as he took the vanguard. The sign on his back read, "*You just watch my back.*"

As expected, many traps had been laid up ahead. They ran into a new one every few meters.

"Right there!" First Pupil may have been bad at puzzles and ciphers, but he was a master at dealing with simple gimmicks and finding hidden objects. As such, he saw through every single trap along the way. Even with Martel's prior warnings, it wasn't easy. Cat Sith did his job admirably, though, removing any danger of running into traps unprepared. This bred overconfidence, which led to a fatal misstep.

"Aaaargh! What a stench! My nose, my nose!" Mira groaned.

"This is hell... Woof! I'm in hell!" Woofson howled.

"I really messed up this time!" the cat cried.

At first glance, it looked like a normal, green flower bud. But it was a trap that emitted sludge upon approach. The sludge gave off an awful stench that made the victim nauseated. Close-up exposure could have led to lost lunches. Thanks

to First Pupil, they had avoided the worst of it, for his long-ranged card throw had set the trap off from a distance. However, the correct solution was to simply detour around the trap, since it only sprung when approached.

“Ugh, I can *taste* it!”

This was a trap that had been set up by progenitor spirit Martel, so the stench of sludge was simply legendary. Even mouth-breathing failed, causing Mira and her friends to gag in agony. It was awful enough to whittle away at one’s sanity.

“Ms. Owner... I’m not long for this world...” As a dog, Woofson was sensitive to smells, making this many times worse for him.

“Woofson! Get a hold of yourself, Woofson!” Mira picked up the lifeless canine and ran back the way she’d came. If she charged forward, she would risk running into another devastating trap. “Nnnngh!” She ran, all the while trying to stop her stomach from churning.

She ran, and ran, and ran, until the smell couldn’t reach her anymore.

“Phew, that was close...” Mira just barely managed to stop herself from blowing chunks.

Pale, she glared in the direction of the sludge. They would have to do something about it before they could proceed. Its effects were stronger than she’d expected, and it was still expanding outward, though slowly. And because this labyrinth was a closed space, there was no hope of it dispersing. It would eventually fill the entire place.

I have to settle things with the sludge first. But how? Mira thought to herself. Just then, she heard the voice of the sludge’s manufacturer.

“Sorry for the trouble, Mira.” Martel sounded apologetic.

“No, it’s our fault for being overconfident,” Mira replied, casting a glance at the corner.

She was naturally looking at Cat Sith, who sat on his knees. He jolted up in response to her voice. Next to him stood a sign that simply said, “Reflecting on mistakes.” This was the result of him ignoring Woofson’s warnings and trying to

forcefully disarm every single trap. Either way, he'd learned his lesson—or at least Mira hoped he had. Cat Sith often acted without thinking, but he always did what he needed to when the situation called for it.

How could Mira deal with that stench? She decided that asking its creator would be the fastest way to find out. *"So...what should I do about it?"*

This was the right call. Martel taught her how to solve the problem. There was a red flower bud near the green one. If one spread the nectar of the red bud on the sludge, it would neutralize the horrid stench. However, that nectar was another trap that would cause intense hallucinations. As such, she would need to be careful.

"I...I see." She knew how to deal with it now, but the question was how to put the solution into practice. The red flower bud was already in ground zero of the sludge. In other words, she'd have to go back into the thick of it.

Mira took medicine from her Item Box as a test. It was an anti-odor medicine she'd purchased from Dinoire Trading that suppressed the effect of bad odors. Before taking it herself, she glanced to her side.

"First Pupil, come here," she said, picking the cat as a sacrifice.

He ran over, delighted that his time-out was finished, at which point Mira handed him the anti-odor medicine. This was her first time using it, and that sludge's stench was even worse than rotting corpses. She'd picked Cat Sith to see just how well it worked.

"First Pupil, I will kindly offer you an opportunity to regain your honor," Mira said exaggeratedly, hiding the truth. One or two failures could be overwritten by success. In her enthusiasm to avoid the work, she passed on the solution from Martel to Cat Sith.

"As a man's man, I'm gonna take responsibility!"

Having learned from his mistakes in trying too hard to outdo Woofson, he gulped down the anti-odor drug as a show of resolve. He fearlessly marched down the path where the sludge awaited, shooting them a manly thumbs-up as he walked away.

Not long after, Mira heard a cry. "This is hellish!" Shortly afterward, the feline

heroically screamed, “I’m not done yet! The drug is still working!”

The cries of her First Pupil’s soul gradually grew more distant. It seemed he was making progress despite his screaming. Through her summon link, Mira received occasional status reports. The anti-odor drug was at least enough to *help* with the sludge’s stench. Impressed by the quality of Dinoire Trading’s goods, she drank one of her own, just in case.

Sometime after First Pupil left to retake his honor, Woofson came to. “Ah... Woof?! Where am I?!” He sat up in Mira’s arms and frantically looked around.

“Ooh, you’ve finally awakened.”

When he saw Mira, he breathed a sigh of relief, slumped over sadly, and apologized. “I’m sorry for causing you trouble. It won’t happen again.”

“No worries, friend. That must have been difficult for you.” That sludge’s stench must have been a lethal weapon to a dog’s nose. Mira petted Woofson in consolation before retrieving a third anti-odor drug and asking if he’d like to take one, just in case.

“Thank you, but no,” he refused. “I’ll need my sense of smell to use my magic to the fullest.” If the effects of the drug suppressed his sense of smell, it would also suppress the effects of his magic. When he was helping Mira, he didn’t want to venture any risk.

“Very well. I’m counting on you, Woofson.”

“I’ll do my very best, woof!” he replied.

While First Pupil fought for his life in the murderous stench, Mira and Woofson’s bond grew ever stronger.

Having suddenly remembered the situation at hand and his reason for fainting, Woofson asked in annoyance, “By the way, Ms. Owner, where did that cat go?”

“Ah, well...” Mira told him what she’d heard from Martel and how the cat had gone to carry out the plan.

“So that’s how it happened... Well, if I know that cat, it won’t be much

longer.” Though he’d taken anti-odor medicine, that stench would still be painful. Woofson had to admit that Cat Sith had guts. Not that he’d say that directly to his face, of course. “I bet he’ll be hallucinating from that nectar when we see him again, though,” he said, laughing.

“I did it! I did it!”

After Mira and Woofson had discussed their strategy for a while, First Pupil reported that his mission was complete. Apparently, the red bud was made to hide when the green one burst, so it took a fair bit of searching in order to find it. He proudly explained that, even though his senses had been thrown into disarray by the pungent odor, he’d managed to deploy the red bud.

“It seems First Pupil came through for us,” Mira said to Woofson. Seeming to notice that there was a change already, he ran down the corridor in the direction of the sludge.

“Woof, this is odd. The smell is gone. It’s as if it was all an illusion.” Woofson sniffed and sniffed, amazed that it had cleared up so quickly. Even if the source of a stench was removed, it would normally linger for some time.

Martel had mentioned that the nectar-covered sludge became a substance that neutralized the stench. Based on what she’d witnessed, Mira could tell that it was working fast.

The cause of the odor was gone. With that confirmed, Mira and Woofson stepped forth, eager to continue their journey.

Upon returning to the site of First Pupil’s mistake, Mira cringed at what she saw. “This looks...ominous.”

Thanks to the nectar, the sludge scattered from the green bud had turned into a harmless substance. But the substance had an oily sheen and convulsed like a beating heart. Things that looked like poison slugs littered the area. Martel had said that they were harmless, but the images flowing into Mira’s brain through her eyes made her doubt this.

“This is strange, for sure,” Woofson barked in agreement.

The objects wobbled and convulsed. Mira backed off in fear. While it was eerie, Woofson’s thirst for knowledge had been stimulated, and he daringly approached. He produced a magnifying glass out of thin air and observed the biggest one. Then, he picked up a nearby twig and began poking it. Woofson almost looked like a child poking cat poop that had been left in a park sandbox.

“It’s, erm... How do I even describe it?” Mira shuddered.

If nothing else, the sludge problem had been solved. That meant they could focus on the traps up ahead without vomiting their guts out. As for the hero—and villain—of the day...

“Gold! Gold everywhere! I’ve finally discovered the City of Gold! I’m riiich!” As Woofson had hypothesized, Cat Sith was hallucinating, while buried in a pile of dead leaves. Based on his words, he seemed to think he was lying in a pile of coins. He piled them up in his hands and said, ecstatic, “The sparkle...that’s the color of victory!”

“Well... What do we do with him?” Mira wondered aloud.

He’d been like this since they’d arrived. When asked how to get him out of his delusions, Martel said that smelling the sludge would wake him right up. However, that would mean releasing that stench again. Wondering what to do, Mira pulled Woofson—still absorbed in observation—back to reality and asked for his wisdom.

“Worry not. I’m on the case!” Woofson replied confidently. Upon being questioned, he declared that this was the perfect opportunity to use his newest magic. “That was an intense one, so I remember it vividly, woof!”

Woofson’s new spell allowed him to recreate smells that he recalled. He could even calibrate its concentration and duration. Apparently, he normally used it to recreate the scents of vicious fiends to keep unwanted trouble away. He seemed excited to use it to awaken his delusional “friend” this time. The First Pupil would make a fine subject.

When Mira and Woofson approached, the cat started dancing around on top of the pile of leaves, his eyes spinning. “Meowstress, look at this! Gold!

Mountains of gold, I tell nya! Mew-hoooo!” The sign on his back also said... nothing at all. “How d’ya like this? This is my greatest treasure!”

First Pupil uncrossed his legs and elegantly approached Woofson. Then, he confidently showed off the red flower bud and smiled.

“Do you see this golden grail? This is the ultimate treasure,” he declared, before bringing the so-called grail to his mouth and drinking something down. That was probably the remaining nectar. The grin on his face grew wider and wider.

“Could it be? The Feline Deity...” First Pupil was no longer dazzled by money. He fell to his knees like a monk who’d received divine revelation and looked to the sky.

Martel had mentioned the nectar’s strong hallucinogenic effects, but based on how he was acting, there was more to it than that. Alcohol was nothing compared to this; the cat was truly tripping.

“Okay... Do it, Woofson.” Mira felt a little bad forcing her feline companion to smell that sludge again, even if it was for the sake of saving him. Still, it would be kindest to drag him out of this state before it could get worse.

“As you wish, Ms. Owner.”

Woofson got to work. He circled around Cat Sith’s back, put an arm around him to restrain him, and covered the cat’s mouth with his other paw. Mana began to flow and take form through his magic—becoming that hellish stench from before.

Its effects were dramatic.

“Mreooowwr!” After letting out an agonizing cry, the Cat Sith fell onto the ground and shouted, “It’s pure hell!” His placard—which read, “Where am I? Am I God?”—was launched away. It was unclear if he had sobered up yet or not.



Chapter 21

WOOFSON'S ODOR-REPLICATING magic was super effective, dragging the First Pupil out of his delusions. Unfortunately, it would take him ten more minutes before he would be able to move on his own again.

"Well, I'm just happy you've returned to your senses," Mira said.

After finally standing up, Cat Sith slumped over sadly. "I'm very sorry for my actions."

"No, no, it's okay. This was a risky mission to begin with. You did well." Mira held him in her arms and petted him in consolation.

Once they were back in top condition, Mira and her companions continued into the depths of the labyrinth. There were many traps along the way, such as pitfalls hidden under dead leaves and vines that would entrap anyone when touched, but the First Pupil and Woofson's efforts nullified them all.

Moreover, they tested what would happen when these traps were sprung, using dark knights as bait. As a result, they found that all of them forced the victim back to the entrance; despite the labyrinth's haunting atmosphere, they'd found no traps that could directly kill. No doubt that was because they were based on Martel's original seal. Despite being corrupted, they hadn't fully been turned evil. However, that didn't mean the team could let their guard down, for there were many things that could whittle away their willpower.

They found many more flower-bud traps along the way. When they did, they kept a wide berth in order to avoid repeating past mistakes. Cat Sith's eyes lingered just a little too long when he spotted the red buds. Did they have addictive effects? If so, the problem would surely be solved with time—or at least, Mira hoped it would.

They managed to progress smoothly for a while, but after passing through the middle layer and reaching the lower layer, they fell prey to a new trap.

"I didn't think...it would be so simple...but this is still its own brand of hell!"

Mira giggled.

"Nya ha ha ha! Stop iiit! That tickles!"

"I won't...be defeated by this, woof..."

Martel had warned them about this, but due to the dead leaves that littered the floor, they had not noticed something lurking there. The trap was a poison that made the victim feel like they were being tickled all over, mercilessly. The bright blue and yellow leaves were poisonous, and despite decaying and falling to the ground, the poison in them remained active.

If they were being tickled normally, they could shake off their assailant. This was caused by poison, though, so it tickled no matter what they did. It was inescapable, and because Martel had made it, no antidote worked.

Mira rolled around on the ground, spasming. First Pupil jumped around, laughing loudly. Woofson tried to withstand it like a monk in training, but his shoulders trembled, showing that he was at his limit.

Immediately baptized by the lower layer, the group agonized for ten minutes, until they were finally released. Despite not injuring the victim, this trap was more than enough to ward off intruders.

"I didn't think tickling could be so cruel... Terrifying, to be sure."

"I thought I was a goner..."

"I can't... No more..."

They fell to the ground, utterly exhausted. Some might have been broken by this trap alone; though it was *just* tickling, it put such a burden on the victim's body that it could be used for torture. Whether she knew that or not, Martel had created a truly vicious trap.

However, Mira still managed to stand up. Holding her quivering legs, she caught her breath and looked forward to granting Martel's wish, to saving the wolf, and if all went well, to obtaining a new summoning contract. Cat Sith and Woofson likewise showed their grit by standing up.

"This...is what makes conquering labyrinths all the more worthwhile!" First

Pupil put on a bold smile. Perhaps he'd let his guard down after things had gone so smoothly so far. But now he declared, "From now on, I'm su-purr serious!"

"I've memorized the smell. We won't get fooled again," Woofson said confidently, gazing at the dead leaves behind him. Then he turned to face forward again and announced the presence of more traps. "There are more smells I don't recognize up ahead."

"Now! Labyrinth Expedition Team, onward!"

"Will do, Meowstress!"

"Roger that, woof!"

They moved out energetically, marking a fresh start in their states of mind. Then, they stepped into the sealed labyrinth's lowest layer, for real.

The corruption was most prominent here, turning the labyrinth into an even more treacherous place than the previous layers. Set among a decayed forest showing no signs of life, there were many traps that they hadn't run into earlier. Some had evolved without Martel's knowledge, and others had fused in unexpected ways.

However, it wasn't all bad. Now that they'd come this far, Cat Sith began to sense what seemed to be the wolf.

"Meow meow?! That presence... That's definitely the wolf!"

"Ooh. Well done, First Pupil."

To this point, they'd only gone deeper by testing paths one by one. But now that the location of their target was clear, they could head straight there.

"Woof! Go that way first." Woofson's abilities discerned all warps and traps that might make them lose their way. He quickly calculated the optimal route toward the wolf.

"Fantastic work, Woofson."

Cat Sith and Woofson often ended up at odds when they worked together, but in a labyrinth, they were the most reliable allies one could have—most of

the time. Mira thanked them both as she walked toward the depths where the wolf waited.

They already knew the correct route, but *because* it was the correct route, there were abundant traps to ward them off. While none threatened their lives, they often created enough annoyance to make for some truly devious traps. Many traps even began to fool First Pupil and Woofson. When they thought that a trap was merely a red flower bud, they found that it was mixed with the green buds' sludge. When they thought they'd found a bud with sweet nectar, the ticklish poison was mixed in.

