

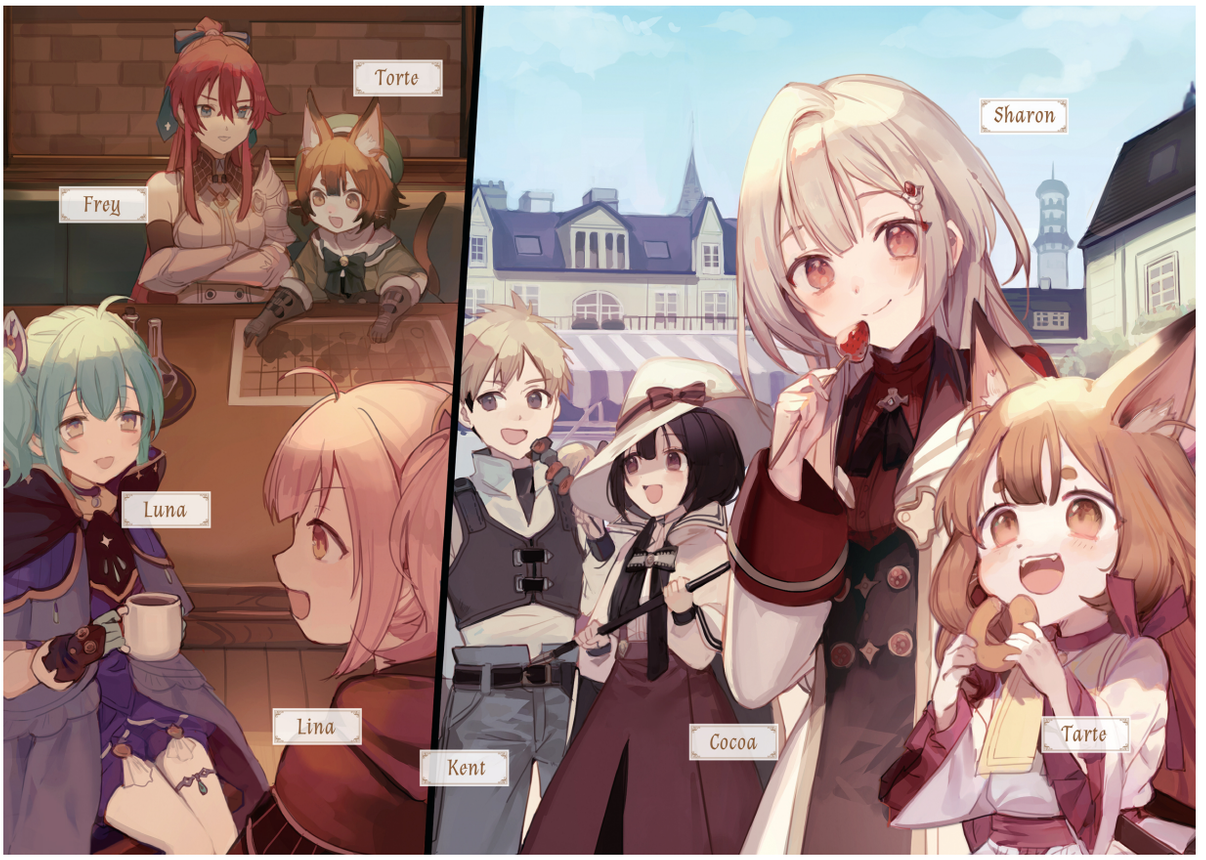
Vol. 2
The MMO Way to Train an Alchemist

From Villainess to Healer

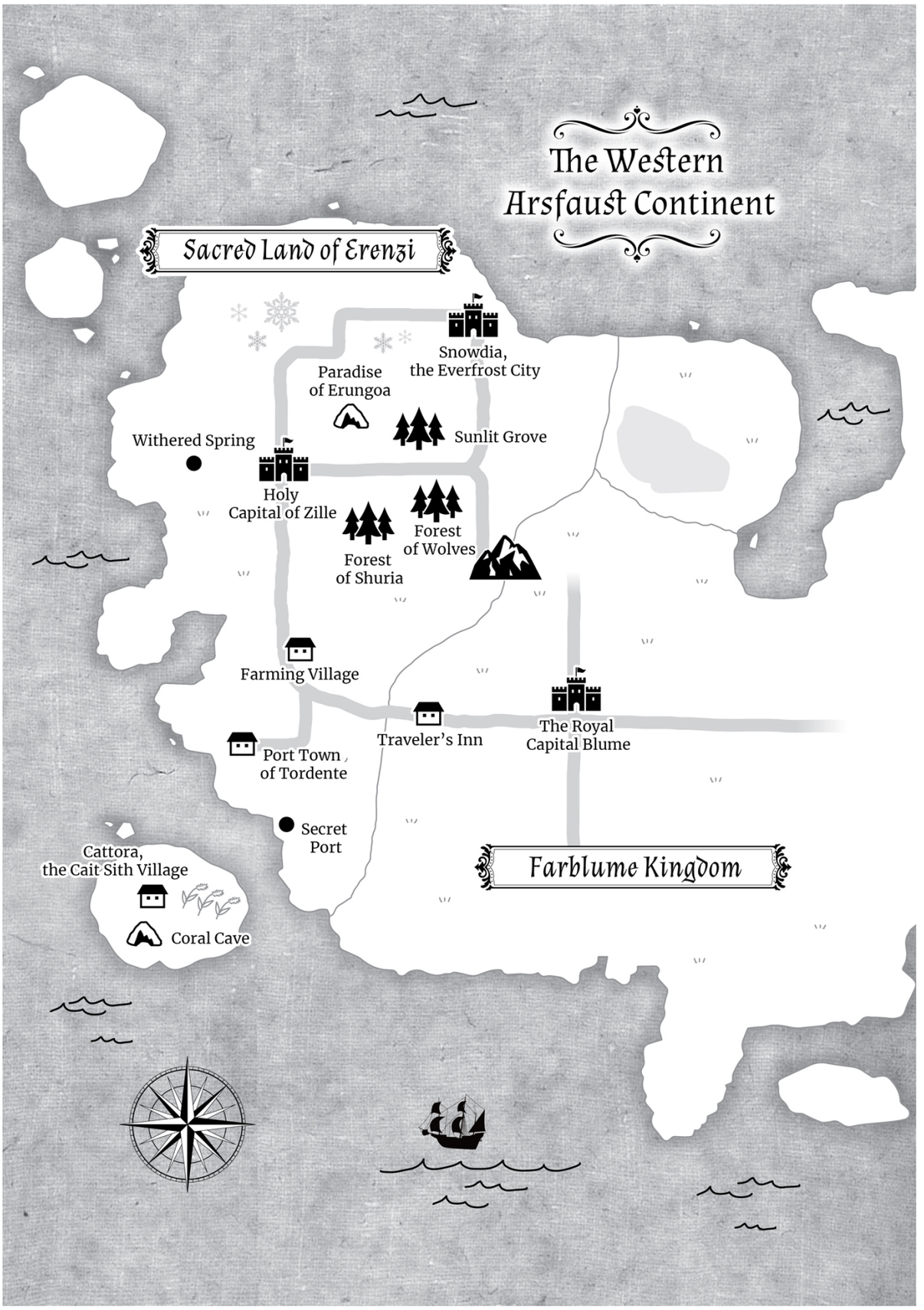
Author: Punichan
Illustrator: Yoh Hihara


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Torte
Frey
Luna
Lina
Kent
Cocoa
Sharon
Tarte


“Goddess Flaudia,
lend me your strength.
Goddess’s Sanctuary.”
Then, a gentle light
emanated from her.


The Western
Arsfaust Continent
Sacred Land of Erenzi
Snowdia,
the Everfrost City
Paradise
of Erungoa
Sunlit Grove
Withered Spring
Holy
Capital of Zille
Forest
of Wolves
Forest
of Shuria
Farming Village
Traveler's Inn
The Royal
Capital Blume
Port Town
of Tordente
Secret
Port
Cattora,
the Cait Sith Village
Coral Cave
Farblume Kingdom

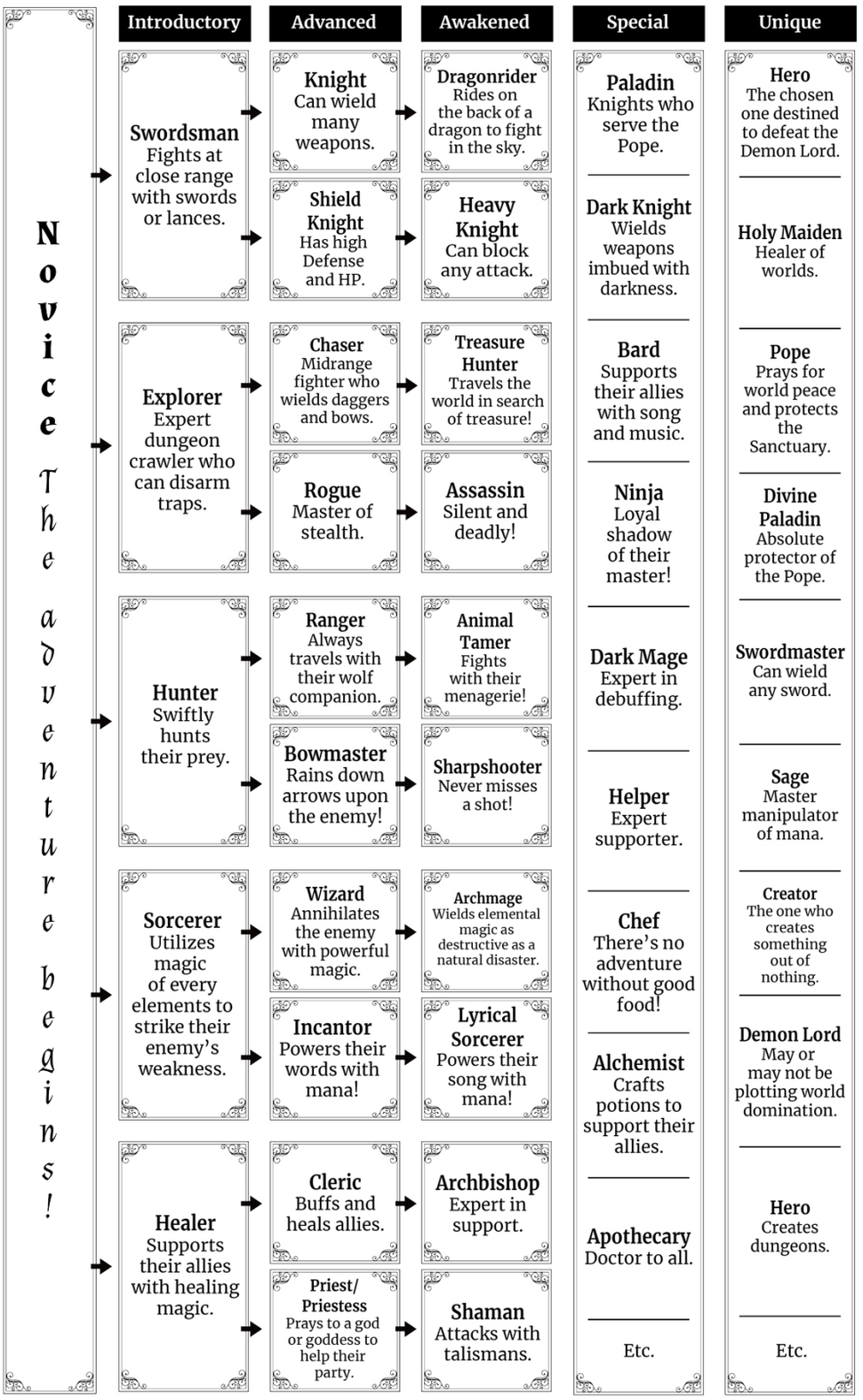

Novice The adventure begins!
Introductory
Advanced
Awakened
Special
Unique
Swordsman
Fights at close range with swords or lances.
Knight
Can wield many weapons.
Dragonrider
Rides on the back of a dragon to fight in the sky.
Shield Knight
Has high Defense and HP.
Heavy Knight
Can block any attack.
Explorer
Expert dungeon crawler who can disarm traps.
Chaser
Midrange fighter who wields daggers and bows.
Treasure Hunter
Travels the world in search of treasure!
Rogue
Master of stealth.
Assassin
Silent and deadly!
Hunter
Swiftly hunts their prey.
Ranger
Always travels with their wolf companion.
Animal Tamer
Fights with their menagerie!
Bowmaster
Rains down arrows upon the enemy!
Sharpshooter
Never misses a shot!
Sorcerer
Utilizes magic of every elements to strike their enemy's weakness.
Wizard
Annihilates the enemy with powerful magic.
Archmage
Wields elemental magic as destructive as a natural disaster.
Incantor
Powers their words with mana!
Lyrical Sorcerer
Powers their song with mana!
Healer
Supports their allies with healing magic.
Cleric
Buffs and heals allies.
Archbishop
Expert in support.
Priest/ Priestess
Prays to a god or goddess to help their party.
Shaman
Attacks with talismans.
Paladin
Knights who serve the Pope.
Dark Knight
Wields weapons imbued with darkness.
Bard
Supports their allies with song and music.
Ninja
Loyal shadow of their master!
Dark Mage
Expert in debuffing.
Helper
Expert supporter.
Chef
There's no adventure without good food!
Alchemist
Crafts potions to support their allies.
Apothecary
Doctor to all.
Etc.
Hero
The chosen one destined to defeat the Demon Lord.
Holy Maiden
Healer of worlds.
Pope
Prays for world peace and protects the Sanctuary.
Divine Paladin
Absolute protector of the Pope.
Swordmaster
Can wield any sword.
Sage
Master manipulator of mana.
Creator
The one who creates something out of nothing.
Demon Lord
May or may not be plotting world domination.
Hero
Creates dungeons.
Etc.

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Prologue

“What a puuurrfect day!” I felt good enough to prowl outside today, where the silky soft breeze almost melted me like butter. A kitty cat was melting on a wooden box left in the yard—I would have loved to take a catnap with it.

Wearing my favorite outfit Frey had gifted me, I was on my way to buy baking ingredients at the only item shop on the island. *If only I could bake like my sister...* My older sister was a Helper who supported her party by doing everything from setting up camp and cooking to managing their loot—she was my purride and joy!

The street grew busier as I made my way from my house at the end of the village to its center, and we all exchanged smiles and hellos. Purrty soon, I spotted the light-blue roof that marked the item shop and opened its door.

“Hello,” I purred.

“Hi, Tarte. Welcome.”

“Welcome.”

The brown-furred shopkeeper, Jose, and his white-furred wife, Marl, greeted me. They were a wonderful couple who always gave me extra sweets.

Marl trotted up to the counter to help me. “I’ve got a new book in...but it might be too advanced for you.”

“I can too read it!” I hissed. Even though I was only seven, I’d read plenty of books—that was all I *could* do since I was too sick to play outside. My room was piled high with books grandma had collected for me.

“Sorry,” Marl purred and handed me the book—not a storybook but a kind of handbook for adventurers. “Different from your mewsual books. It may not even be a good read.”

“It’s fascinating,” I said, flipping through the pages while my ears twitched with curiosity. “There are pages on the basic knowledge and etiquette of adventuring.” Going on an adventure was a dream of mine that would never come true. Still, I always relished the adventure stories my sister and her party mates told, and the ones in the books on my shelves.

When I’m cured, I’ll go on an adventure of my own, I told myself,

knowing that'd never happen. My sister and her party were scouring the world for a cure, but they hadn't found anything that kept my energy from draining, day after day...

But I can't stand here and sulk about it! Shaking the thought out of my head, I forced a smile. "I'll take the book!" I trilled. "And I'm looking for ingredients to bake some sweets."

"You got it. What sweets did you have in mind?" Marl asked. "We have some cattail sugar—a sprinkle of that would make any sweet meowch tastier."

My tail shot up. "That would be purrfect!"

Cattail sugar was a special sugar refined from the cattail plant. Its earthy sweetness and golden tint spruced up any treat. It was very rare because each cattail yielded very little sugar.

I'll save it for Torte and her party, I decided. The sugar was a purrfect addition to a cattail brew.

"Thank you so much—" Just as I turned to leave after paying, my strength suddenly left me, leaving me on my knees. Marl quickly caught me so I didn't fall any farther. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Don't be sorry," Marl said. "I'll walk you home right away."

"Thank you so much..." I said.

Marl left Jose in charge of the shop and took me home.

While she helped me into my bed, she asked, "Are Elza and Colton at work?"

I nodded, curling up into my bed.

"I'll let them know on my way back," Marl said. I didn't want to worry my purrents, but that would be for the best. "I'll store your food items so they won't go bad."

"Thanks," I trilled again. Marl and mom were good furiends, so she came to our house all the time. She put the ingredients away like it was her own kitchen.

After I lay down for a few minutes, she brought over a cup of cattail tea and an apple neatly cut into bite-sized pieces. "How are you feeling? You should eat if you've got an appetite."

"I think I do," I purred. "Thank you." The apple was purrfectly crisp and juicy, and it put a smile on my face.

"Purrfect!" Marl's lips curved into a grin too. "Isn't Torte due home purrty soon?"

"Purrhaps." My sister and her party regularly put their adventuring on pause to come see me—even when they didn't have new herbs or medicine to try on my illness, which they

often did. Though I felt bad for making them go out of their way, my excitement outweighed the guilt. “I wonder what adventures she’s been on this time,” I said.

“It’ll be exciting to hear her thrilling tales, won’t it?” Marl asked.