They found a pitfall trap that looped to a point directly above itself as well. When they tested it with a dark knight, it fell for ten minutes before finally being warped back to the entrance. Given the raw sadism of this trap, Mira chose to believe that it was a result of the corruption.

They overcame these many diverse traps with First Pupil's intuition and Woofson's quick wit. Despite occasionally falling for traps, Mira's Labyrinth Expedition Team managed to break through and finally arrived in front of the place where the wolf was sealed.

At the center of the wide sealing area was their objective.

"I heard it was a big wolf, but that is ridiculous!" Mira was stunned by his size, but she soon understood.

She had imagined a wolf that was bigger than average. His true size, however, was incomparable to that of a normal wolf. He was a giant, probably over thirty meters, and took up half of the clearing.

Martel had claimed that the earthquakes were a result of his struggling. Judging from his size, that certainly made sense. There were countless chains around his giant form—probably part of the seal—depriving him of any freedom. As long as she didn't get close, his fangs could never reach her.

"Nuh-uh, is's too much... I'm gonna pee my poor little self..."

"I'm not going any closer, woof..."

Even First Pupil and Woofson, who were naturally adventurous and had carried the expedition so far, tucked their tails between their legs. And despite

all their arguing, it seemed they'd finally agreed on something: retreating.

"While I would love to leave, sometimes a man must do what must needs be done," Mira declared. The chains kept the wolf from moving much, but even the slightest motion from that giant would have enough force to strike them down. Mira hid in the corner of the entrance and observed the wolf, trying to Examine it. "What...?"

It had come back "Unknown;" just like the angel Tyriel, Mira was unable to Examine the wolf.

This ability, inherent to former players, had only two limitations: it didn't work on former players or angels—more precisely, beings close to the sacred realms. In other words, it was likely that the wolf before her was one such being.

"Spirit King, do you know what that thing is?" Mira used the Spirit King as a bit of an encyclopedia, but he was close to being a god. Perhaps he knew something about the wolf. As expected, he was able to answer her—but the answer made the summoner shudder.

"Yes, I recognize it. He's gotten a fair bit smaller due to the seal, but that is certainly Fenrir."

"Fenrir?! The surprises never cease..."

The way Martel talked about the wolf, Mira had imagined he would be a little cuter. Instead, he was a famous wolf from Norse mythology, of all things. She trembled in fear. This was a mythological monster said to devour even gods. It was natural to be scared of him, especially when one knew the legends. Yet at the same time, Mira's heart quaked with excitement. What possibilities lay before her if she managed to form a contract with this beast?

She had contracts with all kinds of spirits. Surely, she could do the same with a mythical beast. Despite not knowing for sure, she found herself filled with certainty and hope as she faced Fenrir. At the same time, she remembered something Martel had said: Fenrir had come looking for his brother and sister. His siblings were famous too. If he had come here in search of them, then Jormungand and Hel must be somewhere around here as well. Mira chuckled at the frightening, yet exciting news.

Despite Mira being in hiding, Fenrir locked eyes with her. A chill ran through her, making her body jolt and her back straighten. Then, she saw it. Instinctively, the giant suddenly leaped forth.

“Whoa!”

“Meow meow?!”

“Awoof?!”

Faced with his force and momentum, she swiftly seized First Pupil and Woofson before using Shrinking Earth to jump back. However, she soon realized that doing so was unnecessary.

The chains wrapped around Fenrir creaked, and the earth quaked violently. It seemed this was, indeed, the cause of the earthquakes in town; whenever Fenrir struggled, the impact shook the world around him. Those chains were impressively strong. Despite Fenrir’s continued raging, they barely moved.

However, Fenrir had other means of attack, even when trapped. He stopped struggling and howled, causing darkness to gather and form in the shape of a wolf.

Sensing danger, Mira reflexively summoned a holy knight.

“What?!”

Though it was about the size of a large dog—nothing compared to Fenrir itself—the shadow wolf was surprisingly agile. It also had high offensive prowess, putting the holy knight on the defensive and gradually wearing it down over time.

“Much stronger than any old monster. Fenrir’s no slouch,” Mira mused.

The wolf was powerful enough to rival an A-rank. However, that alone was nothing to Mira. While the holy knight drew its attention, she summoned five dark knights. As a result, the battle was turned on its head, and the wolf was overwhelmed by their numbers. However, when the shadow wolf loosed a backkick as its final resistance, it struck the dark knight that happened to be behind it. This blew the dark knight away in an instant, sending it crashing into the ceiling.

“Ah!” Mira gasped. It didn’t end there; the dark knight fell in a heap before Fenrir, just as intended. Despite the shadow wolf’s defeat, Fenrir devoured the dark knight in one bite. “Well, we’d best avoid that combo...”

Fenrir howled, causing darkness to spread. This time, it also created multiple wolves.

“Whoa! It can send out so many at once?!”

Continuing the fight without a plan would only wear her out. Knowing that, Mira ran back the way she’d come, before the wolves could move.

“We gotta do a tactical withdrawal!” First Pupil screamed.

“Agreed. Our only choice is to escape!” Woofson added.

The moment she’d decided to make an exit, First Pupil and Woofson suddenly became very vocal. They knew that they weren’t meant for combat. Little did they know, they would be given a role in the coming operation.

Chapter 22

FIRST PUPIL AND WOOFSON stood side by side, peering into the labyrinth. It seemed the wolves would not track them this far out.

“Seems like they gave up, Meowstress.”

“I think they’re focusing on guarding that chamber.”

“Hrmm... Well, I suppose we can relax for the moment.” Mira summoned a few holy knights to stand guard, just in case.

Her plan to wait and watch had turned into a fight, but she’d learned some things as a result. First, her opponent was Fenrir. Second, he could create wolf minions out of darkness.

Martel had said that the seal had been corrupted far more than expected. Even if she temporarily strengthened it, she’d already weakened Fenrir as much as possible, and wouldn’t be able to suppress the dark wolves.

Hrmm. In that case, I’ll need more firepower.

She could defeat the wolves, but the multiple summons at once were an issue. If Fenrir could do that infinitely, she could forget fighting the big dog himself; Mira might have abundant mana, but even she had her limits. She wasn’t here to kill Fenrir either; she was here to expel the mysterious power that had driven it mad. Keeping that in the forefront of her mind, she borrowed the Spirit King and Martel’s wisdom to formulate a strategy.

Once the strategy meeting had ended and Mira had mustered her forces, she returned to the corridor before the final chamber.

“Okay... The time for our fight has come.”

“We sisters are fully prepared,” Alfina declared. Behind Mira were her precious elites, the Valkyrie Sisters, led by Alfina. They each commanded a mixed squad of holy and dark knights. They were going to war as platoons,

rather than a unified army, so the Valkyrie Sisters were here to provide more precise leadership.

First Pupil and Woofson lined up at Mira's feet.

"I'll go left!"

"And I'll take the right side."

They were tasked with reporting the battle situation to her, so they moved along the walls in search of vantage points. They escaped the wolves' sight by moving through the shadows, stealthily pressing forward, yet jokingly selling each other out, as they searched for the ideal positions.

"Don't look at me-ow! Look over there!"

"Nuh-uh, look there! He's going that way, woof!"

"I'm relying on you, too, friend," Mira said to the last summon standing with her: Garm. He was here as a countermeasure against the enemy's powers, as well, but Mira also hoped that he could bring Fenrir back to his senses.

Once upon a time, Garm had guarded the abode of Hel, Fenrir's little sister. They were thus acquainted, and thanks to Cat Sith's translation skills, Garm even noted that he knew some of Fenrir's powers. However, Garm was clearly nervous to confront someone so much stronger than himself. Even when he barked in response to Mira, his tail quivered.

Unfortunately, Eizenfald would not get to participate in this battle. His strength in battle was excellent, but he wasn't well-suited to fighting in confined spaces. Worse, Fenrir already took up half of the chamber; anyone could imagine what would happen if a being of similar size tried to charge in. Besides, raw firepower wasn't what they needed in this fight.

"Hrmm... They're on guard," Mira noted.

When she peeked into the final area, there were dozens of wolves carefully watching their surroundings. As expected, it would be nearly impossible to approach Fenrir without handling them first.

They looked like an impenetrable barrier, but Cat Sith and Woofson easily wove through the gaps and made slow but steady progress. Eventually, reports

finally came from both of them. On top of confirming the number of wolves, they also reported that they'd found their target, behind Fenrir.

"Behind him, hmm? In that case, I suppose there's nothing wrong with being a little loud." Their first objective was to drive off the wolf pack and open the way to Fenrir. Mira stood before Alfina and her sisters, raised her right hand, and swung it down. "Begin the battle!"

With that as their signal, the Valkyrie Sisters and their platoons rushed in. Fenrir howled in defiance.

All of the wolves that had been focused on scouting immediately turned and rushed forth. They slipped across the ground like shadows, approaching in the blink of an eye. The battle lines clamored with wolves' roars, the sounds of swords, and Alfina's orders.

On top of the sisters' strength, the armored spirits they commanded displayed excellent teamwork. Mira served as command and control, making use of the First Pupil and Woofson's reports to allow for even more precise coordination. They encircled the wolf pack and began eradicating them.

Ten minutes after the start of the battle, Mira's army had annihilated the wolves. However, Fenrir's wolves were strong; each platoon had accumulated some casualties.

"A protracted battle only works in his favor." Mira used her mana to recover everyone's wounds as Fenrir howled once more in the meantime.

Unsurprisingly, there were plenty more wolves where those had come from. Darkness gathered, and they attacked like mad, one after another.

"Well, this was expected. It's time for Strategy Alpha!" Mira had prepared a few strategies to respond to various situations. She chose the quick strategy, having assumed that there would be no end to the wolves, and charged into the front lines.

Garm was behind her, dark knights holding Sanctia on either side. Alfina's platoon at the front guarded her and cleared a path. The other sisters' platoons acted as a wall to suppress the wolf hordes.

Thus, Mira steadily approached the great wolf.

However, he took this as a threat. The wolves fighting the other Valkyries all disappeared into the darkness, then appeared in midair to ambush Mira's blind spots. This did nothing to stop her, for the First Pupil and Woofson were watching the entire battlefield, *including* the ceilings. Garm received their report of the ambush and smacked all the wolves down with ease, neutralizing their attack.

This time, they became shadows that attempted to ambush Mira from the ground. It seemed there was a limit to how many shadows Fenrir could create at once, however; only three slipped through the Valkyrie barricades.

It became difficult for First Pupil and Woofson to see the wolves once they became shadows, delaying their reports. However, Garm reacted swiftly. He knew Fenrir's abilities well, and he could feel the flow of his power, to an extent. Believing that he could handle a sealed Fenrir, he swung his fiery tail, as if to rouse himself. Then, as the shadow wolves leaped out, he delivered a powerful blow.

But the wolves were tough; they stood up even after taking the brunt of Garm's power. The dark knights by Mira's side lunged to finish them off without difficulty. They may have been formidable, A-rank foes, but Mira's formation could brush them off just fine. She pressed on, remaining in an adaptable formation, until they finally arrived in front of Fenrir.

Fenrir glowered at her with bloodshot eyes. He was thirty meters long, too big to see his face without looking straight up. Supposedly, he was originally twice this size, proving the power of the seal.

"Even when he's sealed, he's just...frightening."

The chains restraining Fenrir creaked. Each time he tried to lunge, the room shook.

As long as the seal remained, he couldn't move any more than that. Though Martel had promised her this, Mira felt nothing but terror when she saw the beast in the flesh. Even so, she roused her cowering heart and confronted the behemoth.

Things are going according to plan so far, but this is the difficult part...

Behind them, the Valkyrie Sisters maintained their superiority against the shadow wolves. That didn't mean they were without casualties, though; if the wolves were infinite, as Mira presumed, things would eventually take a turn for the worse. As such, she had to feed the fruit to Fenrir before that could happen. The problem was *how...*

Ten in all... There's nothing we can do but try.

There were ten white fruits in total. If she could succeed in feeding two to Fenrir in this fight, he would be returned to normal. In other words, eight of them were backups.

Mira took a fruit in hand and looked up at the giant wolf. Fenrir bit its chains, outraged, and growled at the girl. After they'd maintained eye contact for a while, there appeared a gleam in his eyes—then he opened his mouth wide and snapped at her.

He was frightfully strong, but Mira calmly threw the fruit into Fenrir's mouth. "Eat this if you're so hungry!"

Despite his frenzied state, Fenrir turned his head away. Was that the reaction of the unknown powers within him? Had he discerned the effects of the fruit? Or was it a dog's innate ability to avoid taking medicine at all costs?

"Hrmm... So, this won't work. In that case—"

This, too, had been expected. However, what Fenrir did next was somewhat unexpected.

Having judged Mira and the fruit as threats, he roared loudly and caused a new phenomenon. The black shadows shooting out of Fenrir wrapped around the wolves as if possessing them, and they grew even bigger. What had he done?

Having witnessed the event, the Spirit King explained, "*This is bad. Fenrir's power poured into them.*" The wolves, previously just Fenrir's shadows, had morphed into beings that harbored some of his power.

Alfina's expression turned grave. "This is... Master, beware!"

There were many wolves, and though they each had only a fragment of Fenrir's power, it was still *Fenrir's* power. They'd evolved into even more powerful foes. Their shadows grew darker, and they displayed powers unlike before.

The Valkyrie platoons, who'd maintained an advantage to this point, were now barely holding on. Worse, the wolves were still growing bigger. At this rate, Mira's army would collapse in ten minutes. Such was Fenrir's power, even when sealed. This was no doubt the real devourer of gods.

"Then, I say it's time we call for reinforcements!" Mira had come into this battle knowing that Fenrir might have more than just his shadow wolves, so she summoned more allies.

"I'll do my best, Master!" Wise Popot, the owl who specialized in mobile warfare via magic, appeared.

Pegasus and Hippogriff followed shortly after. They were aerial reinforcements, who could join the fray without limiting the movements of Mira's ground forces, and their mobility made them the perfect team.

The three reinforcements quickly began supporting their allies from above. Aerial support was valued for its ability to throw the enemy into disarray without disturbing allied formations. Their diversion was astoundingly effective, especially against foes who acted on instinct alone.

"Gaaarbage day!" Wise Popot blanketed the wolves with a hail of fireballs. It was anyone's guess where she'd gotten that line from.

Pegasus was doing quite well. Its lightning tore through wolves, drawing their attention. When they jumped at Pegasus, it struck them with powerful backkicks. Even Fenrir's bolstered wolves were mere targets as they leaped into the air, powerless to fly.

The Hippogriff lacked the flair of either of its fellow reinforcements, but its fighting had an admirable elegance, like a taciturn laborer. It scouted for enemies from up above, choosing opportunities to ambush from blind spots or precisely strike enemies that were open to attack. All of its attacks were surprise attacks that dealt deep wounds. Furthermore, it reduced the burden on grounded fighters by drawing enemy attention.

This trio stood out both for their individual skills and for their ability to work well together to dominate the air. The wolves fought well, too, and Mira's side had yet to turn the tide of battle again, but this would buy her much more time.

The situation was ever-changing on this battlefield. Just as they'd pushed the enemy back with a land-and-air combo, Fenrir's power drove back their breakthrough. Even when they reacted quickly, they could do nothing to stem the flow of suicidal wolves. The Valkyrie platoons had their hands full fighting this tug-of-war battle.

"Argh, how infuriating!" Alfina grumbled.

Fenrir had a deep connection with Odin, the master of the Valkyrie Sisters. As a result, Alfina became enraged when faced with his power. Fenrir himself seemed to instinctively grasp their connection, too, as he glowered at her rather than Mira.

"Now!"

When Mira surreptitiously sent the signal to the Valkyrie platoons, the battle lines gradually fell out of order, until it all became a mad brawl a few minutes later. However, the situation remained largely unchanged. The Valkyrie platoons mostly stayed on the defensive, enduring the wolves' onslaught. The aerial trio also maneuvered to avoid letting the wolves crowd them.

Now that it was a mad melee, wolves started to leak toward Mira's group. Alfina and Garm delayed them.

In the midst of all this, Mira quickly scanned the battlefield. She issued an order to a waiting dark knight while Fenrir was still focused on Alfina and herself. *Over there!*

It ceased guarding her and charged into the midst of the brawl. Then, it unleashed a devastating blow—with its sword, Sanctia—upon a wolf that was in the middle of biting another dark knight. The surprise attack, backed up by the power of a holy sword, successfully dealt the wolf a fatal blow.

One last powerful kick was unleashed by the wolf, however, striking the dark knight perfectly. Not only did the wolf knock the sword the dark knight had

defended itself with out of its hands, but it also sent the knight flying to the ceiling. The dark knight struck the ceiling and fell straight to the floor—once again, right in front of Fenrir.

The knight stood, its armor shattered. Whether instinctively or reflexively, Fenrir opened up and chomped down. Even a dark knight could not withstand Fenrir's bite. Beyond its repair limit, the knight shattered and dispersed.

"He took the bait!" A smirk crept onto Mira's face.

It didn't take long for a change to take place. Blackness spewed out of Fenrir. It wasn't like the darkness that had come from its howls either; if all of this concentrated darkness turned into wolves and joined the battle, they would obliterate Mira's army in no time. It was such a vast amount that it seemed certain that they'd be engulfed in a horde of wolves in no time.

Nothing took form, however. Instead, it continued to erupt from Fenrir before merely dispersing.

"How do you like that? Perfect, isn't it?!"

As darkness erupted, the giant began to visibly shrink. Mira smiled at the sight of the smaller Fenrir, and she heard Martel cry happily, "*You did great, Mira!*" At this rate, she'd be able to feed him one more fruit and bring him back to his senses.

It had all gone according to plan. Mira had hidden the white fruit inside the dark knight's hollow armor, then replicated the situation where the first dark knight had been eaten in order to feed the fruit to Fenrir. As a result, the white fruit was working its magic.

Its effects were clear, given the difference in size. That was proof that it worked. But that lone fruit wasn't enough.

The wolf continued to snap and lunge at Mira. The chains containing it creaked each time, and the room shook. Mira simply watched the chains, as if waiting for an opportunity.

"Now, for this next one..." Mira muttered to herself.

There was more to this strategy. A single white fruit created by Martel could

normally save Fenrir on its own, but before the operation, she'd informed Mira that she would need to feed him two.

The problem was the chains...

Garm knew all about the chains. Gleipnir was one of Fenrir's powers. It was also the name of the chains that currently bound the wolf. It was an extremely potent restraint that limited the abilities and powers of its captive. Unfortunately, Gleipnir was also an obstacle right now. According to Garm, it suppressed the effects of the white fruit on Fenrir's body. It limited the powers of not just its captive, but the effects of any external drugs, healing, or support magic used on them. Gleipnir was the ultimate restraint.

Even the fruit's effect wasn't perfect; it only expelled half of the power that ate away at Fenrir's sanity. However, it had succeeded in weakening him. Some light had also returned to the beast's eyes, meager though it was. It was absolutely a ray of hope.

Chapter 23

“YOUR TURN, Alfina.”

“Yes, Master. Leave it to me!”

When Mira advanced to the next phase of the strategy, Alfina readied her sword and lunged. She headed straight for Fenrir’s feet. Despite his lack of sanity—or perhaps because of it—he attempted to crush Alfina with all his might.

She dodged his bite by a hair’s breadth, parried his claw with her sword, and... refused to attack. Instead, she sprinted past Fenrir to circle behind him. Fenrir tried to turn around in pursuit, but the chains stopped him, leaving him to struggle in vain.

“Confirmed, Master. I’m ready at any time.” Alfina wasn’t here to fight Fenrir; she was here for what lay behind him.

The first phase of weakening Fenrir was completed. Now they needed to remove Gleipnir and let the fruit work its magic to the fullest.

The problem was how to break the powerful chains. Fortunately, Martel had advice: Fenrir had imposed the Gleipnir chains upon himself while he was still struggling to maintain his sanity.

Martel had created a tree with the power of reflection in order to keep him from breaking it once he was out of control. Now that

Fenrir had shrunk, the towering tree could be seen behind him. This was one of the objectives Cat Sith and Woofson had confirmed ahead of time.

The Gleipnir chains restraining the wolf were supported by the tree. Alfina’s objective was to cut the tree down in order to release Gleipnir.

They needed the fruit to work to the fullest to save Fenrir, and releasing Gleipnir was an essential step in the process. This would mean releasing the mad wolf as well. It would be the main event in the Fenrir rescue operation.

With a quick glance at her surroundings, Mira found that the wolves summoned by Fenrir had also grown weaker, just as expected.

Then, she went on the offensive.

[Summoning Technique: Remote Bonds]

This technique allowed the user to deploy Bound Arcana, using summoned allies as origin points. Through this, she designated First Pupil and Woofson to position four arcana on points encircling the battlefield.

Bound Arcana had a use beyond turning into Marks of the Rosary: strengthening summons. By surrounding an area, she could pass this blessing on to all of her summons within. However, this continuously consumed mana, making it important to carefully choose when to use it.

Mira's timing was perfect. After the wolves had powered up, the Valkyrie platoons went on the defensive. Thanks to their aerial support, they had been able to conserve their power. Now that the wolves were weakened, and Mira's summons had received the power-up from the Bound Arcana, they were able to mount a counteroffensive.

The tides had turned. One, then two wolves fell, turned into darkness, and disappeared.

The second and third sisters, whose platoons had defeated the wolves, moved to reinforce the others. Wise Popot, Pegasus, and Hippogriff's fighting only increased in intensity. It was only a matter of time before the wolves were defeated.

Mira judged that would happen within five minutes, so she called out to Martel, "*Martel, is everything ready?*"

"*Yep, any time!*" she replied eagerly.

Though the seal here was corrupted, Martel had said that she could temporarily strengthen it. They were up against Fenrir, a rampaging being that was leagues beyond Mira—Martel's seal was absolutely necessary in order to suppress his power as much as possible. However, the seal would not remain empowered for long. Mira had backup plans to either buy time to escape or to use as a final push. It looked like the seal would be used to bring the battle to a

close.

“Sixth platoon’s work is done.”

“The seventh’s, too!”

The Valkyrie sisters announced their victory. Mira monitored Fenrir, waiting to see how he would act. Now that so much of his power had been sapped by the white fruit, it was unclear whether he would sic more wolves on them or not. His next move would determine their formations for the next phase of the plan.

Fenrir roared loudly. Was he going to create more wolves? Mira’s side braced themselves for what was to come, but it seemed that the white fruit was working well; he didn’t have enough dark power left to make the wolves. But that only meant they’d finished the first phase. This was where the true risk began.

Fenrir glared at them odiously.

“We’ll finish this swiftly. Everyone, to your positions!”

At Mira’s direction, the Valkyrie sisters swiftly moved to the next phase of the operation. Meanwhile, the dark knights and the aerial trio stood by, toward the rear, in case of emergency.

“Everyone is in position,” the second sister, Elezina, reported.

The sisters surrounded Fenrir. The wolf itself was held back by the chains, despite his best efforts to bite them.

“Eeeek...” Christina shrieked so weakly that nobody could hear it. Since Alfina was facing away from her, she was both unheard and unseen.

“It’s finally time,” Mira said. She’d finally guided the situation to this state. Everything rode on whether this final strategy worked. “Get ready!”

When she gave the order, the sisters all prepared for battle. Mira, too, adjusted her posture, ready to move at a moment’s notice.

Then, she gave the signal. “Now, Alfina!”

“Understood.”

Alfina swung her sword at the tree that supported Gleipnir. Her sharp slash was enough to sever it in two with just a single blow. With a loud noise, the tree fell. The Gleipnir chains extending from it instantly rusted and shattered. Fenrir’s shackles had been removed. Released from the restraints on his mobility and powers, he seemed to regain some of his abilities. Darkness gathered.

However, they would not let him use this power so easily. The withered space returned to vivid life in the blink of an eye, overflowing with greenery as Martel powered up the seal.

While blooming flowers absorbed the darkness, Fenrir followed his instinct and leaped at Mira. Countless vines instantly entwined around the giant. The sisters moved, taking more sealing vines in hand and tying up the canine.

Darkness-absorbing flowers and sealing vines—these would temporarily return Fenrir to a state similar to when he had been restrained by Gleipnir. The difference was that they would not limit the power of the white fruit.

“Well done!” Mira called out.

Fenrir was once again trapped by Martel’s seal and the sisters’ efforts. He still had his physical strength, however, and vines snapped every time he struggled. But between the ever-growing number of vines and the sisters’ tireless efforts, they were able to maintain the status quo. Fenrir lay on the ground, restrained. All that remained was to feed him one more fruit.

“Come now. You want to eat me, don’t you? Open up.”

Mira took a white fruit in hand and walked up to the beast’s mouth, but unsurprisingly, he was wary of the fruit. His mouth, which had so eagerly snapped at Mira before, remained closed. Mira tried offering him a dark knight instead, but he still did not bite. Nothing worked. Even when Fenrir was out of his mind, he was still able to avoid taking his medicine.

At this rate, Martel’s seal would reach its limit. Yet every method Mira tried ended in failure. There was one left that she didn’t want to use; even now, she hesitated somewhat.

“In that case, I’m left with no choice...”

That method was to pierce Fenrir’s belly and shove the fruit directly inside. Unfortunately, she’d already tried shoving the fruit in his nose and other...*orifices*. None of those had worked.

The white fruit had to reach his stomach. The most certain way to accomplish this was to open a hole directly in Fenrir’s body. After she shoved the fruit in, she could use Asclepius’s power to heal the wounds. However, stabbing Fenrir’s stomach would result in great pain. That pain might make him struggle even more violently. Still, this was the most direct solution.

“I promise I will finish this as quickly as possible.”

Can’t you miraculously open your mouth before it comes to that? Mira pleaded mentally as she stroked Fenrir’s chin. But that wish was fleeting, washed away by Fenrir’s hateful growls.

Alfina stood next to her master. She gazed at the belly of the beast, discerned where his stomach would be, and readied her sword.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to withstand this...” Mira warned. This would hurt the poor thing. With a sorrowful look on her face, Mira directed Alfina to carry out the strategy.

“Groar!”

Garm suddenly barked—not just once, but two, then three times. He gazed at Mira; it seemed he couldn’t bear to see her so pained. He kept on barking and barking, as if telling Fenrir something. Then, he looked directly into Fenrir’s eyes and struck the tip of his snout, still barking all the while. It almost looked as if he was trying to inspire, or even provoke, Fenrir.

What was Garm doing? When Mira asked her First Pupil, he explained that Garm was trying to appeal to Fenrir’s logical side. Telling him to not submit to evil—to defy it, to show that he was made of stronger stuff. He also told Fenrir to just open his mouth and let Mira help him.

No doubt, Garm empathized with Mira’s desire not to hurt Fenrir. Earlier, Garm had quivered in the face of the giant, but he had now mustered enough courage to overcome his fear.

Then, Fenrir's growls gradually became louder. It seemed Garm's pleading had reached him after all. With each defiant howl, Fenrir's giant form shook—and his mouth opened ever so slightly. Then, having finally regained enough control to defy the mysterious powers, Fenrir opened his mouth, just wide enough.

"Well done!" Mira seized the opportunity to shove several of the white fruits into Fenrir's mouth. Immediately after she pulled her arm back, his sharp fangs snapped closed. When the wolf gulped, she jumped away and confirmed that her arm was still attached before breathing a sigh of relief. "That was close..."

Would the white fruit work?

Martel's seal reached its limit while everyone watched with bated breath. The vines restraining Fenrir fell, powerless, and the verdant surroundings began to wither. Everything that had held him back was now gone. The Valkyrie Sisters did their best to hold him down, but it was difficult to restrain such a giant. They were quickly shaken off.

Fenrir stood, finally free. Tension ran through the chamber. Alfina and her sisters moved to protect Mira. The summoner herself did not flinch in the face of Fenrir's glare; she simply grabbed another white fruit and watched his movements.

Mira and the wolf glared at each other. Then, the giant lurched slightly and roared, ending the stalemate. His roar seemed to shake the very air, echoing as if to drive something off. Vast darkness then spewed out of Fenrir, melting into the air as it disappeared.

This was exactly what they'd seen before; the white fruit had worked its magic. As proof, Martel's seal was gradually cleansed of corruption. Their surroundings returned to vivid greenery, making it look like paradise in no time.

As for Fenrir, the giant from before was nowhere to be found.

"I thank you, venerable young woman," an unfamiliar voice said.

The valiant, majestic voice came from below. When Mira looked down toward the sound, she found a single puppy—no, a wolf pup.

"Could it be? Are you...?"

Though he was a wolf pup, the only cuteness came from his appearance. He was as big as a large dog and could easily hold Cat Sith down with one leg. But there was no doubt that this pup was Fenrir himself.

“Hrmm... I do see the resemblance.”

He may have been cute, but when he looked up at Mira, his eyes bore the same sharpness and dignity of the former giant. There was a light of intelligence in his eyes that gave his visage an elegance it had lacked before. Despite the cuteness, this was definitely Fenrir.

Once Mira was certain of this, the pup bowed and said, “I am beyond grateful for your actions today. You have saved me from madness.” He didn’t seem especially bothered by his tiny size now. Fenrir looked to Alfina and her sisters and bowed once more. “I did not expect to be saved by the Valkyries themselves. Allow me to thank you too.”

“I did it for my master,” Alfina replied. She kept some distance between them; perhaps they had a troubled past?

However, Alfina was the only one who maintained her distance. While startled by the change, her sisters were all struck by the pup’s cuteness.

“Aw, he’s so cute!”

“He was so big and cool before, but this isn’t bad either.”

“Well, I say we should be grateful for the change.”

They all reacted differently, but they petted the pup and cradled him in their arms, making their fight from mere moments ago seem like a distant memory. But, though he was small now, he was still Fenrir. Perhaps they were adaptable, or maybe they were just fearless. Either way, Alfina’s sisters were strong in a very different sense of the word.

Meanwhile, Fenrir must have allowed this as a way of thanking the sisters, for he simply let it happen.

After dismissing her summons, Mira returned to Martel’s home. When asked why Fenrir had turned into a pup, Martel answered, “It looks like the corruption

went all the way to his core.”

The white fruit had successfully expelled the dark powers, but Fenrir’s use of the powers during their fight had hastened its corruption. Since it had slipped so deeply inside him, the white fruit had to strip all of it away. It became impossible to maintain his size, leading to his current form—at least according to Martel’s analysis.

“I see... Makes sense. Sort of...”

Based on his form, Fenrir currently only had 10 percent of the strength he’d had in his prime. Mira looked to the pup, worried, and wondered if there might have been another way.

“You need not worry, Mira.” Fenrir faced the sad Mira head-on and thanked her once more. “This was the result of my own carelessness. I feel that your actions were for the best. It was the only way to escape my predicament.”