“Very much.” I promised myself I’d finish the adventurer’s guidebook by then so I could enjoy Torte’s stories more than ever.

Once Marl left, I decided to stay cozy in my bed while I started on the book.

Then, a delicious smell woke me up—I’d fallen asleep with the book in my hand. When I walked out of my room, mom was cooking dinner in the kitchen. “Look whose tail’s up. How are you feeling?” She walked up to me while she wiped her paws on her apron. She put a paw on my forehead, which felt nice and cool. “Hmm… You have a little fever. Let’s have supper so you can take your medicine and get some rest.”

“All right,” I said without a fight.

“Good girl.” Mom patted my head. “Don’t look so worried. Torte and her Hero’s party are hunting all over the world for a medicine to fix you right up! You just have to wait for them! There’s nothing to worry about.”

Some of my nervousness must have shown on my face. I shook my head to get rid of that feeling and gave my mom the best smile I could. Even if she didn’t have a cure for my illness, I couldn’t wait to see my sister.

A few days later, when my sister came to see me, a meowracle would happen.

The Cait Sith Island

As waves rhythmically rocked our boat, I couldn't take my eyes off the horizon shimmering with golden, sparkling sunshine. Not too long ago, sights and adventures like this had been nothing more than a daydream to me. If I had married Ignacia, my whole life would have been spent serving Farblume. It wasn't that I had anything against my country, but now the thought of living life like that was unbearable. Even the thought of my ex-fiancé couldn't sour my mood today, though.

I used to be the villainess in someone else's story. Just as the prince was about to break off his engagement with me, I'd regained the memories of my past life—the life of a Japanese woman obsessed with *Reas*, an MMO that took place in the world I now lived in. Happily exiled from Farblume, I was now living my adventuring life to the fullest. There was no way to overstate just how much I enjoyed my newfound freedom.

After leaving Farblume, I'd switched jobs from Dark Mage to Healer in the neighboring Sacred Land of Erenzi. There, I'd met Frey, the Hero, and her party mates: Luna, Lina, and Torte. After I guided them through the Paradise of Erungoa, they'd invited me to tag along for one more adventure.

My heart seemed to beat faster and faster as the boat continued to glide toward that shimmering horizon. *Why?* someone might have asked, and I would have shouted my answer to the open sea: We were on our way to Cattora, the island of the Cait Sith!

I can't wait to see the Cait Sith village! Our objective as a party was to cure Torte's sister using the rare Paradise Dew we'd harvested from the Paradise of Erungoa.

I didn't even want to think about how ridiculously wide my grin must have been, but there was nothing I could do but continue to count the minutes until we reached the island—*that island right there!*

Leaning over the bow of the ship, I pointed ahead. "Look! An island! Is that your home, Torte?!"

"Yep! The Cait Sith island is purright ahead!"

Overcome with excitement, I nearly toppled over the railing. I

flailed to regain my balance, and if not for Frey's quick rescue, I would have gone overboard. *My Hero!*

"Calm down, Sharon… I didn't realize you were looking forward to this so much."

"Looking forward to it is an understatement… Seeing the Cait Sith village is pretty much a lifelong dream of mine!" I exclaimed.

"A-All right," Frey said. She sounded a little taken aback, but I couldn't contain my longing for all the wonderful sights and adventures this world had to offer.

I sat back up and took in the island fast approaching—it wasn't too big, and it had some distinctive curves. *Is it shaped like a cat's paw?* If only I could see it from a bird's-eye view. Alas, I had no means of flight yet. Once I raised my level, there should be a few options available to me… Maybe becoming the Holy Maiden would allow me to fly unassisted.

"We're about to dock," Lina said, watching the waves. "Let me give you the rundown, Sharon, since it's your first time. The boat's going to dock at a field a short distance from the actual village. There are some monsters there, but none of them are threatening."

"Got it!" We'd have to traverse the field before entering the village. That much wasn't surprising.

"We never struggle to go through it, and your backup will make it all the easier," said Luna.

I tightened my fist in response. "I won't let you down."

"I'm counting on it." Luna smiled with a sparkle in her eye. Apparently, she was a fan of my style of supporting—probably because my Strengthen Skill directly helped out the back line. As a Wizard, Luna didn't have as much stamina as the rest of the party.

Pretty soon, our boat at last landed at the Cait Sith island. We'd sailed up to the dock—which was a generous description for the rickety string of logs tied together, many of which were clearly rotten. *It's not going to break on us, is it?*

With a fresh gust of wind, the world turned golden, the color nearly swallowing me whole. "Wow!" I blurted, almost forgetting to breathe. The field we were about to cross was a field full of cattails! Endless rows of the fluffy grass carpeted the ground, their golden ears glimmering as the breeze shook them.

"My thoughts exactly!" Frey proudly said. "This beautiful field never loses its luster!"

“I bet…!” I said, my voice shaking from the grandeur of the view. I almost wanted to weave a lei of cattails and wear it around my neck to commemorate this moment.

“I’m glad you like what you see, Sharon,” Torte purred. “Now I’m going to tie up the boat—don’t move a whisker.”

“You got it!” I called back, eyes still glued to the field of gold.

As soon as Torte secured the ropes, I jumped off the boat and onto the ground. The soil was softer than I’d expected, but I liked to think no one else noticed that I nearly lost my balance and ate a face full of cattail. The grass grew so thickly that I couldn’t see much of the ground below. Now this was what I’d call “the great outdoors.”

“My heart won’t stop pounding…” I said, tempted to start counting prime numbers to calm myself down.

“It’s not *that* spectacular.” Torte trilled a chuckle from atop the boat.

This was serious business to me, though. I wasn’t going to leave a single rock on this whole island unturned. A Transportation Gate in the village would let me come back here anytime—I’d have to look for that. There was so much to do!

“Sharon, can you take another step already? You’re holding up the line,” Frey said, and the rest of the party pushed past me to disembark, cutting short my relishing of this momentous occasion.

Right. There are monsters here, I realized. Even though I was only level 17, I’d learned enough supporting Skills to serve as an effective Healer for their party. The only downside of me tagging along with them was that they were too many levels above me—I wouldn’t get EXP from any of their kills.

Overview:

```
Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 17
Job: Healer (Expert in healing magic. Supports
allies with buffs and barriers.)
```

Titles:

```
Fiancée No More: +5% Resistance to attacks from
Male enemies.
Flaudia’s Blessing: Healing Skills are 10% more
```

effective. / Reduce mana cost of healing Skills by 50%.

Skills:
Blessed Light: Turns clean water into Holy Water. / Item Required: Potion Bottle
Mana Rations (Level 1): Recovers mana every 30 seconds.
Heal (Level 3): Heals the target.
Strengthen (Level 5): Buffs physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).
Wide Heal (Level 1): Heals all targets within a 7-meter radius of the user.
Goddess’s Smite: Doubles the damage of the next attack used.
Regeneration (Level 2): Recovers HP every 10 seconds.
Goddess’s Protection (Level 3): Creates a barrier around the target.

Equipment:
Head: Hairpin of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Physical Defense / +3% Resistance to all elements)
Body: Robe of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Magical Defense)
Right Hand: Staff of Bloom (+3% Healing / +10% Holy element)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: —
Feet: Boots of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Physical Defense)
Bonus: Compassion Set 3/3 (+15% Healing / +5% Physical Defense / +5% Magical Defense / −10% Mana cost for Skills)

“Strengthen to start with… And Goddess’s Protection on you, Lina, since you’re scouting ahead. I’ll add on what we need as

monsters show up," I announced.

"Thank you."

"Thank you so meowch."

I returned the party's thanks with a smile and held my staff tight. My knowledge of everything Cait Sith was limited to what I'd encountered during one special event when I'd played *Reas*. It was very much possible for me to encounter a monster I'd never seen before. The thought kind of terrified me, but Luna had said that the monsters here weren't too much of a threat. All I'd have to do was stay calm and use the appropriate Skills. Odds were, I wouldn't even need to improvise any clever use of my Skills.

Just as I took a deep breath, Lina called from the head of our formation. "We're going into combat."

Rustling came from the grass farther ahead, drawing my attention to it. Soon, a cat monster jumped out of the cattails.

O! M! G! So kawaii! This monster was stupid cute. I blew out a breath, lest I get swept up in the cuteness overload. Unlike the half-human-looking Cait Sith, this monster looked just like a house cat, except it walked on two booted paws. A black cloak was slung over its shoulder, pinned by a brooch. The monster in pretty, gray fur also carried a rapier and round shield.

I've never seen this monster before, I realized. Taking out a Memory of Stardust, I held it up toward the cat monster. This one-use item let me read the target's level and job. I'd most often used it on other players in *Reas*, but using it on a monster would give me its name, element, and level.

```
Cat Swordsman
Element: Neutral
Level: 25
A close-range fighter that takes advantage of its
agility.
```

While I was a lower level than the Cat Swordsman, Frey and her party would be the ones taking it on directly. From the way they showed no concern about the monsters of this field, I expected them to handle this with no problem.

Just because it was our first battle off the boat, I cast Strengthen and Regeneration on Frey and Lina. Regeneration would heal them every ten seconds, so they should be able to go

without my support for a while. “Now that I have the time… Strengthen!” I cast Strengthen on Luna, Torte, and myself—this would let us move around a lot more easily during the battle.

I returned my gaze to the cat to find it clashing swords with Frey. Listening to the sound of metal on metal, I made sure to keep an eye on our surroundings. It fell to the supporter to be aware of any other potential threats.

No sign of other monsters, so far, I noted with relief. Then, Luna launched an Icicle Arrow that froze the Cat Swordsman’s hind paws in place, giving Lina the opening to finish the monster off with her dagger. Leave it to the Hero’s party to take care of the battle without breaking a sweat…even if I felt a little sorry for the adorable cat monster that turned into a burst of light and left behind a Broken Blade—a common item dropped by monsters that wielded swords, with no particular use but to be sold off for pocket change. Torte plucked this one off the ground and stowed it in her bag.

“That went smoothly… Expect a few more battles before we reach the village. Let’s keep our guard up,” Frey remarked, and we all showed our agreement. “Lina?”

“You got it!” Lina ran ahead of us to scope out what lay ahead. “Three Swordsmen and two Archers!”

“Bowmen… We should take those out first,” Frey said.

“Yep. Luna and I can take one each. Cover us, Frey,” Lina said.

“Of course,” Frey answered.

Through the gaps in the cattails, I could spot three Cat Swordsmen and two Cat Archers. Like Frey had said, it was best practice to take out long-range enemies first.

“Let me put a Skill on you,” I said. “A Goddess’s Smite for Luna…and a Goddess’s Smite for Lina.”

“Thanks!” the twins said in unison.

“That’s the Skill that boosts your attack through the roof!” Frey exclaimed, almost sounding jealous of Lina and Luna. “You’ll one-shot the Archers with no problem.”

Goddess’s Smite doubled the damage of the target’s next attack and was best used before unleashing a powerful Skill or when you wanted to OHKO a monster.

“I feel so much power!” Lina said. “Stormblade Pirouette!”

“Let’s do this,” Luna added. “Coldest Blizzard!”

“You don’t have to go that hard!” I shouted as I watched the twins unleash their attacks.

Lina twirled at high speeds with her pair of daggers to create an attack devastating in both damage and area of effect, in contrast to its beautiful, dance-like form. Coldest Blizzard was a Skill you could learn once you'd leveled up Icicle Arrow to level 5—the AoE magic spell affected about a ten-meter area in the chosen direction, with a slight chance of added status effects like Frostbite.

It was overkill in the highest degree, but they got the job done. It wasn't like we expected stronger monsters between here and the village, which had to be pretty close by now. Lina's and Luna's attacks had taken out the Cat Swordsmen too—was I really surprised?

"But you should keep an eye on your Mana reserves... Mana Rations." I cast my Skill on the twins.

"What?" the whole party blurted, including a "Meow?" from Torte.

"Sharon..." Frey said, tentative. "I don't think I've seen you use that Skill. Mana Rations, was it?"

"I don't think I've used it yet. It recovers your Mana every thirty seconds. Not by much, because my Skill level is still too low... It's better than nothing, though," I said.

"No, this is incredible. It's a huge help," Frey insisted.

"Thank you." I smiled. Compliments like that really made being a supporter worth it. Because I had game knowledge of most combat skills from each common job, I could roughly calculate how much HP and mana everyone in the party was working with. With no HP or mana bars, I couldn't be as exact as I'd been when I was playing the game in VR, but I could work out the gist from memory. Of course, it made it easier that we weren't fighting monsters that demanded our entire attention.

After we walked for a little bit postbattle, the village came into sight.

"Is that...?!" I asked.

"That's Cattora," Torte purred. "The Cait Sith village!"

No joke, I'd *dreamed* of this moment! I was so excited, I could barely keep from sprinting toward it. The village was encircled by a fence with a Cait Sith guarding the entrance. Paw print and fish designs dotted the round-roofed architecture of the village, and the buildings stood a little shorter than human houses. Even from here, it looked like a village built for cats. And what did that

mean? That this village was extremely kawaii!

“Stranger!” the guard yowled. Apparently, the Cait Sith didn’t find humans very kawaii at all.

“We were in such a hurry that I didn’t think this through,” Torte sighed.

What should I do? The guard was a little taller than Torte, at about ninety centimeters. He had flowy gray fur that reminded me of a Russian Blue. Now, the guard was pointing his spear at me like he was ready to attack if I gave a wrong answer.

Before the guard could make a move, though, Torte put herself between him and me. “Wait! This is Sharon—I asked her to come with me!”

“Torte, it’s you! I thought you went to look for an herb to cure Tarte,” the guard said.

“Sharon helped me find it! She knows a lot about herbs—I didn’t know if we could make the herb into meowdicine without her…”

Frey, Luna, and Lina were backing up her claim. Honestly, I could take credit for pointing out the herb they needed, but I couldn’t claim that I really knew my way around herbs.

“She knows a lot about herbs…? That would be a great help,” the guard trilled, considering Torte’s claim.

When I’d given them the tip about the herb, I hadn’t even thought I was sharing any special information. Even now, I couldn’t guarantee that the herb would work on Torte’s sister.

The guard stared me up and down, as if to assess me—this would all be worth it to get into the village. He let out a troubled rumble. “But the villagers won’t like to see another human. It took them a long time to get used to Frey and the others.”

Torte matched his concerned rumble with a trill of her own. They were both clearly racking their brains to find me a way into the village. Their kindness nearly brought tears to my eyes.

“Then… What if I did this?” I asked, slipping on my old Cat Cape.

Torte and the guard meowed in awe, staring at the hood of my cape like they’d found a long-lost treasure. “Those cat ears should do!” the guard said.

“Wait, really?” *It’s that easy?* I had to ask—even though the Cat Cape was my idea, this was making me concerned for the security of the Cait Sith village. What was stopping someone with nefarious intentions from slipping into the village using a Cat

Cape? Maybe they'd been burned by humans before, and that was why they didn't like humans... There was no sense thinking about that now.

By whatever means, I'd made it into Cattora. The Cait Sith village, as I should have expected, was filled with Cait Sith—and house cats that prowled the streets here and there. The whole village seemed so cozy.



We went straight to Torte's home—a single-story house with a front door I'd have to stoop to walk through. Sightseeing could wait until we'd helped Torte's sister. The ceiling looked high enough for me to stand straight once I was inside, though. Here at the edge of the village, away from the main street, we could hear the occasional lapping of waves. Combined with the clean air of the island, it seemed like a retreat perfectly suited to a convalescent girl.

The cute little house had a blue roof and fish-shaped windows, as well as a cozy wooden door with a cat-shaped doorbell attached. Colorful flowers and cattails filled the yard encircled by a low ivory fence and flanked by a bench.

Torte's home is so adorable! If anything, her house only served to amplify my excitement, which was already reaching critical mass. I couldn't stand still, wondering if this village offered a quest of its own. *But first, we need to deliver the herbs.* I took deep breaths and managed to steady my heart.

"Come on in." Torte opened the door for us, and a smaller Cait Sith came running out.

"Sissy! Welcome back!" The girl jumped into Torte's arms.

"Tarte! I missed you," Torte purred back.

I searched for the perfect word to describe Torte's mini-me and had to resort to the ol' reliable—kawaii!

Tarte, Torte's cute-as-a-doll sister, was about fifty centimeters tall. She had light-brown eyes and curly hair of the same color, which was fastened with a hair clip on the right side of her face, forming a long ponytail that hung to her waist. The tips of her ears and tail were colored darker, like Torte's. Her clothes were of very high quality—a suite of excellent items. She wore a Mademoiselle Dress with a pearly-white top that flowed into a knee-length beige skirt, accented with a dusty red; white Mademoiselle Socks on her feet; and a Father's Locket on her neck. This three-piece set had a bonus that greatly bolstered HP and boosted both Defense and Natural Recovery—a fantastic set for solo hunters. Tarte even wore a Hexagram Ward in her hair, which added a little more to her Defense.

From how this world compares to Reas*, those have to be pretty rare,* I thought. My eyes were glued to Tarte's outfit. Even in *Reas*, they'd been decently difficult to acquire. "The Mademoiselle Dress set may be perfect for her," I muttered. "The HP buff could help with her illness."

“You know what those are?” Frey asked.

“What?”

“I came across those by chance, so I brought them to her!” Frey said with a grin. “Just in case it helped.”

I nodded. Frey, the Hero, could certainly get her hands on those items. “So nice of you, Frey. I’m sure they help a lot when the symptoms are aggressive.”

“It’s great to hear an expert say so, Sharon!” Frey beamed, even though I only knew the effects of her equipment, not whether said effects would help cure Tarte. Even if it was just a placebo, I liked to think that they helped in some way in this fantasy world.

At this point, Tarte took notice of us and quickly wiggled out of her sister’s arms. “Welcome!” the little Cait Sith greeted us.

“Long time no see, Tarte,” Frey said.

“You look well today. How do you feel?” Luna asked.

“We brought you herbs!” Lina announced.

The three petted Tarte’s head as they greeted her, looking relieved at how energetic she seemed. Today must have been one of her good days.

Tarte spotted me and came over. “Nice to meet you. I’m Tarte, Torte’s sister.”

“How very proper of you,” I said. “I’m Sharon. The pleasure is all mine.”

“Yay!” Tarte happily flashed her teeth.

Her adorableness drove me to make a silent vow—to vanquish this vile illness if it was the last thing I did!

Mana Eater

The front door of Torte's house opened directly on to the living room, which was decorated with tastefully cute furniture like the small table by the door and the landscape paintings on the wall. The wall to the left was lined with three doors that must have led to the bedrooms, and the far wall contained two more doors. A kitchen with an island occupied the right side of the room. A couch and coffee table sat closer to the door, with another couch and rug by the fireplace at the other end of the room. This would be a very comfortable space to stay in during the cold of winter.

Tarte offered us seats on the nearer couch, which we took. "What a purrfect day! I've felt great all morning, and you came home to see me!" Smiling ear to ear, she brought out tea and snacks to us.

The yellowish tea was very flavorful, with a hint of sweetness. It was strange, though; I hadn't drunk anything like it in this world or in Japan. *What kind of tea is this?* I wondered. *If it's a specialty of the Cait Sith village, I'd love to take some home.* I let out an appreciative moan as I took a bite of the delicious dango served with the tea.

After taking a swig of the tea herself, Frey grinned wide in satisfaction. "You can't beat Tarte's tea! This is the only place in the world that brews cattail—I always look forward to it."

"Cattail tea?!" I asked in a raised voice. *The cattail* plant*, right?! The fluffy ones we saw a ton of on the way here?!*

"Yes. The Cait Sith have passed down their process of brewing cattails for generations," Frey answered. "Delicious, isn't it?"

"So delicious. I never even considered making tea out of cattail." I hadn't bothered reaching for them when we crossed the field, but now I was tempted to harvest a handful and keep it in Storage.

Tarte's smile broke as a cough escaped her mouth—then, she fell into a coughing fit that quickly grew more violent.

"Tarte!" Torte rushed over to her, followed by the rest of our party. My heart sank to see Tarte's face practically turn green.

This looks serious!

“I’ll go and fetch the doctor!” Torte announced, darting out of the house.

Frey scooped Tarte up in her arms and hurried to the room adjacent to the front door—that must have been Tarte’s room. I followed her in to see Frey lay Tarte down on the bed and then let out a quiet breath.

Healing magic only heals injuries, not illnesses, I had to remind myself. Even if I was powerless to cure her, I would try anything that could help. “It might not make much of a difference, but I hope it helps you feel a little better. Heal. Regeneration.” This combo of onetime recovery and continuous healing had to be better than nothing.

“Sharon… Thank you so…meowch,” Tarte said and coughed again.

“You don’t have to talk, Tarte. The doctor should be here soon. It’s all right.” I smiled reassuringly. Even though her breathing seemed steadier, I didn’t have the medical expertise to decide whether she was completely stable.

“Do you have a fever?” Luna asked, dipping a towel into a pail full of water, wringing it, and gently placing it on Tarte’s forehead. “You’re a little warm.”

Bring that doctor as quickly as you can, Torte! Time seemed to tick by in agonizing slow motion—what if Tarte’s symptoms started becoming much worse?

At long last, I heard rushing footsteps and the chime of the bell above the front door. Torte had brought with her an elderly Cait Sith with black-and-white fur and blue eyes. He was wearing a lab coat and carrying a briefcase that must have contained his tools.

“Tarte, are you okay?!” Torte asked.

“Yes, Torte.” Tarte smiled weakly. “I’m…all…right.”

“Let me take a look,” the doctor said, kneeling at Tarte’s bedside. He took her temperature and examined her eyes and mouth. “She does have a fever. I’ll prescribe some herbs to help with that.” The doctor opened his bag stuffed full of medicine and herbs. Perhaps he was an Apothecary—the perfect job for a doctor.

Once she drank the fever reducer brewed from the doctor’s herbs, Tarte’s breathing definitely eased, and with it, so did the tension in the room. *Thank goodness.*

As soon as I sighed in relief, Torte turned to the doctor.

“Doctor! We brought back herbs that could cure her—we need you to make meowdicine out of it!”

“You did…?! At long last! What a relief. Tarte always puts a brave face on, but I’m sure she wants to run without worry and play with her friends outside… Finally, she’ll be able to,” the doctor said, crying tears of joy for his little patient.

“Here it is!” Torte proudly presented her stock of Paradise Dew.

The doctor took one look at the item and threw his hands up. “I am nowhere skilled enough to handle that!”

Oh no. I had to put my head down and massage my forehead. Clearly, the doctor was too low-level. He must have used Appraise Herb—a Skill that read the name and effects of any herb, as well as the difficulty of crafting with it. His shortage of Skill levels was the immediate issue, if I had to guess. Raising one’s level was required to learn new Skills, but those with jobs that weren’t combat oriented had a tough time raising their level. It was a terrible cycle that made the lives of noncombatants even more difficult in real life than they had been in the game.

What can I do?

“If you can’t make meowdicine with it… I don’t know what to do,” Torte muttered, sending a new wave of tension rippling through the room.

Luna seemed to be contemplating our options for crafting a potion, while Lina was pacing, muttering to herself that maybe we should go find a high-level Apothecary in the Holy Capital.

Frey scratched her head and turned to me. “Any ideas, Sharon?”

I put a finger to my lips and considered. *What* is *Tarte’s illness, anyway?* It’d be difficult to find a solution without even knowing what was ailing her.

“What’s her diagnosis?” I asked the brow-furrowing doctor.

“I don’t have a precise diagnosis. The only thing we know is that it rapidly drains her strength every day. She’s usually energetic in the morning, but the symptoms worsen after sundown. Potions and healing magic can mitigate the symptoms somewhat, but they’re only temporary,” the doctor said.

“All right…” So Heal was effective, if only a little. That made me feel a bit better as I scoured my game knowledge for a solution. A few of the quests I’d completed had dealt with illnesses—

maybe one of them had the same symptoms as Tarte's. I also tried to recall any conversation I'd had with an NPC that mentioned sickness. *Come on, brain, work harder! Heal mitigates its symptoms. She's drunk HP potions...* Light bulb! "Have you tried giving her a Mana Potion?" I asked the doctor.

"Mana Potion? No, we've never tried that," he said.

So they hadn't tried to recover her mana. I took a vial of Star Mana Potion from my Bag. "Maybe her strength is being drained because her body is trying to compensate for the lack of mana. Can I try giving this to her?" I asked.

"Lack of mana? Y-Yes, let's try that," the doctor confirmed. He went to Tarte, who looked to be on the verge of falling asleep, and helped her sit up in the bed. "Tarte?" he asked gently. "Try drinking this purrtion."

"Huh...? Yes, doctor," Tarte mewed quietly and took the potion. To my relief, the potion went down smoothly.

I suspected Tarte was inflicted with a status condition called Mana Eater—a terrifying condition I'd rarely seen in *Reas* that rapidly drained your mana. The only way to cure it was to use a rare item that lifted all of the person's status conditions. Most of the time, it was easier to let your character die and respawn. But I wasn't just playing a video game anymore. Suggesting that she cure a status condition by dying wasn't really an option.

After downing the potion, Tarte blinked a few times, opening and closing her fists to see how her body moved now. "Me-Me-Meow! It's like a weight has been lifted!" From how quickly she seemed to regain her strength, her symptoms were definitely caused by mana deficiency.

"Tarte! I'm so happy!" Torte purred, clinging to her sister.

"I never would have thought to heal her mana...!" Frey said.

"I'm so glad!" the twins chimed in. Tears of joy welled in everyone's eyes.

They were all as ecstatic as if Tarte's condition had been cured, but this was mere first aid—her mana had to be draining as we spoke. Now that we'd confirmed the cause of her symptoms, I cast Mana Rations on her. Its effect wouldn't last long, but it should mitigate her symptoms a little. I gave Tarte a brief explanation of the spell, saying that it would help heal her mana a little faster.

"Thank you so meowch, Sharon," Tarte said.

"You're very welcome. But it's a little soon to celebrate," I

warned. Continuously taking Mana Potions wasn't feasible—she didn't have enough money or a reliable means of restocking the potions for the rest of her life. Finally, I was able to answer Frey's question. I did have a few ideas. "Realistically, there are two options for curing Tarte."

"Really?!" Frey and Torte said together. The doctor was looking at me with anticipation too. The pressure was on—there was no guarantee either cure would work.

"One, we can help you raise your level," I said to the doctor. "If the level of your Concoct Skill increases, you may be able to concoct a medicine with Paradise Dew. Or, like Lina said, we can try and find a doctor with a higher level." Unfortunately, those were the only ideas I had. Procuring the rare potion outright was technically on the table, but I doubted we could just buy it in the market.

Considering how elderly the Cait Sith doctor was, I doubted he'd be able to grind levels by facing off against monsters. Everyone else apparently shared my sentiment, because they suddenly averted their eyes from the doctor. Solution number one wasn't going to be realistic.

"Hmm..." I grunted. "Let's see if we can find another Apothecary in the village! Luckily, I have some Memories of Stardust." Each one-use item would allow us to learn the job of a single target who was under level 50. I'd stocked up on a decent amount of the convenient item.

Frey and the others immediately agreed. "That's better than standing around," Frey said. "Let's comb the village! But you stay with your sister, Torte. Use as many of our communal Mana Potions as you need!"

"Thank you so meowch!"

***

We split up into pairs—Frey and I went one way, and the twins another—to search for another Apothecary. *I should have bought more Memories of Stardust!* I cursed myself.

Probing eyes followed us through the streets of the village, but their accusing glares softened as they noticed Frey, someone they were familiar with.

Our first stop was the village's item shop. It was a building with a sky blue roof near the center of Cattora, featuring a

wooden sign with a drawing of a potion bottle and dagger.

This shop seemed to cater to almost every need of the village by carrying all sorts of goods, from spices to adventuring equipment. Shelves lined every wall of the shop, organized by usage: One shelf held potions and items for hunting, another held food and spices, and so on. Brushes of all shapes and sizes took up a good portion of one shelf. Of course, the Cait Sith couldn't go without brushing their fur.

A Cait Sith item shop! So cool! While I took in the shop's interior with great interest, Frey lifted her hand in a casual greeting to the shopkeeper, a middle-aged male Cait Sith with a thin towel twisted around his head and a strand of cattail in his mouth.

"It's been too long, Jose."

"Frey. Long time no see," the shopkeeper purred.

"We're looking for an Apothecary skilled in Concoct. Any chance you're an Apothecary?" Frey asked.

She just...asked him outright! I realized, feeling a blush of shame that I'd planned to steal that information with an item. Just then, a child ran past the shop window, too young to even know his own job. *Definitely not an Apothecary.*

"The doctor's Concoct Skill isn't enough? I'm worried about poor Tarte. She came to our shop earlier. I wish I could help, but I'm a Merchant," Jose said.

"Thanks for thinking about her," Frey said. "Do you know of any Apothecaries in the village?"

"Hmm. The only one I know is the doctor," Jose said.

"Ooh!" I shot my hand up in the air. Something had totally slipped my mind. "An Apothecary would be great, but they could also be an Alchemist. An adequate Formulation Skill can craft a potion that should be effective."

"You're trying to help Tarte too... You put my fur up at first. Sorry for doubting your intentions. But I don't know any Alchemeowst either," Jose said.

"That's all right. Thank you for your help," I said.

Bidding Jose goodbye, Frey and I went out into the village again. We walked the streets, Frey asking passersby what their jobs were while I used a Memory of Stardust on anyone who seemed too busy to stop and talk to Frey.

"If it isn't Layla!" Frey greeted someone. "We're looking for an Apothecary or an Alchemist. Do you mind if I ask what your job is?"

“When did you get here, Frey? How long has it been? Well, I’m a Hunter,” Layla purred.

“You’ve always been great at hunting!” Frey said.

Thankfully, everyone Frey had talked to was forthcoming about what their job was. Of course, Frey’s heroic charisma and friendliness had to have helped. We’d tried Cait Sith after Cait Sith, but none of them fit the bill, maybe because they rarely left the island, which gave them no opportunity to switch jobs.

In *Reas*, your default job when you made your character (or at your birth, in this world) was Novice. Then, you could take up a basic job like Healer or a special job like Apothecary. There were also unique jobs, like Holy Maiden, the one I was working toward. In this world, unlike in the game, people believed that their own actions influenced what job they took.

Frey and I stood near the entrance to the village and let out dejected sighs. Frey looked particularly downtrodden, like her spirit was about to slip out of her mouth and plop onto the mud.

“Well… We should go back,” she said.

“Yeah,” I agreed. And so, we made our way back to Torte’s house.

“We’re back,” I announced as we opened the door.

As soon as we did, Torte came running. “Welcome back! How did it go?”

Luna and Lina stood behind her, disappointment clouding their faces—they hadn’t been successful either. Frey quietly shook her head, and Torte’s ears drooped.

“That’s all right,” Torte said, looking anything but.

“How is Tarte?” I asked.

“She’s better than usual because the puurtion helped her recover some mana. Still, she’s losing mana really fast… She’s lying down now to gain back as much mana as possible,” Torte said.

“Gotcha,” I said. Tarte was so young that her capacity for mana had to be pretty low. Your job greatly affected your mana capacity, but everyone’s maximum mana increased with each level they gained. Tarte also had to be at a low level, making her mana drain faster than others’. The easiest remedy for her condition at the moment was to recover as much mana as possible, and sleep was the best way to do so naturally.

“It’s already late,” Torte said. “We should eat and take a catnap.”

Dinner was spread on the table: steaming stew, plates of vibrant salad, fruit, and rolls. Torte must have cooked it for us while she took care of Tarte.

"I agree," Frey said. "Good ideas don't come from empty stomachs."

"Yes," Luna concurred.

We all took our seats at the dinner table.

Eating spoonfuls of stew, I considered our next move. It would have been so easy if I could switch jobs to be an Apothecary or Alchemist, but I'd have to go to Arcadia to become an Apothecary or to the Laureldite Republic—which was on the other side of Farblume—to become an Alchemist. Both locations were too far away, considering how urgently Tarte needed a cure. I would also have to reveal the job-switching mechanic to Frey and the others... As a last resort, I might have to do just that and travel to Arcadia or Laureldite.

"Sharon!" someone called loudly.

"What?" I snapped out of my thoughts and realized that everyone else had cleaned their plate. "Oh, sorry. I'll finish this up."

"Take your time. We were just worried because you looked troubled," Torte said.

"Oh... I was just lost in my thoughts. I'm okay." I smiled, quickly dipping my roll in the stew and taking a bite. As usual, Torte's cooking was phenomenal.

"There's no need to rush," Frey chuckled, then turned to the rest of her party. "I've made a decision. We'll return to Zille tomorrow. There have to be Apothecaries and Alchemists in the city. We'll find someone who has the adequate Skill."

"Thank you so meowch, Frey."

"Tarte's like a sister to us too," Frey said. "It'll be all right. Sharon knew about her condition. There is a cure, and we *will* save her!" Frey promised, tightening her fist in determination.

Then, I heard someone behind me. I turned to find Tarte, who looked not entirely miserable but definitely worse for wear. Quietly, I cast another round of Mana Rations. Two Cait Sith stood behind her—probably her parents. I rose from my seat and walked up to her.

"Tarte! You should still be napping," Torte said.

"I'm feeling much better now that my mana's recovered, so I wanted to eat dinner with you." Tarte flashed a smile, rubbing

her belly. A timely growl of her stomach punctuated her adorable request.

"Just a minute!" Torte scrambled to the kitchen as Luna and Lina moved to the couch to open up seats at the table.

Once I'd helped Tarte sit at the table, her—presumed—parents greeted us.

"Wonderful to see you, Frey. And you must be...Sharon. Torte's told us so meowch about you."

"I was told you helped ease Tarte's symptoms. Thank you so meowch. My name is Elza. I'm their mom."

"Where are my manners? I'm Colton. Their papa."

"Nice to meet you both. I am Sharon."

"Great to see you again," Frey said.

Elza had a sharp face with glowing sunset eyes and black fur. She wore a white apron and cap that gave the impression of a fierce and protective mother. Colton had gentle mahogany eyes and light-brown fur. He was definitely the more laid-back of the couple and reminded me more of Tarte.

"It's been a long while since I've seen Tarte so energetic. Meow, was I surprised to see her up and about when I came home! Thank you so much, Sharon," Elza said. Apparently, both she and Colton worked in the village during the day, which explained why they hadn't been home when we first visited.

"I'm just glad she's regained some mana," I said.

"Everyone sit down purrlease!" Torte called. "Dinner's ready! Frey and Sharon, I've poured tea for you."

We obediently took our seats at the table.

"My sister's cooking is the best!" Tarte chowed down on her stew with a beaming smile. A healthy appetite was a good sign. Meanwhile, Frey and I enjoyed our cattail tea.

"Oh, your cooking's improved even more since last time, Torte." Elza let out appreciative moans as she ate her portion. I imagined Torte couldn't make it home all that often with how busy the Hero's party was.

"Tell me about your adventures, Torte," Elza purred.