Besides, he added with a laugh, he could regain his power and more with time and training.

“Most of all, I am glad that I can move freely again. Now I can continue searching for my siblings. Martel, Mira, it is all thanks to you.” The pup hopped around, checking his physical condition. “Hmm. Though I’ve lost much power, I can still fight off any monster around these parts with ease.”

“If you say so, I suppose...”

Even after losing 90 percent of his strength, he was still Fenrir. He was probably right. Besides, worrying over this when he said that he was fine with it was just rude.

Mira finally rejoiced over her rescue of Fenrir.

Chapter 24

“YOU’VE DONE ME a great service. If ever you should need anything, I will rush to your aid.” Fenrir expressed his gratitude once more, announced that he would leave in search of his brother and sister, and skillfully turned the doorknob.

However, Martel called out to him to stop.

“Wait, little wolf! I’m sorry, but you shouldn’t leave my domain for a while.”

Fenrir gave her a dubious look. “And why is that?”

It was then that Martel announced something surprising: this situation was not yet resolved.

“Don’t you feel it? That awful power that took control of you is floating all around us.”

Martel explained the situation in more detail. The mysterious power that had consumed Fenrir was encroaching once again, attracted to his own power. The domain protected by Martel prevented its entry, but it remained outside, wafting about, waiting for Fenrir to emerge.

The white fruit had managed to remove the darkness, but that was all it had done. If Fenrir was possessed by these powers again, things would end the exact same way.

“I had no idea...” Fenrir had felt the mysterious power’s presence before it drove him mad. He’d perceived it as something similar to his brother and sister’s powers, but once it began to eat away at him, he’d realized that it was entirely different in nature.

I can’t believe the mess this has turned into...

Similar yet different powers. That meant that something with powers similar to Jormungand and Hel’s was in this Ancient Underground City. Mira considered the grandiosity of the situation as she listened.

"So, little wolf, we need to do something about the cause if we don't want you to fall victim to it again." Martel lifted the pup and cradled him in her arms. She then sighed regretfully and added, "I just wish I could neutralize the power completely."

So, even Martel's power was not enough to defend against the corruption forever. This place was protected by the Trinity, as well as her power, making it safe, but the mysterious power would follow wherever Fenrir went.

Martel had been nearby this time, so the damage had been kept to a minimum. But if Fenrir lost himself somewhere else, there was no telling what tragedy might occur. Who would stop the next rampage when a progenitor spirit had struggled so greatly to quell the first?

"In that case, there's little we can do." Fenrir understood. He reluctantly chose to stay, his face clearly full of resentment.

"Hrmm... From what I've heard, it sounds like the cause is beneath this underground city, no?" Mira chimed in. "I don't know if this will comfort you, but what if I were to go and check on things down there?"

At this rate, he would never be able to search for his siblings. It must have hurt to finally regain control of himself just to be told that he'd have to stay locked up here forever. When Mira offered to investigate in his stead, her objective was a source of power that endangered Fenrir himself; so she sadly added that they'd best not expect too much of her.

"Thank you, Mira. Your concern is much appreciated. Do not push yourself too hard." Fenrir bowed his head deeply. He had great gratitude for—and faith in—the courage and fortitude of she who'd stopped his rampage.

The conversation had settled somewhat when the Spirit King suddenly had a suggestion. "Say," he said. "I have a proposition. What if you were to form a contract with Mira here? She already has links to spirits all over the world, thanks to my power. This vast information network may yield clues on the whereabouts of your family."

It seemed he'd already seen through Mira's scheming.

“Oh, what a wonderful idea. I agree.” Martel threw in her support. She and the Spirit King added that, once they’d resolved the problem of the dark powers and Fenrir could move freely, he’d be able to meet Mira right away and easily receive the information their network had yielded.

“Mira has contracts with many of my kin, and I’m sure she’ll form many more. It’s much more efficient than searching on your own. Besides,” the Spirit King said, “You can’t sense them anymore, can you?”

Mira cocked her head curiously. What did he mean by that?

Fenrir nodded gravely. “So, you’ve noticed,” he confessed.

As it turned out, he couldn’t sense the mysterious power anymore. This place was protected from it, yes, but Martel could still sense it drifting outside just fine. Fenrir hadn’t noticed it at all. According to the Spirit King, this must have been because of his loss of strength.

Though ultimately different, the powers of Fenrir’s brother and sister were *similar* to the power outside. If he couldn’t sense the lurking evil, it was questionable whether he’d be able to sense his siblings, even if they were nearby.

No one knew how long it would take Fenrir to regain his former power. In that case, the information network going through Mira was sure to be a valuable source of information for him.

“Besides, I think you two meeting here was fate. Isn’t that wonderful?” Martel had given plenty of reasons by now, but she just loved fated meetings. Mira was a summoner, and Fenrir was in need of help. Was that not reason enough?

Martel might have been getting carried away, but Mira was in full agreement. Riding the wave the Spirit King and Martel had made, she made her own appeal. “You’re right. Right, I say! Besides, I have information on more than just spiritual matters. I’ve plenty of allies, from Garuda, Pegasus, and Korpokkurs to Garm, Cat Sith, and Cu Sith! And, of course, I have the king himself here as a friend. His authority may be useful in your search. So? I think it’s a good deal.”

A contract with *the* Fenrir. Sure, she was happy to help him, given the various restrictions he’d found himself with, but her desire to contract with him as a

summoner was just as strong. Mira gazed into the wolf's eyes with a mixture of expectation and uncertainty.

"A summoning contract, hmm? It sounds favorable enough. I would be glad to accept a contract with you, Mira. But are you certain? One of your companions, the eldest Valkyrie, is wary of me..."

Had their appeal to logic worked, or had simple faith won out? Either way, Fenrir was willing to form a contract. However, he was wary about Alfina. The god who ruled over the Valkyries, Odin, had a past with Fenrir, and that made Alfina uncomfortable in return.

It was then that Mira remembered something that her lore-loving friend had once told her: myths and heroic tales from her world were reflected in this one, but they were all things that had actually happened in the distant past. In other words, the Fenrir before her eyes was a being that had reappeared after Ragnarök. Likewise with Odin. What a mysterious world this was. It was because of that past that Fenrir now hesitated.

"In that case, why don't we ask the Valkyrie in question?" Mira couldn't bear the thought of a failed contract at this point. After thinking of a way to persuade Alfina, she summoned the Valkyrie.

"I have come to answer your summons." Alfina appeared gallantly from the Bound Arcana and kneeled in front of Mira with clear pride on her face.

"Sorry for keeping you so busy, Alfina. There's something I'd like to discuss with you," Mira said hesitantly to the enthusiastic Valkyrie. Depending on how things went, she might have to ask Alfina to put up with something she didn't want. It was no wonder she had trouble getting the words out.

"Oh? What's happened, Master?" Taking Mira's reluctance to speak as concern, or perhaps even worry, Alfina continued, "If there's anything I can do for you, please tell me!"

"Hrmm... Well, you see..." Mira faced the firm, reliable Alfina and asked her if she would have a problem with Mira forming a contract with Fenrir. "What say you, Alfina? I'm sure you have some concerns, but could you set them aside?"

Fenrir trotted over on his stubby legs and bowed to Alfina. His actions

overflowed with sincerity, but given his puppy form, one could hardly see him as anything but adorable. Mira couldn't help but smile, despite the seriousness of the situation.

Alfina just so happened to be glancing at Mira at that moment. While misunderstanding the reason for her smile, she finally gave her answer. "It would be a lie to say that I have no qualms," Alfina admitted, "but if you will fight for my master, then we are allies. When the time comes, I swear that I will cooperate with you." Alfina held a hand out to Fenrir, offering a handshake to symbolize reconciliation.



“You have my gratitude, Alfina.”

Fenrir took her hand and shook. In a way, this was a historic moment: a Valkyrie and Fenrir, shaking hands and putting the past behind them. To any onlooker, though, it just looked like Alfina was playing with a dog.

Mira, the Spirit King, and Martel watched, smiling.

The problems regarding Fenrir’s contract were solved. All that remained was to form it.

Mira thanked Alfina, then dismissed her, before facing Fenrir.

It’s time. Please, please, work! she prayed.

Summoning contracts couldn’t necessarily be formed between any two parties. There were various factors involved, such as the contracted and summoner’s respective levels of strength, as well as their level of trust in one another.

The contracted’s power was especially important this time. He was the famous Fenrir, after all. Mira was confident in her own strength, but she was unsure that it could stack up anywhere close to his. It was especially different from contracting with Martel; she’d had the Spirit King’s help with her.

“Now, let us begin.”

Despite her concerns, she’d done this ritual many times over by now. Mira used Contract Forging on Fenrir’s brow, perfectly. It abruptly burst and scattered as particles of light.

Was it a failure? Could she not make a contract with such a being after all? Just as the thought crossed Mira’s mind, she noticed something. The particles of light symbolizing the pact still floated around them. It didn’t stop there either. Rays of light connected one particle to another until a giant seal of light had eventually been formed. The light continued to spread. It was like looking at a planetarium, the runic text glowing like constellations.

“Goodness, this is...” Mira gasped in admiration of the sight, and the Spirit King and Martel watched with great interest.

After a while, the light of the contract gathered and was sucked into both Mira's palm and Fenrir's forehead, creating a palpable bond. Furthermore, runic text lingered on Mira's hand for just a moment before disappearing.

"So, this is what they call a summoning contract." Fenrir gently closed his eyes. "It's warm... As if you've gently cradled me in your arms." His eyes then opened wide in surprise.

"A perfect success!" Mira's scream was earsplitting. When the contract succeeded, and the information regarding his summoning flowed into her mind, her joy had finally burst forth.

Like with Eizenfald, summoning Fenrir took the maximum four rosaries. The mana consumption involved was likewise the same, which meant that he was around the same level as Eizenfald. In other words, Mira had gained a top-tier addition to her arsenal. If the situation called for it, it might not be too long until Eizenfald and Fenrir fought together.

There was one difference, though: summon frequency. In order to make a gate for Fenrir to travel through, she apparently needed to use the rune she'd acquired when they'd made the contract. Even with Mira's strength, she could only make the rune once per day, at most. Given this limitation, he probably had more potential than Eizenfald. Mira had a new option for future battles, a new way of adapting. She couldn't help but be excited.

"I look forward to working with you, Fenrir!" Mira pulled Fenrir into a hug and nuzzled him with sheer joy.

Fenrir seemed rather happy, too. "I'm glad. If you ever need my power, however small it may be, do not hesitate to call me," he replied. It would be his first time being summoned, he added with a smile, so he was excited for the new experience.

"By the way, Martel, I have a question."

After rejoicing over her new contract for some time, Mira asked Martel about the mysterious power they'd driven off earlier.

If things got back on track, she would be clearing the Ancient Underground

City in order to find Soul Howl. That would probably mean fighting the raid boss on the bottom floor. Her enemy was extraordinarily powerful, and she would love to have Fenrir's strength for the upcoming battle. But would the darkness consume him again if she summoned him for a fight? This worried her.

"Hmm... I think you'd better not, at least for the time being. Summoning him somewhere farther away should be all right, though." If he was summoned in the Ancient Underground City, Martel believed that he could quickly be consumed by the mysterious power. However, she added to her answer after dwelling on it a moment. "But that doesn't mean there isn't a way. Tell us ahead of time, and I can feed him one of the white fruits. Summon him after that, and he'll be able to withstand the power for as long as the fruit keeps working, around ten minutes."

Indeed, she had her tricks. They didn't know how long the mysterious power would last, but for the moment, Fenrir would live with Martel. Mira could communicate with Martel through the spirit network, making her proposed method possible.

"Ten minutes? Then this is the perfect test of skill!"

Due to the rune, Mira could only summon Fenrir once per day. Now there was an added ten-minute restriction. Despite the limitations, having another ally as strong as Eizenfald was a major boon that would lead her to certain victory. The only question now was how efficiently she could use those ten minutes.

In order to use Fenrir efficiently, she would have to get to know him. What could he do? What were his abilities?

"Fenrir, may I ask you to teach me a few things?!" Mira begged, hoping to prepare for the large, upcoming battle. Her interest spurred her to pry out every detail he could offer.

"Of course. I will answer anything I can." Fenrir went on to answer every question she had about his abilities.

Sadly, he had lost most of his power to the corruption, leaving him with few practical abilities. Still, he was Fenrir; puppy or not, he was strong enough to trounce Mira's holy knights with ease.

What will it be like when he's regained his full power, I wonder?

Perhaps four summoning circles were enough only because he was a puppy. When he regained his former glory, he might be upgraded to a Transcendent Evocation. Even with that prediction in mind, Mira decided to have Fenrir show off his stuff so she could grasp his current strength.

Chapter 25

BY THE TIME Mira had a good grasp of pup Fenrir's current abilities, night had fallen. She would stay the night in Martel's home.

Considering the importance of what she was protecting here, the Spirit King had returned the divine mineral walls back to their original state. Nobody could enter unless they had power equal to his, which meant that they were secure.

Martel whipped up a special-made salad for dinner. She made a new fruit simply to use its juice as dressing, which was surprisingly delicious. It was nutritious and had many status-effects, such as raising the consumer's physical abilities for a few days.

Feeling lighter than ever, Mira gleefully devoured the salad. Naturally, she ate to excess.

"Ah, how satisfying..." she murmured happily as she lay in a bed of vines that Martel had prepared for her. As one should expect of the progenitor spirit's veggies, they were all exquisite enough to satisfy even the meat-loving Mira.

One more being lay down happily next to Mira: Fenrir. "Who knew vegetables could be so delicious?"

He ate meat most of the time, naturally, but the salad had opened his eyes to the potential of plants. However, those vegetables had been specially grown by Martel. Mira warned him not to expect all veggies to be that good.

"Hmm, perhaps. Looking back, the ones I've eaten in the past were all terrible," Fenrir muttered with a nostalgic smile.

Curious, Mira asked, "What kind of vegetables were they?" They must have been really bad if they'd make Fenrir say such a thing.

"Hmm... It was a rich green color. I think Hel called it green paprika," Fenrir said in recollection.

Apparently, his younger sister, Hel, had a cooking phase where she'd often make Fenrir and Jormungand taste test her food. That green vegetable, green

paprika, had come up many times throughout her efforts.

“That awful, unspeakable bitterness... Hel kept stuffing meat inside it and cooking it, but the bitterness never went away.” He clearly wasn’t a fan. Fenrir chuckled. “Jormungand didn’t mind it, but he’ll eat anything. I don’t think he cares about flavor.”

“So even beings like you can be picky, huh?” Based on what he’d said, Mira surmised that the green paprika he’d mentioned was a green pepper. So, Fenrir hated green peppers. “I’m not a fan either,” she added, feeling an odd sense of kinship. They then agreed that meat was better used for Hamburg steak rather than stuffed peppers.

After much discussion, they arrived at one conclusion: meat was the best. But there someone couldn’t sit idly by and listen—Martel.

“Seems like you two haven’t had enough to eat. How would you like dessert?” She appeared next to them, seemingly out of nowhere, and offered them another course.

Mira and Fenrir, who’d been talking excitedly up to this point, suddenly shuddered as they looked at what she held: a green paprika. The green vegetable was so perfectly ripe that one could imagine its bitterness just by looking at it.

“I shouldn’t overeat...”

“Me too... I appreciate the offer, but none for me either...”

Faced with peppers, they averted their eyes and came up with an excuse to decline. However, this would not work on Martel.

“It’s okay. I made it so it’s impossible to overeat. In fact, it helps digestion, so it’ll make you feel better!” It seemed she’d already predicted their excuse and had taken measures against it. She continued pushing the green paprika at them and insisted they eat.

Mira and Fenrir tried to find a means of escape, but they were cut off by the Spirit King’s words: “Martel is unstoppable when she gets like this.” He delighted in their fear.

There was no escape. Having judged that much, Mira took the green paprika in hand and bit down, ready to get it over with quickly. A refreshing sweetness spread through her mouth.

“Delicious!” Mira cried.

Fenrir, too, mustered his courage and timidly bit the green paprika. His eyes widened. “Oh, this is tasty!” Oddly, it made them feel *less* full as they ate it, just as Martel had claimed.

“Isn’t it?” Martel said, satisfied, and left them. Mira and Fenrir grinned at each other.

The green paprika was impressively delicious, but these two shared a certain sentiment: while it was tasty, it had been changed so much from the one they knew that it was like a completely different vegetable, one that just happened to look like green paprika.

They spent a leisurely time together after that. Martel was excited to feed them so much tomorrow morning that they’d forget all about meat. She was so excited, in fact, that she already began devising new creations. The Spirit King occasionally spoke up with his own preferences, saying that they’d be better if they were sweeter or crunchier. Each time, Martel glared at him in annoyance.

Mira and Fenrir enjoyed lively conversation, mostly involving stories of Fenrir’s adventures. As one might expect, they were all of mythical scale.

After a while, Martel became frustrated enough with the Spirit King that he joined them instead. He loved to talk people’s ears off, resulting in the stories becoming even more grandiose.

What had begun as idle chitchat grew into the realm of legends and mythology. Before they knew it, Martel had joined in as well, making things even livelier. Thus, the night ended in a relaxed, if noisy, way.

After spending the night at Martel’s house, Mira got ready for the day and devoured a breakfast of salad and fruit with Fenrir. Martel had pulled out all the stops to make these fruits and veggies. Mira felt more revitalized than ever; this was the food of the gods, without a doubt. Fenrir was in an extremely good

mood as well. Mira was sure that he'd have a stat boost from Martel's food when she summoned him.

"You mean I can have all of this?!"

"Of course. I made it all through trial and error, so I'd love it if you took it all with you."

Shortly before Mira's departure, she received exorbitant amounts of improved fruits and vegetables. She was delighted by the fact that she'd get to enjoy these delicious foods for some time to come—not to mention the fact that she'd just procured free souvenirs for Solomon and the others. Solomon might get to eat delicious food every day at his royal castle, but he'd never had anything like this before.

Mira graciously accepted the bumper crop of food and deposited it all in her Item Box. Normally, one would be troubled by such a quantity, but her Item Box solved that problem for her. The Spirit King had told Martel about this, and he later shared with Mira that she'd purposefully made plenty of extra food in order to provide Mira with lots of leftovers.

It was late morning when Mira left Martel's house. She paused in front of the door to the hidden passageway and turned around. Martel protected something unspeakably precious. Even if she'd been safe up to this point, worry still nagged at Mira.

"You've been a big help," she said. "If you need anything, just let me know. I'll come flying."

"Yes, of course. I'll rely on you if that time comes. Also, I want you to know that *you* can rely on *me* at any time." Martel smiled gently and raised her right hand. All the plants in the area immediately changed into poisonous-looking colors, grew sharp thorns, and dripped an acidic fluid. "Sym tells me you adventurers fight often. I'm pretty strong myself," she said confidently, backed by a dense forest that seemed ready to end any life that stepped into it. Despite being a mother of plants, Martel also looked like a final boss of sorts.

Progenitor spirit Martel governed all flora. Anyone would assume she was

strong, but it seemed her power far surpassed expectations.

“R-right. When I’m able to summon you, you’ll be my trump card.”

It had slipped Mira’s mind, after all of the delicious fruits and vegetables she’d been treated to, but this reminded her that many plants were poisonous. Some were even carnivorous. At the same time, she wondered if a country could be surrounded by these plants as a sort of impenetrable barrier.

The progenitor spirit’s potential was immense. Even if Mira failed to find the Nine Wise Men, she might be able to defend Alcait alone if she learned Astra’s Ten Rings and succeeded in summoning Martel.

Not to toot my own horn, but, having the Spirit King and a progenitor spirit...I couldn’t blame people for thinking I’m cheating at this point.

Mira had received a blessing from the Spirit King and could now freely converse with the demigod. She also had summoning contracts with a progenitor spirit *and* the famous Fenrir. Even she knew that it was only normal to find it all unfair.

“I know I’ve asked a favor of you, Mira, but don’t push yourself too hard. And whenever you need me, please call.”

She had been tasked with investigating the cause of the mysterious dark power. Whatever the source might be, it had managed to create something strong enough to eat away at Fenrir himself. It must be extremely dangerous. He warned her to prioritize her safety and added that he could handle a bit of violence, grinning.

“Of course. I plan to lean on you in the near future; I’ll be counting on you when that time comes.”

Despite the wildness of everything that had happened, Mira was thankful for these chance encounters. They would be a major boon when she needed to protect something. With the aid of the Spirit King, progenitor spirit Martel, and Fenrir, she was confident that she could get through nearly any situation.

“Be careful out there.” Martel gently stroked Mira’s hair. Before the summoner knew it, her surroundings had turned back into their usual, paradisical state. The fact that Martel could do all of that at will was a little

scary.

“Thank you again, Mira. I look forward to fighting by your side.” Fenrir looked to her with sharp eyes and bowed. He acted gentlemanly, but as usual, he was just too cute for it to come across as anything but adorable.

A little embarrassed by Martel’s continued hair-stroking, Mira smiled at Fenrir’s cuteness. “Right. I’ll be off!” With that, she left the hidden space.

She still felt Martel’s presence, just as she had when she’d searched blindly for her. The loneliness was gone, however, replaced with something brighter and gentler.

Mira was glad that she’d come here. Feeling her link with Martel and Fenrir, she proceeded down the hidden corridor and returned to the sixth level of the Ancient Underground City. She was back in the chamber where she’d fought the Skull Dragon.

“With this, nothing will be able to encroach upon her domain.” The Spirit King had reassembled the divine mineral used in the passage, while adding extra toughness and camouflage. Satisfied with his work, he’d disappeared from view after Mira left Martel.

“Now, where did we leave off?” Mira asked herself.

The large, white wall didn’t look out of place at all. It was impossible to tell at a glance that it was made of a different material from its surroundings. One would need power like the Spirit King’s to find it, and the mineral was so perfectly camouflaged that they’d lose track of it the moment they looked away.

None could intrude upon the holy sanctuary where Martel resided. Now that she was certain of this, Mira resumed her unfinished conquest of the sixth level. She already had the key symbol for the lower tier, so her next destination was the spherical shrine with the third and final symbol.

Looking back, I deviated rather far from the path...

Going up a long, long staircase, she suddenly remembered her current

location. Following Martel's signal had led her astray and into a distant corner of the sixth level. Worse, it wasn't only on the other end of the level from the spherical shrine, it was also in the opposite corner, making it as far away as it possibly could be.

Not that raw distance means anything in this dungeon!

This sixth level was well-known for being too complex for the linear distance between points to matter. It was not uncommon to take a full day to travel between two rooms divided by a single wall. In other words, it was occasionally faster to reach a destination from a more distant point than from a closer one.

Mira opened her map to devise a path back to the proper route. Skeletons chose that moment to attack, but she absentmindedly summoned a dark knight to fight them off. Of course, she didn't forget to collect the magic stones they dropped.

"Phew... I'm finally back on the proper route."

Crossing bridges without railings, jumping from corridor to corridor, rushing through alleyways, cutting through buildings as big as department stores—it had taken her just under three hours to arrive, but Mira had finally found the large building where she'd obtained the lower tier's key symbol. Finally, she was back on the route she'd taken to this point. This essentially meant that she hadn't made any progress, but the common understanding among former players was that returning to the starting point in this mess of a dungeon was optimal.

"Hrmm... No break necessary, I think."

Mira considered taking a break in this safe zone, but she realized that she wasn't really tired even after running around so much. She had an idea as to why, too: Martel's breakfast. It was more effective than even the most expensive nutritional drinks.

Surely the fatigue won't come back to bite me later. While a little worried, she decided—workaholic that she was—that if that happened, she could just eat some of the fruit Martel had given her.

Thus continued her mad charge through the dungeon.

Chapter 26

BY AROUND NINE at night, Mira had successfully obtained the third symbol and arrived at the Great Temple in the center of the level.

“Goodness, it’s big,” she murmured as she looked up at the Great Temple.

There was a Great Temple on each level, and for the most part, they all shared the same size and design. The sixth level was different. Because the final, seventh level had no Great Temple, this was the last one. And it was three times bigger than the others.

The differences didn’t end there either. The interior was naturally bigger. The chapel alone was about the size of a small stadium. The ceiling soared overhead. Anyone who saw it for the first time would be taken aback by its sheer immensity.

What was really special was the interior decoration, though. All of the Great Temples, to this point, looked dilapidated, with only the shape of the temples remaining. This one was different. Finely detailed workmanship could still be seen on every wall and pillar, and the image of paradise painted on the ceiling was still vivid and striking. The near-palpable divinity that made this temple a *temple* still flowed through this place, even after so many long years.

There are some around here too. Mira surveyed the chapel and spotted a few adventurer groups resting here and there.

Their eyes found her in return too. They seemed curious. Perhaps that was to be expected; a single little girl had come to the sixth level, one designated for B-rank adventurers, all alone. These people knew the difficulty of this level well; they couldn’t *not* be curious about her.

Hrmm... Well, I suppose that group will work for a start.

Mira approached the closest group, which included a man who stared at her a little too openly. They were quite balanced, with three warriors and three mages, two of whom were women.

“I’ve a question for you six. May I?”

When Mira called out to them, the man who’d stared at her abruptly stood. He was uncommonly tall, and he had a tough-looking form. Anyone could tell that he was skilled at a glance but calling him attractive wouldn’t exactly be truthful. He stepped out to meet Mira, gazing at the summoner, who stood firm despite his advance.

He abruptly thrust out his right hand and loudly introduced himself. “The name’s Bardon. Good to be with ya!”

“R-right. I’m Mira. Good to...be with you too?”

She was taken aback by the abruptness of his introduction, but she reconsidered the situation and realized that introductions *would* be ideal before she started interrogating them. So, she shook his hand.

He clasped both hands around Mira’s and flashed a big smile. “Woohoo! Thanks!”

“Eh?”

What was he thanking her for? What was he so happy about? Mira cocked her head in confusion at the man, who’d begun tearing up.

Just as Mira started to get creeped out by Bardon’s emotional instability and mutterings of “thank you, God,” one of his friends—the lone male mage in the party—came over, seized his hand, and literally threw the big man back to his party.

“Sorry,” the mage apologized. “Don’t mind him.”

“Ooh. That was Ethereal Arts, wasn’t it? You’re not bad.”

The man dressed as a mage was only a little shorter than Bardon, but almost as bulky. He was clearly a powerful mage, and he’d constructed the spell that had thrown Bardon brilliantly.

“If you came here alone, I’m clearly nothing compared to you. I sensed another powerful being with you, until a moment ago. Laborer class?”

“Exactly right. I’m a summoner,” Mira answered confidently.

The adventurers who'd watched from afar began to whisper to each other with a mixture of surprise, doubt, ridicule, and admiration.

"A summoner, huh? I've never heard of any of you being strong, but I guess there's all kinds out there." The mage looked Mira up and down, searchingly.

Behind him, a male voice screamed, "Don't leer at my wife like that!"

"What in the world is his deal?"

Mira turned her eyes toward the bizarre shout and found Bardon throwing a tantrum. Several people were holding him back.

"There he goes again, just when we thought he'd finally calmed down. We keep telling him not to propose to people the second he meets them. I mean, how does that work anyway, Bardon? You think a handshake means you're married? Pathetic!" he scolded.

It was then that Mira connected the dots. When he'd said, "Good to be with you," he'd meant it in a romantic sense.

"Don't worry about it," the exasperated mage said. "It just flares up sometimes. He's been getting better lately, but you're cute, so I guess he got excited."

"Stop trying to seduce my wife!" Bardon roared, practically foaming at the mouth.

"He's been like that ever since he learned his childhood friend got married."

Bardon had always wanted to propose to his childhood friend when he grew up, but he never mustered the courage to confess. As a result, she ended up getting married to someone else, which had led to this. Now, he confessed to women the moment he met them.

As they conversed, Bardon continued to spew nonsensical remarks.

"Sorry about him. Really," the mage apologized again.

"No, no. I'm sure it's harder for your party. I can sympathize." Mira spoke from the depths of her heart. And while it wasn't really an excuse, according to the mage, Bardon was genuinely a respectable person and a strong adventurer —when he wasn't doing this, at least.

“So, er, you said you wanted to ask us something?”

“Ah! Right, right.” Mira nodded in recollection. Bardon’s sudden rampage had taken her aback, but she gathered herself and faced the mage. “My name is Mira. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“I’m Hans. My pleasure.”

Mira and Hans introduced themselves more normally. After glancing and chuckling at Bardon, who was being forced to cool his head, Mira finally asked her question.

“I’m looking for someone at the moment. Have you seen a necromancer riding a Bicorn with a broken right horn anywhere on this floor? He probably wore a black cloak with magic circles all over it, as well as fingerless gloves.”

She described Soul Howl fully. The sixth floor had many narrow and complex passages, so it may have been easier for him to dismiss Bicorn and walk on foot. Knowing that, she added a few more characteristics of his clothing that she remembered from their gaming days, minus any features of his Wise Man’s Robes, as he might have taken them off to conceal his identity. Assuming his tastes hadn’t changed too much, he probably still wore the cloak and gloves.

Immediately after hearing Mira’s question, Hans asked in return, “I haven’t seen any Bicorns, but does that guy you’re looking for wear a black eyepatch over his right eye?”

An eyepatch on his right eye—Soul Howl hadn’t worn anything like that before, but knowing his personality, it was more than likely. However, the fact that Hans had asked her that at all was telling.

“Are you saying you’ve seen him?”

“Yeah, I remember him. It was last night, around this time,” Hans recalled.

It had been around this time, here in the Great Temple. Adventurers were resting after a hard day’s work when he appeared with multiple golems in tow. He went straight through the temple and into the seventh level, without pause. “When I saw you, I was surprised to see a second solo mage coming through. Maybe that’s why it hit me right away.”

Even if Soul Howl had golems with him, a single mage clearing the dungeon on their own would naturally seem unusual to the average adventurer party. Then, Mira had come along the next night. “I thought you might have been related,” Hans noted with a laugh. Eccentric adventurers always seemed to find one another, after all.

When Mira had described the man’s striking features, he’d been certain.

“That black cloak you mentioned was really striking,” Hans continued. “And his black eyepatch had a similar design. At the time, I thought he looked really weird. I couldn’t see his hands, though, so I can’t confirm if he was wearing gloves.”

“No, I think that’s an ample resemblance. I’m almost certain he’s the one I’m looking for.”

Soul Howl loved the undead to a fault, and he was often accused of having an eighth-grader’s sense of style. He also happened to prioritize form over function. Though he hadn’t worn a black eyepatch when Mira knew him, it sounded like just the kind of stupid thing he would do.

As two kindred spirits, he and Wallenstein had often teamed up and made dramatic appearances together during the war.