"You brought back the legendary herb? That's ameowzing!" Colton added.

"Sharon guided us through a dungeon called the Paradise of Erungoa!" Frey began, beaming with pride. "Deep in the dungeon, we came to a gorgeous manor and herb garden! Sharon was the one who pointed out the herb!"

As Frey praised me, Elza and Colton turned their gazes of adoration my way. *No, no, no, no, no. Without Frey and the others, I would never have made it to Erungoa's manor!*

"Only because Frey and the girls fought their way through the dungeon," I protested. "They're so strong, and Torte made us delicious cheese fondue… She was such a great Helper. Really, we had a wonderful party," I said.

"You exaggerate!" Frey exclaimed—I'd made her blush.

"That's my job—to keep everyone rested and ready for battle! If you have any requests, you must tell me!" Torte said.

"You're a model Helper," I said.

"And you're a model Healer, Sharon," Torte purred. "Even today, you gave us a big helping paw."

Tarte snapped her head up and looked at us. "That's right. You were looking for a doctor for me."

"Yes. But we didn't find someone to help us in the village. I plan to find one and bring them to you tomorrow," Frey answered for us.

"Thank you so meowch." Tarte smiled. After a few moments, she added, "You wouldn't have to go to the trouble if grandma were here…"

"Grandma?" I asked. They had never mentioned their grandmother before.

"Our grandma was an Alchemeowst," Torte began. "No one uses it now, but we still have her lab in the basement."

"Oh, what a—" I froze on the cusp of dismissing the information as mere coincidence. If their grandmother had been an Alchemist, there was a chance that someone else in their family was one too. Not Torte, though—she was a Helper. *What's Tarte's job?* I wondered. After all the Cait Sith we'd checked, we'd never asked Tarte what her job was. With how stable she seemed now, she'd probably be able to craft one potion, if she had the right Skill. "Hey, Tarte?"

"Meow?"

"What is your job?" I asked.

"My job? I'm an Alchemeowst."

Formulation 101

After scouring the entire village for an Apothecary or an Alchemist, we'd been heartbroken to find none...only to discover that Tarte herself, the Cait Sith girl inflicted with Mana Eater, was an Alchemist. There had been Alchemists in abundance in the *Reas* game, but they were evidently rare in this world!

"*You're* an Alchemist, Tarte...?!" Frey asked.

"We always had the doctor around, and Tarte can't do much when she's sick, so I didn't think about that," Torte said.

Lina and Luna seemed to share our surprise. Tarte herself was really the last person I would have guessed was an Alchemist.

"Yes, I almost forgot," Elza and Colton said together.

"Um... Does that matter?" Tarte asked.

"We found out that Alchemists can also make the medicine you need. Except, it has to be a very well-practiced Alchemist..."

"I'm not good at purrtion making like grandma was..." Tarte said, her excitement dwindling.

Of course she wasn't. Tarte was only seven and dealing with her Mana Eater condition—it was completely natural for her to have barely considered her job at all. The solution would be simple if we could have Tarte learn the Skill she needed and craft the potion herself, but we couldn't drag this sick girl out to grind levels—simply surviving Mana Eater probably left her with no strength to fight.

She doesn't need to be that high-level, though, I considered. Her Formulation Skill could be low—she'd just need more of rarer ingredients. Back in the game, many Alchemists could be found trading for all sorts of items to craft their potions with.

"Have you learned any Skills yet, Tarte?" I asked.

"Well... I'm level 10 in Formulation and level 2 in Star Scales. I can use Deconstruct too," she said.

"What?" I couldn't believe my ears. *Calm down, Sharon,* I told myself, repeating the Skills Tarte had listed in my mind. Her Formulation was maxed out at 10, and she also had level 2 in Star Scales and had learned Deconstruct. Since Star Scales maxed out at five levels, that would be the Skill she'd gain at the next level-up. Without an Adventure Bracelet, she'd also have

four unassigned Skill Points, which put her at…level 18. *Her level's higher than mine?!* "What?" I blurted again. I could have parroted that for hours.

Fortunately, Frey provided an explanation. "Oh, I trained her. There were some times when she was feeling well enough. I thought making her stronger would help her fight the illness…"

"What a gym bro mentality…" I muttered—not that I was denying the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. And, since Tarte had gained mana with those levels, Frey had been kind of right all along!

"One time, I left the island for an errand," Torte reminisced. "I was pawsitively surprised to see Tarte fighting when I came back."

Luna and Lina chuckled.

"I told her to stop, but…" Luna said.

"Well, it never made her condition worse or anything," Lina added, and she went on to describe how difficult it had been to stop Frey when she was so determined to make Tarte healthier.

"Tarte seemed to enjoy it so meowch," Elza laughed. "So I left it up to Frey. What's the worst that could happen from a little combat training?"

"Meow! I thought my heart would stop like a mouse in a trap," Colton said.

In any case, thanks to Frey's training, we had an out. "Since you've maxed out your Formulation Skill, you can craft the potion in a workroom—as long as there's a set of tools. With the ingredients we found in the Paradise of Erungoa, we'll have enough for the potion," I told Tarte.

"You know all kinds of things, Sharon!" Frey said.

"Well… I've only heard about it secondhand," I said, laughing to deflect the attention. Then, I returned my thoughts to Tarte. As long as she had enough mana, she'd be able to use the Formulation Skill, but it'd still be an arduous task in her condition. *What does she think of all this?*

Tarte's adorable sepia eyes were sparkling. "I can make purrtions like grandma?" she asked, apparently itching to use her Alchemist Skills.

"I'm pretty sure you can. The higher your Formulation level, the better you are at crafting efficiently and successfully. You could make just about any potion," I said.

Tarte beamed. "I'm going to make a purrtion for myself!"

Then, Torte and Tarte showed me to their grandma's workroom. "Here's grandma's office."

"Wow," I muttered, looking around the room. The underground room looked large enough to cram in ten worktables and was stocked with a full set of Alchemy tools—the best money could buy in *Reas*. The workroom looked well taken care of, so they must have cleaned it regularly. "You'll be able to use Formulation in here, no problem."

All of Torte's family members' faces lit up. *Dang it, they're too cute!*

Tarte would be crafting the Shooting Star Potion, one of the most powerful healing items in the game. To put it briefly, it was an item that resurrected you from the dead. Even though they had been crucial items in *Reas*, only Alchemists could craft them, leading to the popularity of the Alchemist job among players. When considering possible cures for Tarte, I'd thought of the Shooting Star Potion because it also cured any status conditions. In theory, it should wipe out any buffs or debuffs *as if* Tarte had died and come back to life.

"I'll work real hard!" Tarte crooned.

"Yeah, let's whip up this potion and get you healthy!" I answered. "Just to be sure, do you feel all right? Why don't you take another Star Mana Potion before we start?"

"Okay."

The last thing I wanted was for Tarte to overextend herself during this process and faint. On top of giving her the potion, I brought over a stool from the corner of the room and had her sit on it so she could work as comfortably as possible. "Don't push yourself until you feel better. Take a seat while I get everything ready."

"I want to help but I won't get in your way." Tarte obediently sat while Torte and her parents watched.

"What do you want *me* to do?!" Frey demanded, obviously itching to get moving.

Luna, on the other hand, looked at me curiously. "What is she going to make?"

"A Shooting Star Potion," I said.

"A Shooting Star Potion?!" several voices cried.

"Meow meow meow?!" several others chimed in.

The entire room had erupted in exclamations.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Lina said. “*The* Shooting Star Potion?! It’s almost never on the market. Tarte’s going to…*make* it?!”

“Uh— Yeah! Someone just happened to tell me how to make it!” I remembered, too late, that I’d only known of the potion from the game. I’d never heard mention of it while living as either Charlotte or Sharon. *I didn’t think they’d be this surprised.* “Let’s get this done as quickly as we can,” I said, covering my blunder with a laugh, and began setting out the required ingredients. “First, Paradise Dew. This is the herb that’ll be the base of the potion. Then one each of Mana Herb, Fire Flower, Earth Flower, Wind Flower, Water Flower, and an Empty Potion Bottle. We also need three vials of Holy Water—”

It hit me. *I don’t have any more Holy Water!* I’d used up my stock fighting the Ghost of Erungoa and crafting the Reset Skill Potion. Back in the game, I’d always stockpiled enough Holy Water that I’d never needed to keep count. *I messed up.* Holding on to a shred of hope, I glanced at Frey—then at Torte, remembering that she was in charge of the party’s inventory.

“All that’s right here. Now we can finally heal Tarte.” Relieved, Torte began producing the ingredients from her backpack. There’d been no need to worry about the Hero party’s Helper stocking up on everything we’d need. *One of these days, I’d love to dump her backpack and see exactly how much is in there,* I thought.

“Let’s start formulating. Come here, Tarte,” I called.

“Okay!” Tarte said, her ears perked up due to nerves.

“This will be a breeze,” I reassured her. “Relax. Relax. I’ll walk you through every step.”

“Thank you,” Tarte purred.

The tools she’d use were the Advanced Cauldron, Fast Firestarter, and Ludia’s Sapling Stirring Spoon. When I set up a table low enough for her to reach, Tarte peered into the cauldron. “Meow! This feels strange after watching grandma use these all the time.”

“If you watched her work, then you’ll have a good idea of what to do,” I said. “Start with the Empty Potion Bottle. Put the Mana Herb in there first—you use ingredients in the order of most common to rarest. Add the ingredient in and stir it. Once it flashes, put in the next ingredient and stir again. It’s a lot of stirring, but you can do it.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“That’s the spirit!” I said, feeling like a TV chef walking her

audience through a recipe. After the Mana Herb came the Holy Water, then the four elemental flowers, and finally Paradise Dew. When Tarte put the Paradise Dew in, smoke rose from the cauldron.

"Meow?!" Tarte's tail fluffed up in surprise.

Barely holding in my smile at how adorable she was, I urged her to keep stirring. "It's all right. Once it lights up, it's all finished."

"Okay!" Tarte stirred and stirred with utmost concentration. Soon enough, a bright light flashed from the cauldron, revealing a vial of Shooting Star Potion.

It's still bizarre to see the final product prebottled inside the cauldron.

"That's a Shooting Star Potion? I've never seen one with my own eyes," Frey remarked, peeking into the cauldron. Luna, Lina, and Torte all stared at the bottle, mesmerized. I knew exactly why—the Shooting Star Potion came in an exquisitely designed bottle.

The lore behind the Shooting Star Potion said that a shooting star had found a soul on its way back to the sky and brought it down once more to its body. The cork with a shooting star design on it shimmered beautifully—I'd never realized how pretty it was in the game.

Standing on her tippy-toes, Tarte reached for the potion. "This will cure my sickness...Mana Eater?"

"Yes." I smiled reassuringly. Showing any doubt here would have made her nervous. Seeing that Frey and the others were confidently backing me up, Tarte looked ready. She put her hand on the cork.

"Tails up," Elza encouraged her.

"This will make you purrfectly healthy," Colton added.

Both of them had tears forming in their eyes. I could only imagine how it felt to watch their daughter finally be freed from her long battle against this ailment.

Tarte slowly popped the cork, and a miniature shooting star burst out of the vial—the item's visual effect. I wanted to take a closer look at the crackling liquid within, but I just assumed it was carbonated. Hopefully, it wouldn't taste as bad as the Reset Skill Potion. With a deep breath, Tarte raised the vial to her lips. Eyes wide, she drank the whole thing in one go. Then, she pinched her eyes shut and held herself.

“Tarte, are you all right?!” Torte asked.

“It’s like I’m on fire,” Tarte hissed, wrapping her arm around Torte and breathing out forcefully as if the air in her lungs were scorching her from the inside.

All I can do is watch, I had to tell myself, as what felt like minutes and minutes went by. In reality, less than a minute must have passed before Tarte’s breathing steadied. She let go of her sister and stood unassisted.

“How do you feel, Tarte?” I asked.

“Um…” She hesitated, opening and closing her fists, then walking around the room, squatting and standing. Tarte seemed to be measuring whether she felt different from before. Finally, she jumped into the air. “Meow! It’s incredible! I’d be feeling tired after moving like that before. But now, I feel purrfectly fine! It doesn’t feel like I’m losing strength at all!” Tarte beamed wider than she had all day.

“Thank goodness.” I smiled back, finally letting myself breathe.

“You really did it, Tarte!” Torte purred.

“I’m so glad you’re better!” Frey joined in.

“How impressive that you crafted your own potion…! Congratulations,” Luna said.

“Congrats, Tarte!” Lina added.

Everyone was truly ecstatic that Tarte was healed. *I* was ecstatic, and I’d only met Tarte today—I could only imagine how happy the girls were. Elza and Colton were embracing each other, letting their tears roll down their faces.

“Wow… The Shooting Star Potion is truly mystical, isn’t it? There are still enough ingredients to make more…aren’t there?” Luna muttered, drawing a surprised gasp from everyone but me.

“Th-That’s right… With the Paradise Dew, we can make more Shooting Star Potions!” Frey said, her eyes blazing with intensity. “Using the Shooting Star Potion, could we power through *that* dungeon…? We could take on more powerful enemies without—” she muttered to herself.

I wouldn’t have recommended that, to be honest. It wasn’t a viable strategy unless Frey could stock up on hundreds of vials like players used to in *Reas*. “Hold on, Frey. Calm down. We can make more Shooting Star Potions, but we may need to use Paradise Dew for something else in the future. We shouldn’t use them all up now.”

“Hmm… Good point.” Frey started grunting now, occasionally letting out a “but” and an “on the other hand.”

“I do think it’s a good idea to make a few extra,” I added. “Maybe four? One each for you, Luna, Lina, and Torte.”

“Yes! Each of us having one at hand would be a game changer. Great idea! Five—no, six more!” Frey declared, upping my suggestion by fifty percent for some reason. “Tarte, can you make six more? Uh, if you’re not too tired…”

“I’m bursting with energy now! No purroblem!” Tarte beamed again. “I’m excited to do more Alchemy!” There was no stopping this sweet girl.

“It’ll be the same process. Can you do it on your own?” I asked.

“Leave it to me!” Tarte huffed and began formulating again. Now that she was cured, her hands moved more steadily.

After some time, the telltale smoke rose from the cauldron, followed by a flash of light. Without a hitch, Tarte soon crafted the six Shooting Star Potions Frey had requested. “All done!”

“You’re incredible!” Frey said as she literally applauded Tarte, who seemed a little embarrassed by all the attention she had gotten today.

Frey took the stash of six potions and gave one each to Luna, Lina, and Torte before handing Tarte and me one each as well. “These are for you,” she said.

“What?” I asked.

“Me too?”

I’d expected the extra two vials to be spares for her party. I hesitated to accept an item that was so precious in this world.

“Take it.” Frey finally shoved it into my hands.

“Th-Thanks. Are you sure I can have one?” I asked.

“Of course. You’re practically a member of our party, Sharon!” Frey said.

“Thank you… I’ll make it count,” I said.

“Good,” Frey answered.

I’d just been a hired guide on our first adventure, and I hadn’t thought much of them asking me to tag along today. But Frey had called me one of their own. Somehow, that made me happier than I’d ever thought it would.

My Dear Apprentice

The day after we discovered that Tarte was an Alchemist and helped her craft a Shooting Star Potion to cure her Mana Eater, we all became potatoes in Torte's living room. Frey's party had been scouring the earth for a cure nonstop—now it seemed they'd finally burned out.

"You're all being so lazy..." Tarte said. She herself was full of energy. With her newfound talents as an Alchemist, not only had she made herself healthy, but she'd also made a future for herself. Everything she'd ever wanted to do—but thought she couldn't—must have been racing through her mind. At the same time, Tarte knew full well how hard Frey and her party had worked to find a cure for her condition. "I'll make my best tea—a secret recipe. And treats," Tarte announced as she rolled up her sleeves, adding that she'd practiced on her good days.

"I'll lend you a paw," Torte said, noticing the lingering shadow of exhaustion on her sister's face. *What a sweet sister.*

"Thank you so much," Tarte answered.

I would have offered too, but my cooking skills would have been more of a hindrance than a help.

***

Instead, I decided to go on a self-guided tour of the Cait Sith island—including its fields and dungeons, if I could swing it. Back when I'd been a player, I'd dreamed of exploring this elusive area. Now, while Torte and Tarte baked their cookies, I had some time on my hands to get started on my sightseeing.

"Of course, I've already been everywhere in the village searching for an Apothecary or Alchemist," I said, looking forward to scoping out the other areas. Tarte had given me a quick geography lesson on the island's two regions: Cattail Field, the paradise of cat monsters we'd walked through to get to the village, and a dungeon called Coral Cave. *What kind of place is Coral Cave?* I wondered. *Maybe a cave...full of beautiful coral.* There wasn't much imagination involved in my guess, but I was standing by it.

“I only have supporting Skills, but…I should be fine if I’m just taking a quick look,” I decided, walking down a narrow path that led out of the village toward Coral Cave.

After twenty minutes of walking, I saw the cave ahead. It was nestled at the far end of an inlet teeming with crabs, shellfish, and even an octopus! The inlet before the dungeon was full of sea life, but it looked barely touched by humans or Cait Sith. As I approached the cave, I had to take careful steps to keep from slipping on the mossy rocks.

Am I in over my head?

“No, I’ll be fine,” I told myself. “Worse comes to worst, I have a Shooting Star Potion!” *There’s a beautiful sight waiting for you just inside that cave!* I reminded myself, taking deep breaths. Before I took my first step into the dungeon, though, I put some Skills to use. “Strengthen. Goddess’s Protection. And just in case… Regeneration!” Now that I was all buffed, I was ready to enter the dungeon!