“Thank you for the information. Here, a token of my gratitude.” Mira thanked him, picked out a few fruits from her Item Box, and handed them to Hans.

“Fresh fruit? On the sixth level? This is a huge help. Thank you!”

“I’m just happy that you’re happy.”

The Ancient Underground City was an enormous dungeon. Normal adventurer parties took over three weeks to get to the sixth level. As such, they mostly brought nonperishable food. The only fresh food they could get was whatever was hidden in the still-operating facilities scattered here and there.

These facilities were all in difficult-to-reach places too. Going through all that extra effort was inefficient and unsafe. As such, Hans was happier about the fresh fruit than Mira had expected.

“Goodbye, then. Safe travels.”

"Yeah, you too. If you're following that guy, it means you're going down, right? You look strong enough, but the seventh level is real tough. Be careful down there."

"Of course. I'll keep that in mind."

The seventh level was an A-rank dungeon, but it was among the harder ones, so it was recommended for A-rank adventurers to travel in parties. It was still far below Mira's level, but letting her guard down was still dangerous. She knew this well, so she took Hans's warning to heart.

"By the way, it's more dangerous at night. Are you going straight down, like he did?" Hans asked as Mira walked away.

After the fourth level, the Ancient Underground City became much more difficult at night—even more so than other dungeons. The skeletons grew more active and more powerful after sunset, after all.

The adventurers who made a living here typically returned to the shrines or Great Temples before nighttime. As such, they couldn't go too far to farm during the day. That was why their hunting grounds weren't as spread out as one might expect, despite the number of adventurers in the city. No facilities operated in their effective hunting grounds either, so fresh fruit was even more valuable.

The video game allowed you to log out, so you could just go somewhere else if there were other parties competing with you for space. That was no longer an option.

"Today's been tiring. I plan to rest here for the night," Mira replied. She looked around the chapel. It was over a hundred meters from end to end. Then, a devilish grin spread across her face, and she said rather loudly, "I think I'll take a nice, relaxing shower."

"Shower? I wish. Good luck finding one."

The sixth level of the city didn't have any water sources, so one couldn't get water unless they brought it with them or used Ethereal Arts. However, Item Boxes could only hold limited volumes of water, and the water-generating Ethereal Arts consumed a lot of mana. Just making a cup of water cost as much

mana as an intermediate spell.

Most mages didn't have mana recovery. Generating water would affect their next day's farming capabilities.

There were sorcerer spells that allowed them to produce large quantities of water with less mana consumption than Ethereal Arts. But there was another difference: sorcerers' water would disappear after a short time, while that of Ethereal Arts would remain. As such, it couldn't be substituted with sorcerer water...unless one was ready to take serious damage.

Due to all of these factors, everyone knew that it was impossible to shower here.

"No, it's quite easy for me," Mira confidently replied. "For I am a *summoner!*"

There was never a bad time for marketing.

Hans seemed to notice this. "Oh, I get it," he muttered. "Summoners can summon water spirits. Yeah, that does sound believable." One could ask a water spirit to make a shower for them, and summoners could summon them at any time, if they had a contract. This also cost less than Ethereal Arts, making it easy to shower as much as one wanted. "So, summoning can be used like that, huh?" he said, impressed.

It was then that the two female mages pushed Hans aside and closed in on Mira, desperation clear on their faces.

"You can shower?!"

"Really?! Really?!"

"A-ah, er, yes. It's easy with my *summoning*." Though overwhelmed by their pushiness, Mira once again puffed out her chest.

"Let me take a shower, too, please! My cleaning wipes ran out, and I'm at my wit's end!"

"Me too! I know you understand!"

They really seemed desperate. And they were correct; Mira understood.

They are a little stinky...

According to the girls, who introduced themselves as Etty and Colette, their party had been staying here in the Ancient Underground City for nearly two months now. As such, their Item Boxes were taken up by food, drink, and various tools and medicines necessary for their adventuring. They had no space for other sundries.

One such everyday item was the cleaning wipe, an item sold at Dinoire Trading for 5,000 ducats per ten-pack. They could be used to clean both one's body and hair. After usage, they could even serve as kindling. Unfortunately, the girls had run out of stock a week ago.

Incidentally, men also had cleaning towels, but they were only meant for minimum cleaning. Though they were reusable, nobody would dare share them.

Women often had to forego feminine comforts when they became adventurers, so these two had expected this. But when faced with the cruel reality, their resolve wavered. It was so bad that even they could feel their remaining feminine sensibilities slowly dying.

And their party would be here for another three days.

“Very well. My summons are quite tolerant, so shower as much as you please!” Mira sympathized with the plights of the everyday adventurer, but at the same time, this was an opportunity. She smirked. They’d drawn the attention and curiosity of other adventurer parties, thanks to their volume.

The adventurers in this Great Temple were all powerful enough to get this far down. Mira would later learn that Bardon himself was an A-rank and had a special title. If these people learned just how strong and capable summoning was, it would help her mission to restore the art.

“This is a rare opportunity to shower. I’m sure you’d like a place where you can take your time, in private, no?” Mira said enticingly to the women, who wholeheartedly rejoiced.

“Yeah! It’d be a little weird out here...”

“If we go up those stairs, we can go to the room we usually use to wipe ourselves down!”

They agreed and began to run off. Mira stopped them. “There is no reason to

leave." The women looked at her curiously, as did the other adventurers.

In the midst of it all, Mira leisurely walked over to an open corner of the chapel and fixed her gaze on just the right spot.

"Summoning can even do...this!"

Picking the perfect moment, she activated her magic: Home Sweet Home. A large magic circle ran across the ground and shone brightly before gathering into shape. When the light faded, a building stood, where there had been nothing but empty space before.

"Huh? What is this?!"

"A tiny house?"

A fancy-looking mansion, the size of a shed, had appeared before their eyes. Etty and Colette were bewildered by the mysterious spectacle, and those watching were visibly confused.

"It's still small now, but I assure you that it'll get bigger."

Standing around outside would not convey the mansion spirit's charms. Remembering her own first impression of it, Mira smiled and opened the door.

Chapter 27

“HERE, THIS WAY. Come on in.” Mira beckoned the women inside.

It was incomprehensible. The mansion had been summoned out of thin air. Thoughts of a hot shower beckoned, though, and Etty and Colette obediently followed.

“Wow! This is awesome!”

“It doesn’t have any furniture, but it sure is a house...”

They were amazed by the interior, minimalistic though it was.

Mira explained the mansion’s myriad charms. Borrowing the power of spirits of water, coldness, and fire allowed her to use air-conditioning in the room, use the shower and toilet, and cook, just as one might in any house in any city.

When she finished her lecture, Mira leaned back confidently. “This spell can be learned by making a contract with a mansion’s artificial spirit. So, are you impressed by *summoning*?”

This magic allowed one to relax comfortably in any environment. No doubt these women would understand the value, since they were in a harsh environment. Mira’s explanation was meant to drive that point home.

It seemed her scheme had worked, too. Etty and Colette ran all around the room, screaming about how wonderful it all was.

“Can I use the faucet?” Having shown interest in the kitchen faucet, Etty asked her host for permission before turning the handle.

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“Oh, water... So much water!” Etty cried.

As for Colette, she had frozen up at the bathroom door, repeating the words “flushing toilet” and “privacy.” To survive, humans needed to both take in and expel matter. People in the adventuring business often had to find *creative* ways to deal with this problem—especially women.

Mira watched the awestruck pair and found herself sympathizing with the plight of the common woman.

Just then, Hans happened to peek in the front door. It was cramped, but having a house in the depths of a dungeon was unique enough in and of itself. “What in the world...? It’s a whole house!” he said, surprised. “Crazy that you can summon something like this.”

Those were the exact words Mira had wanted to hear.

“Crazy indeed, isn’t it? This is the true power of...*summoning*!”

The novelty of it attracted the attention of both Hans’s party and others, who gathered outside and peeked through the door. They were likewise impressed by the solid construction, running water, and facilities.

An adventurer among them called out to Mira, “Say, that water comes from a spirit, right? Would you share with us? We’ll make it worth your time.” He had two empty containers in hand. It seemed his party had made some planning errors and was in dire need of water.

“Of course, of course! Take some water.” Mira accepted his request without a moment of hesitation.

“Thank you! You’re a real lifesaver!” He thanked Mira over and over, as if worshipping her, and filled his containers from the tap.

This spurred the onlookers to start making requests of their own. Naturally, Mira accepted them all, giving them her water and receiving magic stones in exchange. She’d soon racked up the equivalent of half a million ducats in trade.

The water was generated from Mira’s mana, through the power of her spirit, but seeing as she had abundant mana, it wasn’t much of an expense for her. Despite that, she’d earned serious money in exchange. She couldn’t stop smiling. She tried to keep herself from grinning madly each time she received more stones.

After making big money selling water for a while, she found ten adventurers, all of whom were women, still at her door. First, she assumed that they were here for potable water, before coming to a realization.

"Wait. Are you all here to shower?" Mira asked, peeking out from behind the door. It seemed she was right; every single one of them practically begged her to let them use her shower, just as the first two had. "Hrmm, very well. I did let two people use it already. Still, there are so many of you... Are you willing to go two at a time in order to expedite things?"

Mira was of the belief that women's showers took longer on average, and she assumed they'd be here for a long time. As such, she proposed that they shower in pairs. There was no telling how long things would take otherwise.

"That's fine with us!"

"Heck, you can throw all of us in there at once if you want!"

It seemed the ladies were so starved for a shower that they weren't bothered by the stipulation in the slightest.

"Good. Discuss the order among yourselves and wait here, please." Mira left them with that, closed the door, and turned to the first two who'd come. They were waiting impatiently in the corner of the room, and as soon as the summoner turned around, they rushed over to her. "Apologies for making you wait, ladies," she said, opening the door next to the bathroom. "This is the shower room!"

"It sure is a shower. Wow!"

"Thank you so much!"

Though it was small, this house was based on a noble's mansion, so the two were thrilled to see the well-made shower.

"Ah. Apologies, but as you can see, I have many more waiting. Would you mind going in together?"

"Sure, that's fine!"

"We don't mind one bit!"

They agreed immediately. Unable to wait anymore, they started stripping. There wasn't a changing room, so they changed inside the shower room.

Mira managed to stop herself from openly gawking and feigned calm. "Take your time," she said as she set up her special sleeping bag in the corner of the

room and sat. Unable to bear it, she occasionally peeked at the women in their underwear.

It was then that they took off their underwear, now fully naked. The women were toned but not too muscular, due to their status as mages, giving them lovely curves. Etty had larger and more impressive assets, while Colette was smaller but more elegant. Both were truly beautiful in their own ways.

Despite being fully exposed, they did not hesitate. Perhaps that was natural, as the only other person present was another woman.

Hrmm... Marvelous! Even when Mira gazed at them with her ulterior motives on full display, they had no idea.

After seeing them off as they gleefully charged into the shower, Mira tried to ignore the voices outside, arguing over who'd get to go next, while she prepared dinner.

Like the other day, she cooked a meal full of meat and veggies. She took out her cooking set and began prepping the ingredients—slicing the meat, chopping the vegetables, and throwing them one after another into a pan with water.

In the middle of her efforts, the shower room door opened, and the women peeked out.

“Mira, we have a request. It’s silly, but do you mind?” Colette asked timidly, her skin wet and glossy. She almost looked like someone on her first sleepover date at a lover’s house, though she certainly didn’t mean to. The sight of her was oddly arousing.

“Sure,” Mira said, thinking dirty thoughts. However, she resolved herself to treat them as a true gentleman would.

“Um, we were kinda hoping we’d be able to wash our underwear... Feel free to say no.”

“It’s kind of life-or-death for us, even if we’re only here for three more days.”

It seemed they’d gone through all of their underwear, despite having packed as much as possible. While not shy about being nude, they were bashful when it

came to their undergarments.

Mira found their nervous fidgeting adorable. But she withstood her urges and tightened up. It would be rude to comment on a maiden's private affairs. She maintained her faux sincere smile and assented. "I see. Well, I don't mind. Wash whatever you need to."

"Thank you!"

"We can't thank you enough!"

The two seemed about to cry. They recovered their underwear before ducking back into the shower room.

As soon as she was sure the door was closed, Mira allowed her cheeks to relax. But even as she grinned, her eyes remained sharply fixed on the shower room door.

A woman's 30 percent sexier when wet.

Mira committed this memory to heart and happily returned to her cooking.

She threw in the prepared ingredients, added in the most delicious combination of seasonings she'd found during this trip, and turned the heat on. Just as a delicious scent began to waft from the pan, Etty and Colette happily emerged from the shower room.

"I feel like a new woman!"

"Ah, that was great!"

Mira acted as naturally as possible. "You seem refreshed," she called out. They turned to her and thanked her from the depths of their hearts. "You two were lucky that I, *a summoner*, happened to be here."

Still emphasizing the word "summoner," Mira suggested that they add a summoner to their party for just this type of occasion. Contracts took some effort, but the blessings they provided were more than worth it. Doing her best to sell evocation, she added that the true charm of a summoner was their adaptability.

"Yeah, that sure sounds right."

“I still don’t really know what summoners do, but I know you’re incredible.”

Her advertising seemed successful, as they expressed positive opinions. They even said that they’d love to have a summoner in their party someday. Mira was elated—not just because she’d gotten to see them naked, but because she felt the awareness of summoners on the rise.

“I’ve never done something like this, so I don’t know the going rate. Will this do?”

“How about this?”

They handed over a few large magic stones. Altogether, they’d easily be worth more than 20,000 ducats.

Market price. What was the price of being able to use water in the depths of a dungeon and enjoying a luxurious, hot shower? Were 20,000 ducats too much or too little? This was Mira’s first time negotiating prices for this, too, so she had no idea either. That said, she wasn’t about to sell her field short. She then remembered something similar to this: the price of a night’s stay at an inn.

“Well, I suppose this much will do,” Mira said, taking two magic stones from each of them.

These four were worth about 10,000 ducats each. Twenty thousand per person for a single shower was expensive, but it was probably permissible, given how deep in the dungeon they were. Mira also factored in the intangible benefit to herself, so that helped to bring the price down.

“Thank you!”

“You’re a treasure!”

It seemed that was an extremely small price for them to pay. They were surprised at first, but when they realized that she was serious, they flushed with emotion, for they had taken Mira’s favoritism as sympathy toward her fellow women. More than that, they revered Mira’s kindness.

“Now, now, it’s fine. Oh, and don’t forget to thank the spirits who provided you with that shower. All of this is thanks to them.”

“You’re right. I’m more grateful for spirits than ever.”

“Me too.”

Gratitude toward spirits was important; Mira had felt that even more as of late, and the women agreed. If this gratitude spread far and wide, surely none would follow in Chimera Clausen’s footsteps. Seeing how they felt, Mira smiled at the thought of a happier relationship between mankind and spirits.

After they’d paid, the two women dressed in simple clothes and relaxed for a moment. It was then that the smaller mage, Colette, suddenly sniffed. “Oh! Is that smell what I think it is?” she asked, right as Mira’s meal simmered to perfection. “Kirori bird, slooreess, yellow leek, and...porlanone! Right?” Colette confidently listed off every single ingredient in Mira’s hot pot.

“Exactly right,” Mira replied, impressed.

Colette didn’t stop there. She even guessed every seasoning Mira had added, surprising her even more.

“My family runs a little restaurant, so I learned a lot as a kid. Before I knew it, I’d learned how to guess everything in a dish just by smell,” she explained, proud yet bashful. Her gift was the result of a strict education.