Coral Cave was a very strange place. It felt like a sort of aquarium. Columns of water, held in shape without the aid of glass, dotted the cave here and there like liquid pillars. Each of them was occupied by beautiful coral and small tropical-looking fish, which showed off fins colored with brilliant reds and yellows. Nothing about the place seemed dangerous at first glance, but this was still a dungeon. A monster could spring out at any moment. Nervously and cautiously, I made my way through the dungeon.

Soon, a blast of water shot toward me, splashing against the barrier around me. “Goddess’s Protection! A monster?!” I immediately recast my defenses and scanned my surroundings. My heart was beating almost painfully in my chest, but disengaging for even a moment could kill me.

Then, I found it—a monster spitting bursts of water from its mouth. Whipping out a Memory of Stardust, I identified the creature. “A half fish, half human called…Halman. A Water monster weak to physical attacks.” The Halman looked like a fish with arms and legs, and it wore a tasteful shell brooch. Since it didn’t look like a stereotypical mermaid, I guessed it was male. The water it spewed from its mouth was a form of magic, which told me that it didn’t have a strong physical attack either. Although the Halman didn’t seem too intimidating, I had no way of attacking it. If the cave had only contained passive monsters

that didn't attack until they were provoked, I could have gone farther into the dungeon. *For today, I'll have to make a strategic retreat.*

Less gracefully than I wanted, I fled from Coral Cave.

***

When I returned to Torte's house, the party was enjoying freshly baked cookies.

"I'm back," I announced.

"You were gone for a while, Sharon. Welcome back," Frey greeted me, holding an undecorated cookie shaped like a cat's silhouette. "Where have you been?"

I only laughed, nervous about what she'd say if I confessed that I'd gone into a dungeon alone. Frey smiled back. *But I'll be back, Coral Cave,* I vowed. *I shall have my revenge…once I'm stronger.*

"Welcome back!" Tarte trotted over with a tray of tea and cookies—she'd set some aside for me. Upon a closer look, the cookies sparkled with a dusting of sugar, which tickled my nose with its sweet aroma. "These are specially made with cattail sugar!"

"I didn't know you could get sugar from cattails! They look delicious! Thank you, Tarte."

"You're welcome."

I took the tea and cookies from Tarte, who smiled at me adorably, and settled down. The fresh cookies were even more delicious than they looked—Tarte was excited about her special sugar for good reason.

As I savored my cookie and tea, I noticed Tarte staring at me intently, like she was dying to ask me something. I crooked my neck in encouragement, and she finally said, "Sharon. I want to be your apprentice!"

"Come again?" I said. This had apparently taken the entire party by surprise, because we were all blinking and staring at Tarte. Maybe using her first Skill as an Alchemist had gotten her overexcited.

"Tarte, I'm a Healer, not an Alchemist, so I can't be your mentor or anything. I'm sorry…" I said, worried that I'd given Tarte the wrong impression by walking her through the Formulation process.

Tarte shook her head, though. “I understand that! Still, I seek *your* tutelage, not anyone else’s. I’ve lived my whole life in this house, and you’ve shown me a brand-new world!”



“Tarte…” Suddenly, she reminded me of myself from not too long ago—when I’d left Farblume after my engagement was broken, driven by the desire to adventure and see the sights this world had to offer. *I get it,* something inside me said. *I know exactly how you feel.* I’d been wanting allies to adventure to various places with, and an Alchemist would make for a trusty ally—not to mention that we were at similar levels. An apprentice was another story, though, especially when Tarte was only seven. This didn’t feel like something I could make a snap decision on.

While I hesitated to answer, Frey turned to Tarte. “Splendid! Now that you’re healed, you can finally do what you’ve wanted! I think apprenticing under Sharon is a wonderful idea, as long as she agrees—and as long as you have your parents’ permission, of course.”

“It’s not as simple as that! Tarte, we’ll talk about it once mom and dad come home,” Torte said, reminding Frey that there was no way we could decide on something like that now—and to not encourage Tarte too much.

Torte was completely right. *Come to think of it, I don’t even have to worry about making that decision,* I realized. *What are the chances their parents will let little Tarte leave the house?*

“You want to go on an adventure? Then do it!” Elza declared as soon as she returned home and heard Tarte’s plea to become my apprentice and explore the world for herself.

“Elza?! What are you saying?!” Colton cried, clearly shaken by the idea. “Tarte, your illness—Tuna Eater, or whatever—may be cured, but your body still hasn’t recovered. Besides, you’re only seven years old. I can’t let you scamper off on an adventure just yet.” Calm returning to his voice, Colton leveled a serious stare at his younger daughter. I would have guessed that Elza was the one who made final decisions around this house, but dad’s word seemed to carry weight.

Tarte staggered back a step but held her ground. “I want to be a full-fledged Alchemeowst!” Even though I hadn’t known Tarte long, I’d learned that she and Torte always had a gentle look in their eyes. Now, Tarte’s eyes gleamed with determination sharp enough to pin me where I stood. “Because of my sickness, I never thought I’d live long enough to— But my purrtion cured me! I might have what it takes. I want to train so I can save other people like how Torte and her party and Sharon saved me.” Tarte said that she wanted to help anyone struggling with an illness

like she'd had. That was why she wanted to hone her skills out in the world. "I also want to see what's outside this island. Frey's stories always made me want to see for myself." Tarte cracked a grin, shining with the years of adoration she'd carried for her sister and her friends. Meanwhile, I was nodding along in complete agreement. Who wouldn't want to set out on their own after listening to tales of others' adventures?

"Tarte..." Colton began.

"Please, dad!" Tarte implored, bursting with an energy that seemed to put Colton on the ropes.

He clearly didn't think Tarte had it in her after years of battling Mana Eater. "Still..." Colton seemed to be lost for words. Elza slapped her husband on the back with some force, sending him trilling and staggering up to Tarte.

"This is the first time Tarte has a chance to do what she's dreamed of."

"Elza..." Colton muttered.

"She's our daughter. She might be a kitten, but she listens to directions well and she's learned a lot from her books. I want to encourage her as much as we can," Elza added.

Colton stood silently for a few moments before returning his gaze to Tarte as if he were wondering how his daughter had grown up so fast.

"Purr-lease, dad! I...want to be the world's best Alchemeowst!"

"All right," Colton finally relented. "How could I not support a magnificent dream like that?"

"Dad...!" Tarte jumped into her father's arms, teardrops rolling down her young cheeks.

"But promise you'll be careful. Come home anytime you need to. No matter what, we will always support you," Colton said.

"Of course. We'll help you with everything you might need," Elza chimed in.

"You have my blessing too, Tarte. I want you to see everything there is in the outside world. Being an adventurer is very challenging but also very fun!" Torte joined the family hug, holding Tarte tight. Their love was so precious that it made me homesick, just a little bit.

"Thank you so meowch!" Having received her family's blessing, Tarte beamed. Then, the whole family looked to me—all Tarte needed now was my permission.

It's a tough decision... If I were to adventure with Tarte, I'd have

to share my secret—the game knowledge I'd acquired from playing *Reas* in my previous life. But that might not be so bad. It wasn't like there was a rule against it.

I blew out a breath and met Tarte's stare. "It's not going to be easy keeping up with me. I won't stop until I've seen all the wonders of the world," I dared her.

"Now that I'm healthy, I'll build my stamina!" Tarte exclaimed, adding that she was going to put her all into grinding levels too. She was determined; that was for sure.

"Okay. If you really don't mind that I'm not an Alchemist, you'll be my apprentice," I said.

"Thank you so much, Meowster!" Tarte said.

"Meowster...!" I repeated, overcome by her cuteness. How could I not take care of a little Cait Sith girl who called me "Meowster"? *You* will *be the best Alchemist in the world,* I silently promised. *I hope you're ready, Tarte. Once I set my mind to something, I never back down!*

***

I flopped onto the guest room bed and thought about what was to come next—mainly about Tarte. "There's still a lot to do. For one, I should write to my family," I muttered. One thought kept nagging me—that father was going to form a rabid search party if he didn't hear from me for much longer.

So, I wrote up a mental to-do list:

Write home.

Grind levels.

Progress the Holy Maiden quest.

Train Tarte to be the best Alchemist.

That was a good start, I figured. If we could regroup with Kent and Cocoa in Zille to grind levels together, that would be best.

"That's where Tarte's Skills come into play..." In *Reas*, there had been three different ways to play as an Alchemist—specializing in combat, specializing in Formulation, or taking a more balanced approach. When an Alchemist min-maxed combat, they could deal some serious damage by throwing Molotov cocktails. In exchange, they didn't have many Skill Points left to allocate to Formulation, so they needed to spend more money buying one-use items.

Specializing in Formulation meant acquiring Skills related to

crafting items, mostly potions. Because of the inverse relationship of success rate to difficulty of Formulation, an Alchemist had to allocate all of their Skill Points to that purpose if they wanted to DIY every item. Leveling up a Formulation Alchemist was an arduous—and expensive—process, though. The balanced approach left the Alchemist relatively capable in combat and able to craft a decent repertoire of potions. Usually, this approach was for people who liked to play the game solo, in a less competitive way. Being able to craft their own potions saved them money as well, even if they lacked firepower during combat.

I'd respect Tarte's choice, no matter which style she wanted to go with. As for the knowledge she'd need as an Alchemist, she could buy the crafting recipe book to read while we trained.

"Then there's this." I looked at my Adventure Bracelet. It had too many benefits not to take advantage of: manually allocating Skill Points, accessing Inventory, using Transportation Gates... *I'll go see Luminous when we get back to Zille.* Maybe she'd craft an Adventure Bracelet for Tarte. Soon, I let my thoughts rock me to sleep.

***

"It suits you," Luna said.

Tarte smiled wide, holding her new cross-body bag—it must have been a gift from the girls. "Thank you so meowch!"

Frey nodded in approval while Lina smiled at Tarte. "You look like a grown-up adventurer now!"

Torte joined Tarte in thanking everyone.

Her tan cross-body bag already held a few potion vials in holsters on one side for easy access. That would come in handy in a pinch. Amazingly, the bag was also a Magic Bag that could store a good number of items like I did in my Inventory.

"How does it look, Meowster?"

"Perfect!" I exclaimed. "It's so Alchemist and so cute!"

Tarte giggled, twirling to show off the bag. A Magic Bag would make gathering and storing items a breeze—a great jump start to her journey.

"I want to get my apprentice a gift too!" I shouted into the ether. *But what?* That was the big question. *If only I'd picked up a piece of equipment that could benefit an Alchemist...* I had yet to

fully deck *myself* out, let alone anyone else. I didn't even have a little accessory that could buff my little apprentice. After all, as a supporter, I could hardly go into a dungeon to hunt for rare loot on my own.

"You've already given me more than I could ever repay you, Meowster."

"How adorable is my new apprentice...?" I couldn't help but remark.

Frey chuckled. "You two seem perfect for each other."

"Now that she's under my wing, I won't let her down!" I said, swelling with determination. Even though I couldn't give my apprentice a proper gift now, I'd do everything in my power to be the best master I could be...so she could become the best Alchemist in the world!

"Speaking of the future... We plan to stay here for a while longer," Frey said.

They'd been questing nonstop to find Tarte's cure. It was understandable that they'd want to take it easy for a while. And Torte's quiet and secluded home village seemed like the perfect place for some well-deserved R and R.

"Tarte and I are way under leveled compared to you guys, so we'll split up for now. There are a few things I want to get done, so I think I'll have her tag along while she raises her level and trains as an Alchemist. First stop, though, I need to register her as an adventurer at the Guild," I said.

"That sounds like a plan," Frey said, approving my general agenda. "The closest Guild branch is in the Port Town of Tordente, and Zille after that."

"Hmm..." I considered. "We'll probably go to Zille. It should be easier to get her set up with Alchemist gear there."

"True. I don't remember the port town having any ties to Alchemy. Zille has a better selection in their shops too," Frey agreed.

"Yep." To me, Tordente's allure was its famous seafood. I'd love to try a dish if we could make the time in the future. "Then there's the Laureldite Republic. They have a lot of items that Alchemists need. Once we raise our levels, we'll head over."

"Laureldite," Frey repeated. "Crossing the desert won't be easy, but it'll be a good experience for Tarte." By the sound of it, Frey and her party had been to Laureldite before.

"It was so hot..." Torte swished her tail.

“Protect yourself from the sun. It’s not good for your skin!” Luna advised me on another front.

Going to Laureldite would pose another challenge for me. By land, I’d have to cross through Farblume, from which I’d been exiled. Yet going through Arcadia and the Undersea Tunnel was too dangerous a route at our current level.

I’ll put a pin in that, I decided.

Tarte began shaking beside me. “I’m pawsitively excited!” She gave a little hop. “I can’t wait to go on an adventure!”

I was right there with her. Adventuring was the best. “We can leave as early as tomorrow, if—”

“Let’s leave tomorrow!”

“You’re so decisive…!” I said. “That’s a good thing, though.” On the other hand, I wondered if she was ready to leave everyone that soon.

“I’ll be all right. I’ll make my goodbyes today, Meowster.”

“If you and Torte are okay with that…” I looked to Torte, who nodded her agreement. It was settled, then. We’d leave tomorrow.

***

In the middle of the night, I was looking up at the mystical night sky painted by the red moon of this world. “So beautiful—doubly so in the village of the Cait Sith!” I almost wanted to stay up all night staring at it. Thousands of stars filled the sky, like devoted followers gathering around the red moon. After absentmindedly watching the sky for a while, I suddenly remembered. “Oops! I was supposed to register the Transportation Gate here.” That was why I’d come outside this late at night.

Transportation Gates, or just Gates, allowed players to teleport from one location to another, as long as those places’ Gates were registered to their Adventure Bracelets. Since Cattora was a village, it would only have one Gate. Bigger cities normally had two, with one at their entrance. I’d found Cattora’s Gate near the village’s edge when Frey and I were running around asking what job each villager had.

The Gate was about three meters tall, engraved with a design featuring this world’s creator-god. Cattora’s Gate also had paw-print engravings worked into its design, adding an element of

cuteness to it.

I raised my hand and touched the Magic Stone held by the god's engraving. With that, this Gate was registered to my Adventure Bracelet. "Maybe I didn't need to sneak out here in the middle of the night if I was just going to register it…" It would have just looked like I was admiring the sculpture.

Right as I turned to make my way back to Torte's house, I heard a voice from behind me. "Meowster?"

I turned to find Tarte, of course. "Tarte! It's not safe to be out this late."

"Right back at you, Meowster."

"You got me there," I chuckled. I had no other defense. Still, I warned Tarte not to do this again because it could be dangerous. I'd be careful too.

"What were you doing out here this late…?" Tarte asked.

"Oh. I had to come see this Gate."

"Gate?" Tarte's ears twitched in confusion. I wasn't surprised—I still hadn't seen anyone else use a Transportation Gate in this world.

"There's so much I want to teach you," I said. "But we'll have plenty of time once we get our adventure started—after tomorrow." First, I needed to find out if Tarte could even get her own Adventure Bracelet. "How about you? Why are you up this late?"

"I couldn't sleep, somehow. If you were up, I wanted to talk to you… But you weren't there, so I came looking for you," Tarte said. As it turned out, it was my fault she'd left the house this late! *Sorry I made you come out at night, Tarte…*

"I'm just so excited to go on adventures with you, Meowster." Tarte smiled, showing her adorable dimples. I didn't think I'd ever get used to how cute my apprentice was.

"I'm looking forward to tomorrow too. And we'll gather materials for Formulation from all over," I said.

"Purrfect! I can't wait!" Tarte said.

There were plenty of items I wanted her to make for us once we had the right materials. Having Alchemist-crafted potions on a hunt made a world of difference. *I'm getting excited just thinking about it!*

I turned to Tarte and addressed the topic on my mind. "First, let's decide what type of Alchemist you want to be."

"Type of Alchemeowst?"

“Right,” I said, explaining the three different approaches to Alchemy.

“I see… But I can’t change my own Skills. How can I choose what kind of Alchemeowst I want to be?”

“Th-That’s—” *I spoke too soon!* I should have waited until after she’d gotten the Adventure Bracelet! *When will I stop yapping without thinking?!* It was too late to take it back, though. As my apprentice, she was going to discover tons of new information. “Do you know what this bracelet is?” I asked, showing her the accessory on my wrist.

“I’m not sure,” Torte said. “Is it a rare piece?”

“This is called an Adventure Bracelet,” I said, explaining the things it would allow her to do: allot Skill Points according to her choice, use another Magic Bag, and so on.

“That’s ameowzing. Do my sister and her friends know?” Tarte asked.

“No, they don’t. I haven’t told this to anyone else.”

“I think that’s purrfect. I don’t think you should share it unless you really trust them. Otherwise, you may be in danger,” Tarte said nervously, adding that if the royal family were to find out, for example, they might take drastic measures to acquire that power. I stared at Tarte, surprised. She’d already thought this through more than I had. “I trust Torte and her party,” Tarte said. “But they aren’t friends with you the same way they are with each other. That’s why I don’t think you should tell them…yet,” Tarte finished.

One of these days, I hoped to share this secret with more people. If the general adventurer population discovered the Adventure Bracelet, there would be great progress in the industry. More dungeons would be conquered, and more drop items would go on the market. Overall, so many more items would be readily available. “Yeah. When the time comes to share this information, Frey and her party will be the first to know.”

“Purrfect,” Tarte said.

That future wouldn’t come soon, though. A normal adventurer like me couldn’t handle the responsibility of wielding this information. Maybe the strongest adventurer in the world, or royalty, or at least a Guildmaster would have to take responsibility for that. The best way for me to have my voice heard would be for me to become the Holy Maiden.

Two Tickets to Adventure

“Tarte, you must write us when you’re settled,” Elza said.

“Take especially good care of your health,” Colton added.

“I know, I know already,” Tarte said from within her parents’ tight embrace. Even though Colton had been more hesitant to approve Tarte’s leaving, Elza was the one sobbing now. The family group hug lasted a while, but eventually they let her climb onto the ship with me.

“Stay safe out there!” Frey called.

“Let’s hope we’ll run into each other again,” said Luna.

“You got this, you two!” Lina shouted.

“If anything happens, we’ll be right there to help!” Torte joined in as all of them waved as big as they could.

Tarte and I waved back, leaning over the boat’s railing. “Tarte and I will see so many wonderful places!” I loudly declared.

“I’ll be a real Alchemeowst when I come back!” Tarte added.

“We’re looking forward to it!” Our friends smiled.

As our ship sailed on, they and the dock they stood on shrank smaller and smaller—this would be goodbye for a good while. I glanced at Tarte, who had understandably gone teary-eyed. She’d put on a brave face, but it had to be difficult for a little girl like her to leave her family and friends. The only thing I could do was to help her enjoy this beautiful world to the fullest.

***

Tarte and I were walking up the highway to Zille at a leisurely pace—enjoying the view along the way was just as important as getting to our destination. Our plan was to rent horses at the Farming Village we’d soon be coming to.

“Are you getting tired, Tarte?” I looked at the girl, who’d asked me to treat her more like my apprentice rather than just my friend’s little sister.

“I’m purrfect!” she responded. “I’m full of energy, thanks to your Strengthen Skill!” To prove it, Tarte began sprinting down the road with a Cait Sith’s swiftness. That much athleticism could be a great advantage for an Alchemist.

“Meowster, there’s a village ahead!” Tarte called.

“That’s the Farming Village. We’re going to spend the night there, then ride on horseback to Zille tomorrow,” I said.

“Got it! I’ve never been to a village other than Cattora—I’m so excited.” That much was easy to see, with her tail fully upright and twitching.

Soon, we arrived at the Farming Village. Since I’d healed those rampaging bulls with Wide Heal the last time I was here, the villagers recognized me as soon as I walked in, greeting me by name.

“You’re so popular, Meowster!”

“I’m going to blush!” I cried out. As I responded to villager after villager with a polite nod, we made our way to the inn.

“Hello, Sharon! How nice to see you again,” the innkeeper greeted me. “But this time you’re a party of…two?”

“Frey and the others have too many levels on me—we were only working together temporarily. It’s just me and Tarte today,” I said.

“Oh, I see.” The innkeeper smiled at Tarte. “Hello there.”

“I’m Tarte, Sharon’s apprentice. Thank you so meowch for having us tonight.”

“Such a polite little girl! And you’re Sharon’s apprentice? You’re lucky to have such a brilliant tutor.”

“That’s what I say!” Tarte answered.

That was it—my face was on the verge of going red. Before any color could stain my cheeks, I swiftly took our room key, but the way the innkeeper giggled told me she’d seen right through me. I hadn’t expected to draw so much attention just by entering the village.

“Your rooms are on the second floor at the end of the hall,” the innkeeper called.

“Thank you,” I said.

I’d booked us a double-occupancy room with two beds. There was only one desk in the room, but we wouldn’t be using it anyway.

“Meow! It’s a fluffy bed that smells like sunshine!” Tarte dove into the soft covers like she was any other seven-year-old girl on vacation. Soon I heard steady breathing from her direction, revealing how much exhaustion Tarte had been hiding under her energetic facade.

Maybe I pushed her too hard, I worried. We’d planned to leave

tomorrow on a borrowed horse, but there was nothing wrong with slowing down our itinerary. While we were here, we could gather the materials needed for the Adventure Bracelet quest before heading back to Zille. It'd be good combat practice too.

"That's a great idea!" I patted myself on the back. *Which means I deserve a nap!* I lay down on my bed to take a power nap until dinner—I was also more tired than I'd thought.

***

The next morning, Tarte and I went out shopping after a leisurely breakfast. We hadn't stopped by the Farming Village's item shop the night before because we'd been so tired. We'd picked up a few things in Cattora, but in my book it was a cardinal sin to pass through a town or village without paying the local item shop a visit.

The Farming Village item shop was a tiny red-roofed building with tasteful landscaping sprucing up its entrance. A sign stood by the door that read "We have everything." It was a charming little general store.

"Hello."

"Meowdy."

Tarte and I walked into the shop and received a friendly greeting from an elderly gentleman. "Welcome. Oh, if it isn't the famous Sharon."

I laughed, resigned to the fact that I was going to be recognized by every soul in this village, and began scanning the shelves. Though we didn't need much restocking, there was no harm in window-shopping.

"Meowster! They have so many things we didn't have in Cattora!" Tarte's eyes shone with more giddiness than I'd ever seen as she picked up a trinket here and a piece of jewelry there, purring over how cute they were.

Compared to Cattora—the only village on a remote and hidden island—I could see how she'd believe this little shop held everything she'd ever dreamed of. *She might just burst from excitement when she sees Zille,* I speculated. Compared to the Farming Village, Zille was a bustling metropolis.

I picked up a few portions of preserved food; I was considering waiting to buy household supplies until we reached Zille. Just then, I spotted a collection of stationery, including

envelopes and postcards, on a shelf, each of them marked with designs of farm animals found in the village, like cows, sheep, or chickens.

"Those are cute," I said.

"Stationery!"

Tarte and I each took up a set. I'd just been thinking it was high time I wrote to my parents. "I think I'll get a letter-writing set."

"You're going to write a letter?" Tarte trilled.

"Yeah. I haven't had a chance to write to my family in Farblume."

"Wonderfurl idea!" Tarte said.

I hadn't told her anything about my family, and I didn't intend to for a while—Tarte didn't need to get wrapped up in that drama. Besides, I was no longer Charlotte the villainess. I was Sharon the adventurer!

"I'll write my letter once I register as an adventurer in Zille!" Tarte added.

"Good thinking. Frey said the party was going to stay in Cattora for a while. Maybe I'll write to them too to let them know that we've made it to Zille," I mused.

"They'll like that very meowch."

We decided to purchase our stationery or postcards for that purpose in Zille, so I left the shop with only the rations and enough stationery to write my family.

With a feline trill and a swing of the Iron Mace, Tarte splattered a Jiggly. It let out a cry and vanished, leaving behind a Jiggly Jelly, a bite-sized treat that also healed a little HP.

"I did it, Meowster!" Tarte exclaimed, literally jumping with joy. I was glad to see my first weapon getting some good use, even if Tarte's level was probably high enough for her to take out Jigglies without a weapon. "These are what I need to collect to have my Adventure Bracelet made?"

"That's right. Five Jiggly Jellies, three Bunny's Flowers, and ten White Herbs. It shouldn't take too long to gather them all," I said. Tarte wouldn't have found it too difficult to collect these items on her own, but it felt right for me to supervise my apprentice's first quest.

"I won't let you down!" Tarte promised and began taking out the Jigglies and Flower Bunnies in the area. For a moment, I saw

Frey's fighting style mirrored in Tarte's movements, but I chose to believe it was just a figment of my imagination.

"Frey always helped me hunt. I didn't think I could do it all on my own," Tarte said, her voice and movements full of life. It reminded me of how energized I'd felt when I'd ended up exiled through my own calculation. She went on taking out monsters and gleefully packing away drop items in her cross-body bag. Those Jigglies and Flower Bunnies didn't stand a chance against her.

While I watched Tarte, I also kept an eye on our surroundings. "What a view," I murmured. We were in a field called High Road, which was right outside the Farming Village. Grassy plains stretched to either side of the road, which was wide enough to accommodate a carriage. Here, weaker monsters and common vegetation could be found. It was a great practice ground for beginners.

On one side of the road, the plains expanded all the way out to the horizon, but on the other side, past the expansive plain, I could see a forest—Goblin Forest, if I remembered my geography correctly. I had little interest in Goblins, but I did want to try my mettle against monsters of all sorts. There had been some monsters in *Reas* that were gory or downright scary, though, so I was apprehensive about how closely the real-life versions in this world would match the game art—extremely closely, was my guess.

It's kind of thrilling…in both a good way and a bad way, I thought.

"I gathered all the materials!" Tarte called cheerfully.

"Already?!" I blurted. As it turned out, my apprentice was as talented as she was adorable.

"Once I got used to it, it was all too easy!"

"Awesome," I said, starting to wonder if there was anything this little girl couldn't do.

Just in case, I double-checked that she had the correct count of each item. "That's all the materials you need. We can take these to Zille and have your bracelet made."

"Purray! I'm so excited, I don't think I could sleep a wink!" Tarte said, sounding like a schoolgirl on the night before an exciting field trip.

"Given how tired you must be, I'd planned to stay here for a few more days—"

“Let’s leave tomorrow!”

“Okay. We’ll go tomorrow,” I chuckled, reading the thoughts on Tarte’s face: If she’d had her way, we’d be on our way to Zille as we spoke. The sacred city wasn’t far from here, so we’d be there by noon tomorrow even if we didn’t leave until morning. There, we’d procure some Alchemy-related items and discuss what kind of Alchemist Tarte wanted to be. From how she’d fought today, I was tempted to guess she’d pursue the combat-centered Skill set.

“Hurry! Hurry!” Tarte purred, having stashed the items back in her bag. “Can’t we go to bed early and leave first thing tomorrow?”

“Okay, let’s do that.”

“Purray!”

Tarte led me by the hand all the way back to our inn.

***

That night, I made sure Tarte was fast asleep before I got out of bed and sat at the desk, keeping the lamp dim enough to not wake my apprentice.

“This letter has been a long time coming,” I muttered. I planned to write and send the letter to my family—which I’d been putting off for a long time—from this village. Using the common post rather than the method of messaging usually used by nobles would delay the delivery of my letter but also lower the chances of Prince Ignacia discovering it.

I laid out the stationery I’d bought today and hovered my pen over the paper. “What should I write about?” I could open by notifying them of Ignacia’s presence in Zille, but I had a feeling they’d known about that before I had. *I’ll ask them to tell me of any news on that front,* I decided. Tip-offs from my parents could help me avoid the prince as much as possible. His face was the last thing I wanted to see blocking my view of the world’s splendor. *And I should definitely tell them I’m doing well.* I’d made good friends and even taken on an apprentice. It was fun to imagine their surprise upon reading that line.

“I hope you’re all doing okay,” I wrote. “Hopefully, I didn’t leave the family with too much of a mess…” For a moment, I was concerned that they were facing some political pressure—until I realized that mother wouldn’t let that happen. Most of my

memories of my mother were of her relaxing at home in one way or another, but she was still the ringmistress of high society.

After finishing my letter, I stretched my arms above my head and went to bed thinking of my mother, father, and brothers.

Tarte’s Adventure Bracelet

Having rented a horse in the Farming Village, Tarte and I began our journey to Zille on its back, going a little slower than necessary because I was a bit unsure of my horsemanship. I’d thought that horseback riding would take quite a while to get used to, but by the time we reached Zille, I was riding that horse almost effortlessly. *How cool is this MMO world?*

“I’ve never ridden a horse before!”

“Not even in Cattora? I guess you wouldn’t need to, to get around the village,” I said. The entirety of the village was very walkable. Even from Tarte’s house at the far end of the village, she could reach the village center in half an hour without hastening her step.

“Meow… I wish I could ride on my own,” Tarte grumbled.

“On your own? Maybe once you get the hang of riding,” I suggested.

“Fur real?!”

“Probably?” I answered. Even fully grown Cait Sith—who were much older than Tarte—were shorter than most adult humans, so there was no chance Tarte’s little feet would reach the stirrups. Still, I was optimistic that she could learn to ride without her feet touching. “I myself am still not used to riding, though. I would really appreciate it if you kept me company in the meantime.”

“Now that you mention it, saddling this horse was really hard at first. All right! Let’s ride and purractice together, Meowster!”

“Thanks, Tarte.” *Seriously, how adorable is my apprentice?!*

Soon enough, we were standing in the Holy Capital of Zille, a fairly short time since I’d last been there.

“Me-wow! I’ve never seen a city this ginormous! What is that crystal castle over there?!”

I chuckled—Tarte’s reaction had been exactly as I’d expected. “That’s like the castle of this city—or this kingdom, even. It’s a cathedral made of crystal, and it’s where the Pope lives. Flaudia Cathedral in the central plaza is open to anyone, so you’ll see it for yourself pretty soon.”

“That’s where you pray to the goddess Flaudia?”

“That’s the one. I’m impressed you know that,” I said.

Tarte cracked a brilliant smile at the compliment. *Need I reiterate how cute my apprentice looks?* “I read many books at home!”

“Ah, so that’s how you know so much.” Maybe her emotional maturity could be attributed to her reading. Come to think of it, her room had held a massive collection of books.

“Well… Let’s get a room first. Then, maybe we can look around the city for a bit?” I suggested. “We can go make your Adventure Bracelet after that.”

“I can’t wait!” Tarte beamed again, devastatingly adorable.

My inn of choice was the same as last time—the Crescent Inn. With a reasonable price, delicious food, and a friendly innkeeper, there was no place more relaxing in Zille.

We stopped by the inn to quickly book our room before heading out into the town.

“This city is full of water,” Tarte said. “It’s everywhere,” she purred, following the flow of water as it rushed through the labyrinth of aqueducts.

When she put it that way, having access to clean water pretty much anywhere in the city *was* a great convenience. “This water flows from the Divine Tree by the Crystalline Cathedral. Maybe we should buy you some Empty Potion Bottles so you can stock up on the water—it’ll come in handy for Alchemy.”

“I’ll bottle *all* the water!” Tarte declared with great enthusiasm.

Once I set her up with the Adventure Bracelet, I planned to stock up on all sorts of one-use items. Alchemists required a wide variety of materials, so the word “overstocking” wasn’t in their vocabulary. All too often, Alchemists would find their Inventory spent— *Enough gamer thoughts,* I reminded myself. *We have some sights to see.*

“Why don’t we go see those food stalls over there?” I suggested.

“Yes, purrlease!”

A street packed with food stalls cut through the southwestern section of the city, which many strolled through to pick out their lunches or have a few nighttime drinks. Many of the stalls sold hearty meat dishes, but plenty of them provided salads, fruit cups, or sweets like cake and cookies.

Tarte’s eyes stayed glued to whichever stall was nearest as we

strolled down the street. “It smells so good,” she purred. “There are so many treats I’ve never seen in Cattora!”

“You can eat whatever you like,” I said.

“Purray!” Tarte began sniffing the air, letting her feline nose guide her to a stall adorned with a doughnut-shaped sign and displaying rows of unglazed doughnuts—she was definitely the type to kick off an all-you-can-eat buffet with a plate of desserts.

Soon, she returned with a doughnut in each hand and a grin on her face. “These smell ameowzing! Let’s eat them together.” Her tail was straight again, quivering with anticipation.

“Thank you.”

As soon as I accepted my doughnut, Tarte took a big bite of her own. Her tail began to swish in the way that cats’ often did when they were enjoying their food. I took my first bite of mine—crispy on the outside, soft on the inside. It wasn’t too airy either, giving me a full, satisfying bite. “Mmm! So good!”

“I could eat a million of these!” Tarte exclaimed.

After demolishing her doughnut, Tarte quickly shifted her attention to other stalls. *Don’t worry, little apprentice. Your “Meowster” will buy you everything you want,* I vowed.

We ended up enjoying candy-coated fruit, then meat skewers, and finally vegetable sticks—then laughed that we’d eaten a full meal in reverse order. Tarte would have pressed on with her food-stall crawl, but alas, her eyes were much bigger than her little stomach. I promised to bring her back soon, and we made our way to Luminous’s house with a box of skewers as a little gift for her.

We were there, of course, to acquire an Adventure Bracelet. We already had all the quest items ready, so Tarte should be able to complete the quest, as long as this quest wasn’t limited to *Reas* players or anything like that. *Will she see a quest pop-up?* I wondered.

“My heart is going fast,” Tarte said.

“Luminous is a very nice lady. It’ll be okay.”

I knocked on the door, and Luminous pulled it open in no time. A quick flash of surprise on her face shifted to a smile. “Sharon. It’s great to see you again.”

“You too, Luminous!”

“Come on in.”

“Thank you.”

Once we stepped through the door, Luminous gave Tarte a

glance. “It’s not every day I meet a Cait Sith. Do you want some candy?” she asked, beginning to search her cupboard.

“She’s my apprentice, Tarte, an Alchemist.” I introduced her.

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“How polite. Here’s a piece of candy.”

“Thank you so meowch!” Tarte said, astonished at the appearance of a lollipop as wide as her hand. Maybe Luminous saw her as something like a granddaughter who’d come to visit.

“We brought meat skewers from a food stall,” I said, realizing too late that they might have been too greasy for someone of Luminous’s age. Keeping an eye on her reaction, I placed the box on the table.

“Oh, I was just feeling peckish. Thanks a bunch,” Luminous said, much to my relief. “If we’ve got skewers, I’ve got something stronger in the— No, let’s stick to tea in Tarte’s company,” she went on. Maybe Luminous knew how to let loose more than I’d thought.

After spending some time enjoying meat, tea, and small talk, I brought up my reason for returning here. “We were hoping you could make an Adventure Bracelet for Tarte. Just like last time, we brought the materials with us.” On my cue, Tarte pulled out the loot she’d worked hard to gather around the Farming Village.