It seemed her parents had wanted her to take over the running of the restaurant. Her current life was the result of an adventurer visiting the restaurant, by chance, one day.

Colette, who’d dreamed of becoming an adventurer instead of a chef, passed the Mages’ Guild aptitude test in secret. After that, she forcefully persuaded her parents and entrusted the place to her siblings before leaving.

“Looking back, getting stronger as a mage was a whole lot harder than cooking. But I’m able to give this my all now that I’m not stuck taking orders all the time,” Colette said nostalgically. Then, with a wry grin, she noted that her cooking knowledge had helped in adventures a lot more than expected.

She now used that knowledge to cook for the party and had become much more skilled along the way. Colette boasted that she was especially confident in her seasoning.

Despite her desire to get away, she seemed a little homesick.

“Oh, sorry for talking your ear off out of nowhere. This is just a lot like what I ate when I was first starting out.” Colette smiled bashfully, thanked Mira, and held out a single leaf as a token of her gratitude. “This is an herb called aminica. If you chop it up and let it boil, it gets even tastier. It’s one of my favorites.”

She added proudly that this aminica herb was the ultimate finisher on the hot pot she’d eaten so often when she started adventuring. Poultry, like kirori bird, went especially well with it, so any boiled or stewed dish that included poultry would be improved by aminica herb.

“Oho! Really? Well, I’m excited to try it out.”

Mira accepted the aminica and got right to chopping it. Colette watched her, remembering how her sister had looked when she was learning. She smiled, albeit a bit nervously due to Mira’s unpracticed knife work, and backed away.

Colette and Etty stopped at the door and thanked her again.

“Thanks for the shower, Mira.”

“Yeah, you really saved us.”

Mira lifted her head to see them off and waved goodbye.

“Ooh, the scent changed all at once.”

When the chopped aminica was placed in the boil, the myriad of scents coalesced into one harmonious aroma that spoke to true culinary expertise. Surprised by how it had changed, Mira peeked into the pot and fantasized about the taste. But she was interrupted by a knock at the door. It seemed the next customers were ready.

When Mira announced that they could enter, two female adventurers timidly peeked inside. They were the first of five pairs waiting to shower. They looked expectant. No doubt, Etty and Colette had told them it was their turn.

“The shower room is there. Know that I don’t have a dressing room; you’ll have to strip over there before going in.” Mira casually omitted the option of stripping in the shower room. She stole peeks as they got naked. “Oh, and feel free to do some laundry, if you’d like,” she added as she watched them gleefully

collect their underwear.

When the shower room door closed, Mira finally began picking at her food.

“Ooh! I’m amazed that it changed so much!” She was astounded by just how much her meal had been elevated by the addition of a single herb.

Mira’s hot pots so far had essentially been that of a novice’s cooking: trying random combinations until something went well. But this time was different. This hot pot had a truly rich taste that came from its core. It could’ve even been served at a restaurant.

Aminica, was it? I’ll have to buy more! she noted mentally, having fallen in love at first bite. At the same time, she wondered about all the other herbs out there that could cause such a change. *Trying out different combinations ought to be plenty of fun.*

Mira had plenty of simple seasonings, like salt and pepper, but she hadn’t tried her hand at herbs. Having now experienced this one, she knew that she needed to expand her horizons.

Chapter 28

MIRA FINISHED DEVOURING her hot pot, getting eyefuls of naked adventurers all the while. Once she'd finished cleaning up, she relaxed with an all-season au lait and a good book. Namely, the *Encyclopedia of Skills*.

In the meantime, the fourth pair finished, and the fifth and final duo entered the shower room. One was an elven woman dressed in magical-girl attire, arousing a sense of affinity in Mira. She stared at the underwear and robes left in front of the shower room. Her gaze was lewd, but nobody was present to notice.

Twenty minutes later, the shower room door opened, and the women came out refreshed. They quickly dressed, paid with magic stones, thanked Mira profusely, and left to return to their friends.

"Now then..."

After seeing off the last pair, Mira stood, grabbed, the hem of her skirt, and threw off the whole dress. Indeed, it was finally her turn. It was late now, but she didn't regret showering last. In fact, she headed to the shower room with excited steps. Before she could enter, there was a knock at the door.

Hrmm? There shouldn't be anyone else...

Before Mira could do anything, a voice came from beyond the door. "Sorry! I forgot something." It was the elf woman whom Mira had taken a liking to.

"I see. Wait a moment, please." Mira quickly searched around the shower room. Then, she found it: a small pair of cute panties.

Bwah?! This is...!

Though shocked by the unexpected item, an evil desire burned within her. Mira was used to seeing girls' underwear—those of girls she knew, at least. But when it came to a *stranger's* underwear? That was different. She had to calm down, however. After all, she was a fellow woman.

Certain lechers would consider this a treasure. However, Mira did her best to

“casually” pick it up and feign innocence as she headed to the door. They weren’t warm—it had been some time since the girl had taken them off—but Mira still desperately held on to that imaginary sensation.

“Here. These are yours, yes?” She gallantly opened the door and held the panties out to the elf girl, doing her best to feign disinterest.

However, something was off. When the elf saw Mira, she looked confused and astonished.

“Ehhh...?!”

What was going on? Could she tell that her underwear had excited Mira? Would the summoner be branded a pervert? She thought she’d concealed her feelings well. How had she been exposed?! *Can it be? Can she read minds?* Mira panicked, maintaining a poker face all the while.

A few seconds later, the elf girl jumped at Mira. “Look away!” she screamed, oddly desperate.

Mira did as she was told and looked away as the elf pushed her back. However, she heard a different voice.

“Sorry!” That was a man’s voice. “I didn’t expect her to come out looking like...that. I didn’t see anything! Not a thing!” And he was close—not that the “mansion” was particularly large to begin with.

Mira managed to turn her head toward the door as the elf covered the rest of her. She spotted a man, who’d turned away and was frantically repeating excuses. Big, empty containers were in both his hands; it seemed he was here for more water.

“Mira, you shouldn’t answer the door so shamelessly!” The elf girl sounded a touch angry but mostly concerned.

“Ah...right. Apologies.” The dots finally connected. Mira had taken off her dress and was only in her underwear. The elf girl’s sudden tackle had saved her virtue.



Eventually, Mira handed over the forgotten undies. Before leaving, the elf girl reminded her not to brazenly answer the door like that again.

Due to all the naked women who'd been in her room, she'd let her guard down. Mira apologized for her lack of self-awareness, reflecting on her mistakes.

Mira finally got into the shower room and took a deep breath.

Twelve girls, two at a time, in this tiny space... I can only imagine! As a raging pervert, Mira let her fantasies run wild as she inhaled the lingering scent and grinned lasciviously. Her brain was full of thoughts of women loving women.

In the midst of her delusions, she began washing herself and thought idly about what it meant to *have* self-awareness as a woman.

I've never really considered it embarrassing...

After all, Mira was *proud* of her body. The elf was right, though. She'd simply reminded Mira of what was normal. What did women do when seen in their underwear? Mira put all of her mediocre knowledge to work, trying to recall the scenes she'd often seen on TV.

With the most stilted performance ever seen, Mira covered her chest and crotch with her hands and said, "Eek! You perv!" This brought something else to mind. "The Birth of Venus..."

Despite the hot shower water raining on her, she felt a cold chill.

In the end, Mira left the shower with no greater understanding of femininity. She immediately put on a dress instead of lazing around in her underwear, obeying the elf woman. A cute girl had scolded her. It was natural for her to obey.

After that, she took out the *Encyclopedia of Skills* and a notepad to begin her daily skill check. She noted the skills she wanted to learn and the ones that she believed she could learn in her current state.

Soon, she could no longer defy the draw of sleep. She put away her book and notes, took off the uncomfortable dress, and crawled into her sleeping bag.

The next morning, Mira woke up at a reasonable time, did her morning business, and sat idly for a while until her brain had woken up.

“Hrmm... First things first: breakfast.”

Ten minutes and a change of clothes later, she shuffled over and made breakfast...though, all she really did was take out a yellow fruit, the size of an apple. Though its appearance wasn't very striking, it was more than met the eye; it was an energizing fruit, made by Martel.

“Mm, delicious!”

Well, of course, it was delicious.

The sublime sweetness, outstanding flavor, and perfect level of sourness all came together to make another ultimate fruit that transcended all others. It was also highly nutritious and extremely nourishing. No breakfast could surpass this.

After being revitalized to the fullest, by a single fruit, Mira maintained her momentum by getting ready for the day, leaving the mansion spirit, and dismissing it. Just as she started to make her way to the seventh level, she stopped.

Right. While I'm at it... Mira caught sight of the party to which Colette and Etty—the pair who'd first used her shower—belonged. They were preparing to leave for the day, but the sudden disappearance of the mansion drew their attention, leading them to make eye contact with her.

Mira waved and greeted them. “How was last night? Did you sleep well?” she asked Colette and Etty.

“It's been a long time since I slept that soundly.”

“What an awesome morning!”

Both wore big smiles.

“I’m glad,” Mira said, grinning. Then, she remembered last night’s dinner. Just a single herb had changed everything. “By the way, that aminica herb you gave me was astounding. I’ve never cooked a hot pot that delicious.”

When Mira conveyed her shock, Colette smiled gleefully. “Right?! I’m glad you liked it.”

Mira asked Colette if she could tell her any other, similar recipes she knew.

Last night’s hot pot had astounded her, to the point that she wanted to experiment with other herbs, but she was still just an amateur chef. As such, she wanted to learn the types of and uses for herbs from an expert first. However, these were recipes. If Colette had devised them on her own, she would treasure them. They weren’t something one could just *ask* for, let alone presume to own.

“You liked it that much? Sure! I’ll teach you some!”

There were roughly two kinds of chefs in the world: those who pursued cooking as a business, and those who simply wanted people to eat delicious food. It seemed Colette was of the latter. Just hearing that Mira had liked her recipe made her happy.

Mira learned more recipes that would bring forth dramatic changes, like last night’s hot pot. After storing them all in her notepad, she thanked Colette and gave her an armful of fresh fruit she’d gathered in the sixth level.

“Whoa, can I really have this many?! Thanks!” Colette gleefully accepted them. When her party looked to her with greedy eyes, she sighed and began divvying up the fruit. However, it was fun to share delicious things. Despite her complaints, she bore a big smile from start to finish.

Ah... Oh, no. That fruit...

As Mira watched her evenly divide the fruit, she saw it. She’d given Colette many fruits that tasted good and had potent effects, but some of them had... quirks. The fruit with the biggest quirk of all had been in the bunch that she’d so flippantly handed over: a fruit that looked just like the treasured Queen of Hearts, despite tasting quite the opposite. It did increase mana regeneration speed, however, so it could be put to good use by the mages.

What should she do? After a moment's worry, Mira decided that she shouldn't give away a fruit that tasted like a dare. She opened her mouth to warn Colette.

However, she stopped as she saw what Colette was doing. She shared the fruit with each party member, one by one. When she finally took the problematic, red fruit in hand, she stopped, picked out a different fruit, and gave it to Etty. Then, she went to the next person—Bardon, the one who'd proposed to Mira, out of nowhere—and put the red fruit in his hand. She wasn't the party's chef for nothing. Colette knew the nameless fruit already.

If Bardon was the victim, then there would be no problem. Mira decided not to take the fruit back.

She wisely kept the fruits from Martel for herself.

Mira left the pleasant group. Hearing goodbyes from all the other groups as she left, she opened the Great Temple door and proceeded inside.

The seventh level of the Ancient Underground City was clearly unlike the others.

The levels she'd come through so far were vast ruined cities, noble mansions, majestic places filled with towers, and a Kowloon Walled City lookalike. Each one was enormous, despite being underground, and overflowed with fantastical elements and adventure. The seventh level was different, though. It was as if the flow from the first to sixth levels had been cut off entirely, bewildering those who set foot within it for the first time.

As I remember, they called this “the fallout shelter,” “secret lab,” and other such things. Always reminded me of a colonization spaceship, in mid-construction.

The metallic ceilings, walls, and floors were all white, with built-in light sources that illuminated the long corridor. The metal doors along the way had no knobs; they were made to open and close automatically using authentication keys. The way the many-layered, metal doors moved, so mechanically, made this seem like a completely different world from the rest of the city so far.

Indeed, the seventh floor went from high fantasy to science fantasy. The cold, inorganic place felt more touched by human hands than anywhere else in the dungeon. Mira remembered a certain spaceship movie's interior and compared it to this one as she checked her map.

The seventh level had many corridors and rooms, but its layout was simple and well-organized. The problem was the doors dividing each area. Different authentication keys were needed for each security level. It would take days for someone to collect all five authentication keys, but there was one difference here, compared to prior levels.

The authentication keys were obtained as *items*. Mira, who'd cleared the dungeon before, already had them. As such, she wasted no time and beelined to the end.

However, this was also true of her target, Soul Howl. One would assume that he'd go the shortest route possible, so it was likely that he'd already reached the end.

Still, how does he plan to deal with the Machina Guardian?

In order to enter the final room, with the Chalk Orb, one would have to eliminate the boss of this dungeon, the Machina Guardian.

The Machina Guardian was classified as a raid boss, but the one here was among the strongest, having been given the distinction of Guardian. It was normal for top players to fight it in groups of several dozen; it would be reckless for even a Wise Man to try to fight it solo. Even together, as a group of nine, they would struggle and need to work together to overcome their foe.

Did Soul Howl have allies? Mira had wondered about this before, but none of the witnesses had noted any companions, so she concluded that it was unlikely.

I hope he's not planning to use what I think he is...

If the battle with the Machina Guardian was interrupted and some time passed without fighting, the boss would begin repairing itself. This in itself was not rare; almost all raid bosses began healing themselves if ten minutes passed without any fighting. That meant that if a raid wiped, they would have to start over again against a fully healed boss.

However, there was one loophole. It could be brute-forced, and anyone could do it. The method was to simply continue the battle. As long as there was a hostile presence in the arena, the boss wouldn't start healing. In other words, someone could simply stay there and prevent it from healing until their allies returned.

Back in the game, there were people who'd made this a business. They were often called Alarms, since they kept the bosses from healing—sleeping, essentially. They often worked in groups of two or three. Alarms could be individuals, too, as long as the individual happened to be a summoner, medium, or necromancer.

Other raid bosses are one thing. But the Machina Guardian?

Sure, it would stop the boss from healing, if things went well, but that didn't mean the fight would be easy. The Machina Guardian's attacks were extremely powerful, so an Alarm could be obliterated in the blink of an eye if he tried to cut corners. Anything that could survive the guardian for a significant amount of time would cost much more mana, making it difficult to rest and recover.

Moreover, the Machina Guardian's most notable feature was its durability. It was tough, even among raid bosses. Eizenfald's full-power attacks wouldn't even shave off a tenth of its health.

In other words, even if all went well, it would take a very long time for Soul Howl to defeat it on his own. The fight might even last *weeks*, and nobody could continuously focus for that long. Human limits would cause him to lose focus at a fatal moment.

Still, I doubt he would just run in without a plan.

Common sense dictated that a solo fight against a Machina Guardian was foolish. However, the Nine Wise Men had attempted and *succeeded* at countless foolish endeavors.

To solo a raid boss, one needed mental stability, more than anything. Plenty of mana needed to be poured into their Alarm, and one had to recover that mana with potions, in order to gain ample time to rest.

With enough money and patience, anything was possible. It was reckless, but

maybe the shift to reality was an advantage in this case. Certain that she'd find out when she arrived, Mira quickly began her clear of the seventh level.

Chapter 29

“UNFORTUNATELY, I NEED something tougher than dark knights.”

The frequency with which Mira’s dark knights had been destroyed had risen greatly as she continued her trek. The A-rank skeletons that appeared here were no longer easy marks.

She suppressed her numbers by only summoning three or four at a time, but things wouldn’t be so easy up ahead. As one got closer to the end, the number of skeletons increased. They began to use group tactics too.

They were powerful, but their unique magic-stone drops were very large, making this floor great for earning money. There was also no competition, as there had been in-game, which meant that she was free to farm wherever she wished. If she really wanted, Mira could make one or two million ducats in a day.

However, she had come with a clear goal in mind.

I’m in a hurry today. Maybe I’ll run through in one sprint, though...

A perfect hunting ground had been left vacant, ripe for hunting. It was also the bottom of a dungeon that took weeks to get to. The skeletons here dropped an extremely valuable item, though rarely, called a white mobility crystal, that could be used to make magical tools or for refining.

As someone who wanted to refine equipment to bolster physical capabilities, this was the perfect item for Mira. However, it was a rare drop, so it wasn’t easy to get one’s hands on. In a day of farming, she might get one or two, maybe three if she was lucky. In a situation where Soul Howl might be in arm’s reach, she couldn’t dawdle.

Mira sighed and prioritized the mission, preparing two summoning circles and chanting to summon the seven Valkyrie Sisters.

Alfina descended from the magic circle and knelt before Mira. “The Sisters Seven answer your summons,” she said in her usual, calm voice.

However, the other sisters were unable to line up, due to the narrow passage, so they rushed back and forth behind Alfina, in a panic, trying to find a place to stand. They whispered to each other, shuffling back and forth.

“Aren’t we supposed to line up in two rows when this happens?”

“But didn’t we get stuck choosing between mountain and valley patterns? What do we do?”

“With this width, we should be able to manage a cross formation.”

“We can’t do the eye of the sun with Alfina in that position, though...”

“Ugh, who cares? Just line up however.”

“Sisters, we have to hurry!”

After bowing to Mira and having lost her patience, Alfina stood and turned to them. “Have some dignity!”

The fussy sisters instantly froze. Mira could only see her back, but the looks on the others’ faces told her exactly what Alfina’s expression looked like.

“Elezina, in such situations, you are to form a ring formation with you at the center. We’ve been over this.” Alfina’s chilling voice was met with silence.

This seemed to spark a memory in Elezina. She gasped and paled. “Oh...”

“Ring formation!” Alfina roared.

Despite their earlier unpreparedness, they acted quickly once they had orders. The sisters lined up perfectly, upon Alfina’s command, and kneeled before Mira. After seeing this, Alfina turned and bowed as well.

“It is my fault that you’ve witnessed this failure. I cannot apologize enough.” She bowed even deeper.

As for Mira, she didn’t really care.

“Now, now. Your sincerity rings loud and clear.” Mira gazed at the Valkyrie Sisters and offered a heartfelt remark: “I feel nothing but gratitude toward you all.” They’d trained for the last thirty years in order to help her, and they continued to do so now. Some occasional clumsiness was nothing compared to that.

It seemed Alfina took Mira's gratitude as forgiveness. "Your generosity is too much for us!" Moved by these words of respect, rather than scolding, Alfina smiled proudly. She then swore that she would continue to hone her skills and train her sisters in order to be worthy of their master.

An icy chill ran down her sisters' spines.

In the Ancient Underground City, almost all monsters from the fourth level onward were undead. The Valkyrie sisters' weapons of light displayed more ferocity than ever. Each Valkyrie had powers far beyond those of the dark knights, and it gave them an innate advantage over the monsters here. The only thing that could stop Mira's team now was the Machina Guardian itself.

That alone greatly increased her speed. It was only a few hours into her trek, and she was already halfway through the middle layer.

When they'd entered the middle layer, the number of skeletons that appeared increased. The rate at which the seven sisters defeated them quickened in turn, which left so many magic stones that Mira couldn't pick them all up on her own. The sisters could have helped, but that would decrease their killing speed.

However, the miserly Mira did not give up and leave them there. She had her First Pupil make another appearance.

"With the help of his comrades, he arrives at the belly of the beast. There, he finds countless evil monsters! Yeah, these are way bigger down here. Very nice, very nice," he said as he began gathering stones.

Cat Sith was beyond enthusiastic; he was the ideal rock collector, for he was agile and could run like the wind all over the battlefield. The sign on his back read, "A dirty job, but someone's gotta do it." He ran around, grabbing stones, all the while announcing his exploits.

"Ladies, there's a group up ahead!" His keen scouting abilities also allowed him to report the locations of skeleton groups to the Valkyries. Once the Valkyries easily slew the monsters, he'd duck in, snatch up the magic stones, and offer them up to Mira as if he'd done all the work.

Because he sensed monsters first, there were times when they deviated from the optimal route. Even then, he raised a sign that said, “We strive for excellence,” and brushed it off by saying that he was “making sure their backs were safe.”

At least we got a white mobility crystal for all that effort.

Their pace had slowed somewhat, but it was hardly worth fretting over, what with the Valkyrie Sisters’ quick killings. First Pupil’s scouting abilities gave them the upper hand in battle, allowing them to settle things faster. Picking up magic stones was his specialty, and they were basically going as fast as a party possibly could. Mira could hardly complain.

In the meantime, Mira did little more than plot the route ahead. Just in case, she used Biometric Scan along the way in order to search for Soul Howl, grinning all the while as her earnings continued to stack up.

They pressed on through the divided areas of the level until they reached the last section. As she reached the final stage of the seventh floor, Mira realized something: their pace had picked up quite a bit.

“All good, ladies. No monsters up ahead.” First Pupil sat on Christina’s shoulder and pointed forward, as if directing her to charge.

Indeed, perhaps because they were in the final area, there were no monsters to be found. They marched on without resistance. According to Cat Sith, there weren’t any monsters on the routes branching off of this one either. However, rumbling could be heard from afar, giving the seventh level an eerie atmosphere.

Mira could only come to one conclusion: it must have been related to the man she expected to find up ahead.

She continued on for a while, checking her map. The eerie rumbling became clearer as they went.

“I knew it. He’s fighting.”

The closer they came, the louder and more intensely the explosions and

crashes echoed. This corridor was a single, straight path that led to the end of the seventh level—the place where the Machina Guardian stood. The rumbling was the sound of battle.

Given the information she'd received so far, she'd hypothesized that it must have been him. While relieved that she'd found Soul Howl at last, Mira knew that this was a reckless battle. Worried for his safety, she began to run.

The end of the seventh level was like a hangar of sorts, about 500 square meters altogether. But at the moment, it was a battlefield.

Forts with cannons atop them were scattered all about, booming as they shot fire. On the ground was an army of skeletons, lined up like soldiers who were launching suicide attacks. Behind them were multiple golems that boasted four-meter-tall bodies.

Indeed, the skeletons weren't enemies here.

"I thought as much," Mira said upon seeing them.

Necromancers didn't just make golems and raise the dead. They could also seize control of undead monsters. Soul Howl had used this magic to mobilize the skeletons of this floor as his soldiers; this was why she hadn't run into any lately.

Mira gazed at a figure standing atop an enormous rock at the front of the battlefield—a man attended by a Bicorn with a broken horn.

"Only he could gather this many."

It was a veritable siege, and yet there was only one person there. There weren't many necromancers out there who could mobilize such forces. Even from afar, she saw the edgy fashion—like he'd picked a fight with a Hot Topic and lost. That was the Soul Howl she remembered.

Based on his appearance and strength, she was certain it was him.

Mira grinned and looked to the battlefield again. What was she to do about this?

A cannonball cut through the sky and struck a place teeming with skeletons.

There, Mira saw the Machina Guardian she so vividly remembered. Over fifty meters long, it looked like a mechanical spider abomination. Every time it swung an arm, skeletons shattered and went flying. However, bulky golems would then jump onto those arms and explode into flames. This was a necromancy spell that Mira knew well: [Internment Arts: Molten Rebirth].

All that did was strip some of its armor away? Goodness, what a beast.

Internment Arts varied in strength based on the size of the golem. These four-meter-tall golems dealt enough damage that even normal fiends wouldn't be able to withstand them. Yet they barely scratched the Machina Guardian.

Unbothered, the Guardian crushed the ever-gathering crowd of skeletons. Countless artillery landed with a sudden boom. A flash of red light, followed by a crescendo of explosions, landed on the Guardian.

Overwhelming destruction, overwhelming saturation fire, and teamwork between skeletons and golems—it was all going perfectly. However, there was no sign of it stopping the Machina Guardian.



An arm shot out from the rising smoke and mowed down skeletons and golems alike.

Golems, cannons, and skeletons fell into rubble, reformed, and took formation once more, working in perfect coordination to attack the Machina Guardian. Even facing a top-tier, large-scale raid boss alone, Soul Howl seemed to fight optimally. So any onlooker would think—except for Mira.

This isn't an enemy he should be holding back against, so why won't he use his advanced magic?

At this time, Soul Howl had four types of forces on the battlefield: He had a few self-destructing golem pawns and cannon-fortress golems; these two continuously rebuilt themselves whenever destroyed. Third were the A-rank skeletons he controlled using his necromancy. They were pure bait, meant to draw the Machina Guardian's attacks. Last was the giant rock, the armored-fortress golem that he stood upon. With its sturdy construction, it was clearly his last line of defense.

Necromancy may not have been her specialty, but Mira knew her friend's magic well enough. She found herself questioning why all of the forces here were made up of intermediate magic.

Of course, given the foe, one couldn't simply overcome it by rushing at it with advanced spells. Sometimes it was better to skillfully use intermediate magic. However, that didn't mean it was better than skillfully using advanced magic. And a strong mage, especially one of the Nine Wise Men, would never misuse their mana.

He ought to have used his advanced spells to deal more powerful blows, especially in this battle, where he used bait and artillery to keep the enemy at bay. A single blow using advanced necromancy would be more mana-efficient than repeated, intermediate golem explosions, and it would deal much more damage.

So what was going on? The main distinction between advanced and intermediate spells was naturally their difference in power, and the need for incantations. Incanting left the mage open, unless he was able to stand back at a safe distance and watch from afar. That should give him plenty of room.

Was it a mana problem, then? As far as Mira could tell, he didn't look to be short on mana; he showed no signs of fatigue, even though he was constantly reconstructing golems.

As such, Mira couldn't think of any reason for him not to use his advanced magic. If he wanted to pursue efficiency against this top-tier foe, then advanced magic was essential. Likewise, Mira would rather summon Eizenfald than a hundred dark knights.

If his plan was to continue grinding the boss down without giving it time to recover, then this would take a month at minimum. Or did he have a different strategy? Was he actually just waiting for the opportunity to unleash an advanced spell he'd already prepared?

He's right there. I might as well go ask.

That seemed the simplest answer. To do that, she would need to give Soul Howl some breathing room. Mira slowly stepped onto the battlefield—the Valkyries in tow—opened four summoning circles, and chanted.

[Evocation: Imperial Dragon Eizenfald]

Her mana flowed in and activated the spell, causing the magic circles to spread. Then, a dragon with silver scales emerged from the light.

“We've got a big foe on our hands. I trust you can handle it, my son?”

“Yes, Mother!”

Through a sort of mother-son telepathy, Eizenfald immediately understood the situation, despite just being summoned. He ignored the golems and skeletons, instead charging straight at the Machina Guardian. Then, he unleashed his breath weapon as his first strike.

There was a scorching flash of light—one so bright, it was as if someone had cut out part of the sun—made of pure, destructive force. Eizenfald's dragon breath struck its mark perfectly. An earsplitting boom made everything else in the area inaudible for a moment. The light condensed, and the echoes faded away.

“So, this is really the limit of my magic...” Mira muttered in frustration.

Summons had a limit related to the defensive membrane that protected all who passed through the summoning circles. The membrane's strength was determined by the magic of Mira and her summoning target. When it was destroyed, the summon was forcibly dismissed in order to protect it from danger. However, by protecting the summon, the membrane also limited its powers.

As the caster's magic grew stronger, so, too, did the limit. Mira could summon most summons with nearly no restrictions, save for one exception: Eizenfald. As the incarnation of calamity, the Imperial Dragon's power was beyond reckoning. Even Mira could not draw out his full power.

"Now, Alfina, I have something to discuss with that man over there. How much time can you buy us?"

If Eizenfald could fight with all his power, he'd stand a chance against the Machina Guardian, all on his own. But there was nothing Mira could do about her own limits for the moment. Alfina would need to assist.

The Valkyrie shot a sharp gaze ahead. "Five minutes... No, with Lord Eizenfald's help, I believe we can stand strong for ten," she replied, determined.

That told her everything. The Machina Guardian she faced was a force to be reckoned with.

Though his power had been reduced, Eizenfald's breath attack had sent the Machina Guardian flying to the other side of the battlefield. However, it proved its durability. That awe-inspiring attack was far from enough to fell the titan.

The sight of that would make anyone think that, no matter how many forces they sent, they would never overcome the boss. But even as the machine righted itself, countless cannonballs rained down at once, and tens of golems closed in. They couldn't match Eizenfald's dragon breath, but it was an overwhelming attack, nonetheless.

Soul Howl wouldn't miss this chance, no matter how small. Unmoved by the sudden intrusion, he calmly activated his magic.

"Now!"

With that as their signal, Alfina and her sisters charged forth. They charged

onto the battlefield, which still smoldered from the last saturation fire, and fought in perfect formation against the Machina Guardian.

“I’m counting on you, friends,” Mira murmured and charged forth, running up the towering boulder ahead.

Afterword

FINALLY, VOLUME 10. I'm beyond happy that we've made it this far. Thank you so much for your support.

Thanks to everyone involved in this publication, especially the readers! And thanks for all the good food!

Now, let's look at the cover of this volume. I happened to be pretty demanding this time around. Just look at that thrilling scenery!

You see, I was actually a fan of fuzichoco before this series was published. I've always been fascinated by her illustrations. (Check them out on Pixiv, if you're interested!) One desire was born by having her as my illustrator: the sixth level of the Ancient Underground City. The whole setting was devised from simple desires: "I want fuzichoco to draw this," "I want to see this," and the like. Sometimes dreams do come true!

Actually, some Japanese text has wiggled its way into the illustrations. Maybe I'm sneaking in some hidden lore? ...Ahem, ahem.

Anyway, thank you, fuzichoco! You're the best! Now, what kind of cityscape should I have you draw next time? Heh heh heh heh heh...

As usual, this tenth volume is being released in Japan at the same time as a manga volume: specifically, Volume 4! Thanks to dicca*suemitsu's efforts, things are going beautifully!

As it is a manga, there are lots of things about the cities and more that can't be conveyed through text (due in part to my lacking skill as an author...) that you'll be able to see in the art. I'm always so excited to see that. And the way Mira moves too. Heh heh heh.

Make sure you check out the manga!

By the way, it turns out I'll need to find a new home by April. They say they're rebuilding the place I live now, due to some earthquake standards or something. This place is in a lovely location, with good rent, so it's a real shame. I've been living here for seventeen years too. It's sad to let it go.

As for finding a new home? Well, that's a can of worms in itself.

I've been going to the same grocery store for seventeen years, so my new home *needs* to be close enough to keep going there. And I'll have to consider rent costs, plus storage space for my ungodly amounts of manga...

I'll certainly have moved by the time Volume 11 comes out... Surely... I hope.

Where will I have moved to? Find out next volume! Let's meet again there!



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