“It’s all there, by my count,” Luminous said, sparking hope in my chest. “I still haven’t met anyone else who brought me what I needed before I even told them,” she laughed.

Suddenly, Tarte hissed, her tail fluffing up as she leaped out of her seat. It happened so suddenly that I squealed too. *What startled her so much?* I wondered and immediately realized the answer. *The quest pop-up!* “It’s okay, Tarte. Deep breaths.”

“Your bracelet will be right out. Make yourselves at home.” Luminous walked out of the room.

“O-Okay…” With a hand on her chest, Tarte concentrated on her breathing. Maybe I should have warned her about the sudden pop-up, but even I’d been startled by it the last time. *It comes out of nowhere, every time.*

“Do you see that all the time, Meowster?”

“It’s called a quest window. Not all the time, just when I’m getting an important item like this, or… How should I put this? When rare jobs or important events in the world are involved, it’s more likely to become a quest, I guess. I don’t have it all figured out either.” It’d only been a month since I’d regained my

memories of life as Mitsuki Toyosato. Despite my game knowledge, I was still a novice in this world. “Eventually, you’ll be able to...sense it, I think?”

“Okay?”

If only I could impart some sage wisdom on the topic... I could have used a tutor of my own.

After some time, Luminous’s voice rang from the other room. “It’s done!” She came back in and approached Tarte. “This is your Adventure Bracelet.”

Taking the item in both hands, Tarte trilled excitedly. Just like mine, it was a thin bracelet with two Magic Stones, one embedded on either side.

“We’re matching, Meowster.”

“We’re starting to look like master and apprentice. I like it.”

“Me too!” Tarte agreed with fervor and slipped the bracelet onto her left wrist, like I wore mine. The Adventure Bracelet shrank to fit Tarte’s wrist. Now, I just needed to walk her through the bracelet’s features later.

“Thank you so meowch, Miss Luminous,” Tarte said.

“Anytime.” Luminous grinned. “Come see me whenever you like. Old farts like me have nothing to do but rot at home. Seeing you will certainly be a nice change.”

“We’ll be back!” Tarte promised.

“I’ll bring something sweet next time,” I added.

“That’ll be a treat!” Luminous said. “I’ll look forward to it!”

***

What we did next might have been the real start of Tarte’s adventure. Back at the inn, I began to walk her through how to use her bracelet. I’d asked if she intuitively knew how to use it, and she’d said no, which meant that, even if someone were to get their hands on an Adventure Bracelet, they wouldn’t be able to use it without game knowledge.

“Let me show you how it works,” I began, sitting side by side with Tarte on the bed. “Try saying ‘Open Menu.’”

“Open menu?” Again, Tarte hissed as her tail fluffed up. “Something popped up!”

Giggling a little at Tarte’s repeated reaction, I gave her a crash course in using the bracelet. “What’s the screen you see?” I asked. “Can you read it to me?”

“I see Stats, Titles, Skills, Bag, Map, Inventory… It looks like I can use those,” Tarte said hesitantly.

“Same as me,” I confirmed. Features unavailable to me—like Guilds and Camera—weren’t usable for her either.

So that’s how it looks to scroll through the Menu, I thought, watching Tarte bizarrely stab the air with her finger. I made a mental note to use it with *extreme* caution in public places.

Once I’d explained each command, Tarte’s eyes widened. “This bracelet fits *that* many items?! How about this one…? And this one?!” Tarte went on, stashing her things into her newly acquired Bag and Inventory, muttering “Me-wow!” each time. I understood how she felt, after having lived in this world. Players had often taken the usefulness of Inventory for granted. I doubted Tarte would have much trouble getting the hang of the other features once she tried them. I guessed that she would soon start using them like it was second nature to her.

“Now, here comes the big moment,” I said.

“Big moment?”

“That’s right—learning your Alchemist Skills!” I declared dramatically.

Tarte trilled feebly, apparently at a loss for words.

People couldn’t choose their Skills in this world. After you stocked up four Skill Points, the fifth was randomly allocated to a Skill. Then, each new Skill Point would be automatically tacked onto that Skill until it reached its level cap…which was incredibly inconvenient. So, an adventurer’s strength in this world was determined as much by luck as by hard work. If your Skill Points were randomly used up for useless Skills, all you could do was cry about it.

“It looks like I got four…Skill Points?” Tarte said. As expected, she had the stockpile of four unassigned points.

“The bracelet will let you use those points for any Skill, but first you need to reset all your Skills,” I said.

Here was where the paths diverged. Now, she had the option to become any of the three types of Alchemist: combat focused, Formulation oriented, or a balance of both. And I wanted to hear what Tarte wanted, though I did have a (financially crippling) recommendation ready. “I know I mentioned it before,” I said. “Did you think about what kind of Alchemist you want to be?”

“When I was sick…I always dreamed of being an Alchemeowst like grandma. But now…I want to see the world with you,

Meowster. So I want to be an Alchemeowst who can fight!"

"You'd go with me all over the world? I've never felt safer," I said. Tarte was watching me, determination burning in her eyes as she squeezed my hand.

Since Tarte wanted to fight, I mentioned the alternative I had in mind. "It'll be a lot of hard work, but you could focus on Formulation and still fight from a distance."

"From a distance?"

"Right. Alchemists can learn a Skill that lets them craft combat potions like Molotovs and Bottled Sleeps and throw them during battle," I explained. Of course, the item would be consumed in a single attack. Players often sold damaging potions on the market, but I'd come to realize that they were much harder to come by in this world. *Oops.*

"Then I can be an Alchemeowst like grandma and still keep up with you, Meowster!" Tarte beamed.

This approach had its drawbacks, though. Compared to a combat-centered Alchemist, Tarte's physical abilities would be lacking because she'd have to prioritize Skills along the Formulation line over passive buffs. She'd need to use a lot more Molotovs and Potions than a combat Alchemist too. *Long story short...*

"It's not a lifestyle for the poor," I deadpanned.

Tarte trilled in fear. "There's no way my allowance can cover that..." Her head drooped like a flower robbed of sunshine.

Still, she'd be saving money compared to some players. Back in *Reas*, for example, I'd always bought throwing potions from other players. That wasn't an option in this world where there were so few of them on the market. Crafting the potions herself would take longer but save her money in the long run, at least compared to buying the finished products.

"Don't worry. We'll make money!" I said.

"Meow?!"

"You're going to master the Formulation Skill. You could craft and sell potions, loot dungeons... We're adventurers, aren't we?" I encouraged her.

"I suppose so..." Tarte said, her eyes swimming with all the new ideas. "Will we really have no purroblem making money?"

Tarte had pretty good equipment since Frey and her party had gifted it all to her. We wouldn't need to budget for new equipment for a while, except for her weapon—she couldn't

keep using my mace forever. If we came across something suitable, I'd make sure to buy it.

"You're ameowzing, Meowster. Even more than I thought."

I chuckled. "Now that you've decided, you need to take this." I handed her the vial of Reset Skill Potion I'd crafted before. This would allow her to reset all the Skills randomly assigned to her and use those Skill Points for the Skills she actually wanted.

"Th-This purrtion sounds incredible!"

"You'll be able to make it yourself, Tarte, with the right ingredients," I said.

Tarte trilled again. "There's so many surprises, I don't know what to do. So confusing…" Tarte's eyes were glued to the Reset Skill Potion.

I chuckled again and met Tarte's stare with my own. "But don't expect it to taste good. It's disgusting."

"Th-That bad, Meowster?"

I nodded. *So disgusting that I never want to take that potion again.* Of course, if I ever were in a situation where I'd have to drink one, I would. *That's what makes me a real gamer…!*

Clearing my throat, I resumed my tutorial. "Once you drink this, your Skills will be completely reset so you can use those points to get any Skill you want. Combined with your four stockpiled points, you'll have seventeen to play with."

To become the type of Alchemist she'd chosen, Tarte would want to max out Formulation at 10 and Potion Throw—her only attacking Skill—at 5. That left two Skill Points that I'd recommend she use on Herb Doctor—a Skill that would boost the quality of potions she crafted with herbs and help her find more herbs in the wild.

I relayed my reasoning to Tarte, who stood contemplating her options. "Is there a particular Skill you really want?" I asked. She didn't have to obey me blindly. I'd much rather nurture Tarte's own play style than stifle it.

"I thought I only needed Formulation for what I wanted to do. Having a choice at all is ameowzing," Tarte said.

"Right? It's natural to not know right away. As long as you take Formulation and Potion Throw, there's no rush to decide on a third Skill," I said.

"Yes, Meowster." Having decided on what Skills to redistribute her points to, she uncorked the Reset Skill Potion. "Here I go—"

"You have to chug! It'll be so much worse if you pause…" I

said.

Tarte stuck out her tongue in disgust, letting out a broken mew.

I know, Tarte. I know. From firsthand experience, that potion tasted so bad that it made you want to question your life choices and swear off potions forever. It had taken tremendous willpower on my part to drink it twice.

Tarte fought back tears and chugged the whole thing. “Meowster…” she wailed, clinging to my waist. “I never want to drink that again.”

“I know. It tastes horrible. Will this help?” I offered a piece of candy.

“Thank you, Meowster,” Tarte said with a hint of a smile.

“That should have reset your Skills. Let’s get you set up with Formulation and Potion Throw.”

“Yes, purrlease!”

And so, Tarte managed to redistribute her Skills.

Overview:

```
Name: Tarte
Race: Cait Sith
Level: 18
Skill Points: 2
Job: Alchemist (Expert in Formulation. A trusty ally who can craft both healing and attacking potions.)
```

Skills:

```
Formulation (Level 10): The user crafts potions.
Potion Throw (Level 5): Attacks enemies by throwing potions.
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Equipment:

```
Head: Hexagram Ward (+3% Physical Defense)
Body: Mademoiselle Dress (+5% HP)
Right Hand: Iron Mace (A simple iron-wrought mace)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Father’s Locket (+5% Physical Defense)
```

Feet: Mademoiselle Socks (+5% Physical Defense)
Bonus: Mademoiselle Set 3/3 (+15% HP / +5% Natural Recovery)

Forming Our Party

The next day, Tarte and I stopped by both Transportation Gates in Zille so Tarte could register them. Now Tarte could travel to Zille in the blink of an eye from any other Gate in the world.

"My whole world has been a lie…" Tarte muttered after registering the second Gate. I pretended not to hear.

In any case, we finally made our way to the Adventurer's Guild! The building was located on the east side of Zille, close to the central plaza, and was easily marked by its heavy doors and hanging sign depicting a sword, staff, and shield.

"Once we register as a party, we can raise our levels together," I said.

"I can't wait!"

Since Tarte and I were fewer than fifteen levels apart, we were allowed to form a party through the Guild. Once we did so, every time we defeated a monster, we would split the EXP down the middle. If I didn't form a party, grinding every level would become a Herculean task for a supporter like me.

Tarte can plow through monsters to grind levels for both of us! Yay! I walked up to my good friend Prim at the counter and asked her to register Tarte as an adventurer. The Adventurer's Card she'd receive would double as an ID, which was a nice perk.

"Great to see you again, Sharon," Prim said. "Are you not working with Frey and her party anymore?"

"Good to see you too, Prim! I did my job, so now we're going our separate ways," I confirmed. Even if I had stuck with them, I was too low-level to form a party with them—I'd have been stuck at this level forever.

Prim noticed Tarte. "Is she…related to Torte, by any chance?"

"Yes. It's just me and her right now," I said.

"My name is Tarte. I'm Torte's sister. Thank you so meowch for always giving my sister a helping paw. I look forward to working with you."

"Me too." Prim smiled and turned to me. "She's so well-spoken!"

"Isn't she?" I said, puffing out my chest. "She's my apprentice, after all!"

“Apprentice? She’s a Healer too, then?” Prim asked.

I should have expected that response. Chuckling, I informed her that Tarte was an Alchemist. Apparently, it really was unusual for an adventurer to take on an apprentice with a different job.

“An Alchemist…” Prim returned her gaze to my little apprentice. “Not too many of our adventurers are Alchemists. I can’t wait to see what feats you’ll accomplish.”

“I won’t let you down!”

The process of registering Tarte with the Guild and forming a party was quick and painless—now we could “Go! Go! Go!”

Then, I thought about my other adventurer friends. “Right… Have you seen Kent and Cocoa lately?”

“Oh, they’re off on another quest today. Should I let them know you’re back in town?” Prim offered.

“That would be great,” I said.

When I’d last seen the Swordsman Kent and the Sorcerer Cocoa, we’d promised to form a party again. *Introducing Tarte to them will have to wait until they return from their quest, I guess.*

Tarte was looking at me curiously, so I briefly explained who Kent and Cocoa were and promised to make an introduction when I next saw them.

“What are we going to do next, Meowster?” Tarte asked, once we’d exited the Guild.

“There are too many things to do, aren’t there?”

“I want to go eat from the food stalls again,” she crooned.

“Agreed!” We shared a laugh, and I seriously thought about the question. I myself wanted to progress the Holy Maiden quest. I guessed that Tarte’s next step would be to buy the items needed to get started on her formulating. Both of us would want to grind levels, of course. In order to get started on that, Tarte would need to craft a healthy stash of her weapon—Molotovs. *Shopping it is.*

“Let’s go buy the ingredients you’ll need, and then we’ll head back to the inn so I can teach you how to craft Molotovs! What do you think?” I suggested.

“My furst step as an Alchemeowst!” Flames of determination seemed to roar behind Tarte.

So, we went to the item shop nearest the Guild, which I’d patronized a few times in the past—its shopkeeper was a friendly middle-aged man who was always willing to help a person out.

As we pushed through the door, it opened with the clang of a bell, and the shopkeeper immediately greeted me. “Hello, Jiggly Jelly Fiend,” he said. He hadn’t forgotten about me.

With an embarrassed grin, I answered, “Hello. I’m shopping for her today.” I indicated Tarte.

“Nice to meet you, sir.”

“The pleasure is mine, little lady,” the shopkeeper said. Immediately, Tarte’s eyes began to wander around the shop full of fantastical items—far more than the store in the Farming Village had held. “Buying for her, huh? What are you looking for?”

“I’m an Alchemeowst!”

“That’s a treat. There aren’t many of you around,” he said. “Over here,” he called, showing us the shelf that seemed to contain the tools and materials we were looking for. In fact, I recognized all the Alchemist staples from the game.

“There’s enough here to give you the same setup your grandma had at your house,” I told Tarte. “Let’s get you a full set.”

“Okay. I wonder how much— *That* meowch?!” Tarte shrieked, hope leaving her eyes as she read the price tags of the items I’d selected to match her grandmother’s setup. The most expensive item was the Advanced Cauldron, at five hundred thousand liz, followed by Ludia’s Sapling Stirring Spoon at a hundred thousand. Even a Fast Firestarter would set us back ten thousand.

I never mentioned exactly how expensive her gear would be, did I? Tarte had some money saved up from her allowance, as well as some cash Frey and the others had given her upon her departure—that wouldn’t come close to covering her setup.

“I got you covered!” I declared, proudly whipping out my own wallet.

Frantically, Tarte tried to stop me. “Meowster, I can’t possibly let you buy me all that!”

“This isn’t a treat, Tarte. It’s an *investment*. You can’t formulate efficiently without a decent setup. It’s okay. I have enough to cover it,” I said, and Tarte cried out pitifully.

Only when I suggested that she could pay me back little by little from the loot she’d soon start collecting on our dungeon dives did she reluctantly agree. “I’m going to use Formulation nonstop and make you purroud!”

“I’m counting on it, my little apprentice,” I said. “First, we need

to buy the materials for that." I turned to the shopkeeper. "I'll take any Alchemy Tomes you have. And the ingredients for Molotovs." For one Molotov, we'd need two Fire Shrooms, a Magic Stone, an Oil, an Orc Rag, and an Empty Potion Bottle.

"Don't carry Orc Rags," said the shopkeeper. "Not a lot of shops do. They smell rancid. Well...your best shot of scoring a lot of them might be through the Guild."

They smell that bad? That would certainly suck the joy out of making those Molotovs. A glance toward Tarte showed me that she was trembling in fear of the Orc stench—alas, her Cait Sith sense of smell was much keener than mine.

"I've got twenty Fire Shrooms and a decent stock of the other ingredients. How many do you want?" the shopkeeper asked, then told us his prices. It would be two thousand liz for each Fire Shroom, seven hundred for each Magic Stone, and two hundred for each bottle of Oil. Back in *Reas*, Fire Shrooms could only be purchased from other players, so I was glad to find them in a shop—and at a cheaper price than I'd expected because there was little demand for them. On the other hand, there wasn't much supply to go around either. Setting up a method of reliably acquiring these items would be key for us. *Maybe we could post a purchase request through the Guild.*

"Then...I'll take all the Fire Shrooms, please, and fifty each of the Magic Stones and Oil. And could I take three hundred Empty Potion Bottles off your hands?"

"No problem. I'll bring them right out," the shopkeeper said.

"Thank you."

He began stacking the merchandise on the counter, and Tarte stashed the items handfuls at a time. Soon, the shopkeeper said, "I'm impressed you can carry that much in there." Then he turned to me. "Oh, you asked for Alchemy Tomes too. I've got copies of the Novice Alchemy Tome and Intermediate Alchemy Tome."

"I'll take one each, please!" I said.

"Here you go."

Tomes contained Formulation recipes. They weren't a requirement to use the Skill, but they would make good textbooks for Tarte as she started to practice her craft. Speaking of Tarte, she had flipped through the pages of the first tome before carefully stowing it. "I can't wait to formulate!"

"Thank you," I told the shopkeeper.

“Thank you so meowch.”

“I hope to see you again soon.”

With those farewells, we left the item shop and returned to the Guild.

“Oh, Sharon, Tarte. How can I help you?” Prim greeted us as we approached her counter again.

“Can you explain, Tarte?” I urged.

“Yes, Meowster. Miss Prim, we’re looking for Fire Shrooms and Orc Rags…as many as possible.”

“Fire Shrooms and Orc Rags…” Prim repeated. “Those are on our buy list, so we should have some in stock. Let me see how many.”

“Thank you,” Tarte purred.

Once Prim had retreated, my apprentice and I shared a look of relief—there would be Molotovs in our future.

After we’d waited five minutes, Prim came back out. “Here you go.” She dropped two sacks on the counter with a thud. “Here are fifty Fire Shrooms and thirty-two Orc Rags. That’s all the rags we have, but we have another hundred Fire Shrooms in the back. How does that sound?”

“Hmm…” Naturally, Tarte looked to me to make the call. She didn’t yet know how many would be reasonable. I gave her a nod—we could use all of it and more. “We’ll take these and the shrooms in the back! And we want more… Can we put in a purrchase request?”

“I’ll bring the rest out,” Prim said. “You can put out a purchase request, but it’ll be a bit more expensive than buying from us directly because we have to charge a fee. Is that all right?”

Tarte looked to me again for confirmation, which I gave. “Yes, purrlease!”

Prim cracked a smile at Tarte’s eagerness. “Wonderful.” Then, she put in the purchase request: With the twenty-percent markup, we would pay 840 instead of 700 liz for each Orc Rag and 2,400 instead of 2,000 liz for each Fire Shroom. That was still a great deal in my book. Back in *Reas*, you could never find Fire Shrooms for cheaper than 3,000 liz a pop.

Having bought out their stock, we left the Guild and returned to our inn.

“It stinks! It stinks!” Tarte yowled as soon as she opened the bag of Orc Rags.

Even I had to pinch my nose from the stench. “I can manage,

but it has to be terrible for you. Cover your mouth and nose with a towel."

"Okay."

I whipped out a couple of towels to protect our senses a little bit. The stench was still prevailing, but it had become tolerable...or so I told myself. I'd have to think of a better solution for working with these rags.

Tarte began laying out her new gear on the desk—Advanced Cauldron, Fast Firestarter, and Ludia's Sapling Stirring Spoon. Then, she pulled out the ingredients needed to craft the Molotov. If you wanted to gather these ingredients without buying them, you'd have to both hunt and harvest them in the wild. As powerful as Molotovs were, they were a bit arduous to make.

"My own Alchemy tools...! I can't wait to formulate."

"Then let's jump into it." I flashed a smile. "Do you remember the steps?"

"Of course! I remember everything you taught me, Meowster!"

"How smart you are," I said, and Tarte's face broke into a smile—how adorable. "Oh, the recipe for a Molotov is in the Intermediate Alchemy Tome."

"Yes, Meowster." Tarte opened the tome to the Molotov page that contained a simple illustration of the item alongside its Formulation recipe and common uses. After reading through the page, she huffed and said, "I'll give it my best shot!"

While the process looked complicated to those who'd never tried it, at its core, formulation was a simple task of putting ingredients into a cauldron in order of most common to rarest.

Tarte started the process by putting an item into the cauldron, stirring it until it flashed, and then moving on to the next item on the list. Before long, she'd crafted a Molotov—a clear bottle of live flame contained by a seal shaped like a dragon. A Molotov would explode on impact, and its firepower was amplified severalfold when thrown using the Potion Throw Skill.

"I did it, Meowster! How does it look?"

"Perfect! You did great," I said.

"Purray!" Tarte cheered, jumping up and down. "I'm going to make more!" she purred and went on to craft all thirty-two Molotovs that she could with the materials we had, taking short breaks here and there. Formulation expended mana, so it was important to take breaks when you needed them.

“I’m a little tired now,” Tarte said.

“You haven’t used Formulation much before, so each one takes concentration. No rush. You’ll get used to it before long.”

“Yes, Meowster.”

***

The next day, Tarte and I stepped out of our inn with all of our Molotovs in our Inventory, ready to go. We’d be using them to grind levels today!

“We’ll pick up a hunt quest at the Guild on our way. If we do that, we’ll earn some money for taking out those monsters too.” *The quest reward, the drop items, EXP—we’re not going to miss out on anything.* As long as Tarte chose to fight with Molotovs, she’d need all the cash she could earn. She wouldn’t turn a profit at first, but as her level increased, she would start earning more from hunts than she’d spend on materials for the Molotovs.

“Quest… I’m so excited for my first quest!”

“We got this!” I said. “If Kent and Cocoa are at the Guild, it would make sense for us to form a party. What do you think?” I asked. Kent’s presence on the front line would be especially helpful.

“Purrfect!”

Now that she’d left her island for the first time, Tarte seemed ecstatic just to meet new people. I hoped to expand her horizons by helping her meet and talk to a lot more.

As soon as we walked into the guild, I spotted two familiar figures by the quest board. “Kent! Cocoa!” I called.

“Sharon!” they both answered, waving me over excitedly—they must have gotten my message through Prim and waited there for us.

“Great to see you both! And let me introduce you to Tarte.” I gestured. “We’re traveling together. She’s my apprentice, actually.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tarte said. “Meowster is teaching me all about Alchemy.”



“An apprentice?”

“In Alchemy?”

Kent and Cocoa shared a curious look but seemed to be satisfied with Kent’s explanation of “This *is* Sharon we’re talking about.” *I’m not sure how to feel about that one.*

Then, they turned to Tarte and greeted her in return. All three were smiling, so it looked like they’d formed a mutually good first impression—especially as they shook hands and Kent and Cocoa looked amazed by how soft Tarte’s paws were.

“So we’re a party, us four?” Kent asked.

“Yeah!”

“Purray!”

All that was left was to decide which quest to take on today, then head to a counter to register our party and start our quest.

“What quest are we going for?” Kent asked.

“I have an idea! Why don’t we hunt Orcs?” I suggested.

Kent’s and Cocoa’s eyes flew open.

“Not a chance!” Kent said.

“We can’t take on Orcs!” Cocoa joined in.

So far, my suggestion had been vetoed with extreme prejudice. Considering our levels, we would be kind of outclassed. Without exceptional equipment, *Reas* players had considered Orcs safe to take on at level 25 if they were in a party and at level 30 if they were on their own. I didn’t blame these two for being intimidated by the prospect.

Regardless, I wanted more Orc Rags to craft Molotovs with. Besides, Tarte’s Potion Throw could deal a lot of damage even at a low level. It’d let us brute-force our way through enemies we might have otherwise struggled to handle. That was why I wasn’t really concerned about facing down Orcs.

While I contemplated how to answer, Tarte trilled, “I agree with Meowster.”

“What?!” Kent and Cocoa said, surprised that Tarte, at her young age, was willing to challenge them.

“We didn’t even ask what your levels are,” Kent said. “Cocoa and I are 25 now. How about you two?”

“Still 17,” I said.

“Mine is 18,” Tarte chimed in.

“Isn’t taking on Orcs pretty foolhardy?” Kent muttered once he learned our levels. He must have hoped that I’d raised my level enough to comfortably handle Orcs on my own.

Alas, we weren't living in a video game where everything came easily. *Oh, the things I would do to have some extra levels!* "Anyway, let's grind those levels! No worries, this quest is just for ten Orcs. Let's start here!"

"O-Okay...?" Kent relented in the face of my steamrolling.

Cocoa turned to him nervously. "Kent?!" Then, she looked back to me and saw how confident I remained. In the end, she agreed to go on the Orc hunt as part of our party.

Orc Hunt

We had come to Sunlit Grove, a place where plenty of Orcs lived. This field lay directly to the east of the Paradise of Erungoa. As its name suggested, it was a beautiful wood—at first glance, nothing about it suggested the existence of hideous Orcs. Warm sunrays cut through the canopy, illuminating what could be fun hiking trails. Clearings were plentiful in these woods, making for relatively easy ground to fight on.

Three species of monster lived in Sunlit Grove—a serpentine monster called Snakle, a spiderlike monster called Spidle, and, at their apex, the Orc. Other than that, there were only a few plants we could gather, like Medicinal Herbs.

I chuckled when I heard Cocoa and Tarte let out pitiful whines. Orcs were one thing, but snakes and spiders came with their own sense of horror. Back when I'd first come to the Sunlit Grove in *Reas*, knowing I was playing a video game hadn't stopped me from shouting every time I encountered one of those monsters. I'd hunted so many, though, that now they didn't bother me one bit.

"Typical girls," Kent said. "They're just snakes and spiders."

"You don't mind them, Kent?"

"I'm fine. I've taken out plenty of bugs in my house."

Are normal bugs and bug monsters the same to you? I wanted to ask. Nonetheless, I was relieved—if our frontline fighter, Kent, had been afraid of bugs, we wouldn't have had much success with our hunt.

"How about you?" Kent asked.

"Yeah, I'm used to them by now," I said.

"Used to them...?" Kent repeated.

I forced a laugh. "Let's go over our strategy." *Oops.* At level 17, I wasn't supposed to be used to monsters of this caliber. "Our main source of damage is Tarte's Potion Throw. Snakles and Spidles will go down in one shot, but an Orc will survive. At her current level and gear, it's going to take two Molotovs plus a little more damage. So, Cocoa, I need you to land a magic spell when we fight an Orc. Combined, that should be enough to take it down. Is that okay?"

“I got it!” Tarte crowed.

“I’ll try my best!” Cocoa added.

The damage output of a Potion Throw varied not only based on the projectile’s stats and the user’s Skill level but also based on the user’s overall level and equipment. I had memorized the formula to calculate damage, but I didn’t need to be too exact right now.

“And my job is to keep the monsters where we want them,” Kent said.

“Yep. Orcs need to be isolated, but you can group a few snakes and spiders together. As soon as we spot an Orc, we’ll attack. Same if there are too many snakes and spiders around,” I said.

“Got it,” Kent answered.

“Here’s the key… I have a Skill called Goddess’s Smite. When I use it on someone, it doubles the power of their next attack,” I said.

“Doubles?!” Kent and Cocoa blurted.

“That’s ameowzing!”

I nodded and then prompted, “How can we use this Skill to hunt Orcs more efficiently?”

“Why don’t you cast it on everyone before we attack?” Kent asked.

For one thing, I wouldn’t have the time to cast it on everyone continuously. It would also be a terribly inefficient use of mana. Even if, say, Kent landed only a light cut on the Orc with his sword, the Skill I’d used on him would be spent.

Tarte trilled in contemplation before raising her paw. “If you double my first attack, it would only take Cocoa’s magic to finish it off!”

“Oh!” Kent exclaimed.

“You’re right!” Cocoa joined in.

“Bingo!” I said. Tarte had found the solution. Even if I doubled Kent’s or Cocoa’s attack, Tarte—our main cannon—would still have to land two attacks. With Tarte’s solution, it would only take two attacks total to take down an Orc. “So, Tarte, you’ll attack only after I use Goddess’s Smite on you—unless something unexpected happens. If someone’s hurt, for example, or if there are more Orcs attacking us than expected, go ahead and attack. Don’t wait for me.”

“Yes, Meowster,” she said solemnly. “It’s an impurrtant job.”

It definitely was, and on her first hunt, no less… *I'm counting on you to learn and grow, Tarte!*

"Let's go!" we shouted, like a sports team starting a game.

As we began our trek through the woods, I soon noticed how good visibility was in here. With very few thick trees, it was easy to see into the distance. No Orc would be small enough to hide behind a tree, so they wouldn't take us by surprise. In contrast, it wouldn't be difficult for *us* to use the trees for cover.

"We want to land the first hit. I'm casting Strengthen and Goddess's Protection on all of us, Regeneration on you, Kent, and Mana Rations on the rest of us!" I announced. Those were the best buffs I could put on us at the moment. I'd be recasting Goddess's Protection only when needed, but I wasn't going to let Strengthen or Mana Rations lapse for a moment.

"How many Skills can you use…?" Kent muttered, and I gave him my most strategic answer—silence. "There it is! An Orc!" Kent pointed. "One Snakle in front of it."

"Go get them, Kent," I said. "I'm putting Goddess's Smite on you, Tarte."

"On it."

"Yes, Meowster!"

I used my Skill, doubling Tarte's next Molotov throw. It felt pretty OP, if I were being honest.

First, Kent slashed the snake with his sword to draw the monsters' aggression to himself. Now, they would target Kent before they targeted us. Then, he charged toward the Orc. "Here goes! Taunt!"

"You have a hate-manipulation Skill!" I said, applauding Kent's growth. That must have been one of the new Skills he'd learned since we'd last hunted together.

Taunt drew enemy hate to the user—a must-have for tanks. With proper maneuvering, it prevented enemies from attacking the backline players at all, making hunts significantly easier.

Kent moved to push the snake and Orc together before jumping out of the way. "Now!"

"Got it! Purrtion Throw!"

"Right behind you! Fire Arrow!"

Tarte and Cocoa launched their attacks at the same time. A Molotov's explosion had a radius of three meters around its point of impact—hence Kent's pin-and-ditch maneuver. Both attacks must have landed, because the Orc and Snakle turned

into a burst of light, leaving drop items behind.

"That was awesome! We took out an Orc just like that!" Kent cheered as he scooped up the drop items. He kept muttering, "Awesome," as he did so.

"I can't believe it!" Cocoa said, relishing our victory. "I never thought we could take out an Orc at our level!"

Tarte, meanwhile, stood motionless—probably in awe of the damage her first Potion Throw had done. "I-I never imagined it would be that powerful."

"It's pretty cool being an Alchemist, huh?" I said.

"It's ameowzing! I'm going to work harder and harder!" Tarte said, wiping away my worry that seeing the explosion in person would intimidate my young apprentice.

"All right. Let's hunt nine more and finish up our quest!" I said.

"Yes, Meowster!"

"Yeah!" Kent and Cocoa cheered.

Once we'd taken out our first Orc, we had the rhythm down.

"Strengthen! Mana Rations! Uh-oh—Kent! Another Orc's coming at you from the right! Watch out!" I called.

"Got it!" Having rounded up a snake, a spider, and an Orc, Kent leaped to the left, in the opposite direction of the approaching Orc. As soon as he was clear, Tarte and Cocoa immolated the trio of monsters. Without missing a beat, Kent used Taunt on the next Orc.

"Go ahead, Tarte!" I encouraged her.

"Yes, Meowster! Purrtion Throw! Meow!" I hadn't had a chance to cast Goddess's Smite on her again, so Tarte had to attack twice—and burn two Molotovs—to take out this Orc. It wasn't optimal, but I was satisfied that Tarte was able to fight flexibly, adapting to new situations.

So far, so good! I thought. Kent was moving even better than I'd expected. He was always aware of how many monsters were in our vicinity, and he always checked in on us before moving on to a new monster. He stuck to the plan, safely luring each monster so Tarte and Cocoa could finish them off. It was clear that he'd learned a lot when it came to combat.

"That's nine," Kent said.

"Yeah, we got this!" Cocoa added.

Their confidence and spirits were definitely up, especially compared to how they'd reacted to the idea of hunting Orcs back

at the Guild.

"All right—Goddess's Smite!"

"Thank you, Meowster!" Tarte whipped another Molotov out of her Bag and threw it at the tenth Orc of the day with all of her strength. Combined with Cocoa's spell, the Orc was cooked.

Molotovs are busted. If Cocoa's Fire Arrow had been our only mode of attack, considering her lack of buffs from equipment, it would have taken at least twenty hits to take down an Orc. And taking down an Orc like that would *not* have been realistic.

"Ten Orcs down!" Kent announced. "Wanna take a break?"

"Yes, please!" I agreed.

We settled down in a clearing that had several stumps we could use for chairs. Sipping on my tea, I remembered my primary reason for wanting to hunt Orcs—the Orc Rags.

"Hey, Kent, Cocoa? If you don't mind, can you sell me the Orc Rags from today?" I asked.

"What?" they said in unison, looking at me like I had two heads. *I understand.* What sane girl would want stinky Orc Rags?

"It's for me to make Meowlotovs with," Tarte said.

"The ones you were throwing?" Kent asked. "I didn't expect something like this to be a part of it... What else do you use?"

"For each Meowlotov, I need two Fire Shrooms, a Magic Stone, a bottle of Oil, an Orc Rag, and an Empty Purrtion Bottle," Tarte listed off, counting on her little fingers.

A grave shadow crossed over Kent's and Cocoa's faces.

"For just one? That's so much!" Cocoa said.

"Stuff like the Magic Stones is one thing, but Orc Rags and Fire Shrooms are expensive! You've been chucking all that money at them this whole time we were hunting?!" Kent bellowed.

"The rags are all yours!" they both said to Tarte, in complete agreement. If we counted the cost to make the Molotovs as a collective expense of the party, I could charge Kent and Cocoa's share after the hunt...but then they'd be left with nothing. On the other hand, I didn't want them to feel bad about Tarte using Molotovs without them contributing.

"Thanks, you guys. We'll call it even if you give us the rags," I offered.

"Of course. Thanks so meowch, Kent, Cocoa," Tarte said.

They both looked visibly relieved.

"It's the least we can do," Kent said. "Your Molotovs are making our hunt so easy, Tarte."

“It makes sense that they’re so expensive,” Cocoa chimed in.

The two of them shared a look. “It’s almost not fair.”

I laughed and agreed. This strategy would not have been an option if I hadn’t had the funds to cover the expense. Orcs were relatively easy fodder, but it would take a lot more than a Molotov or two to defeat high-level monsters and bosses. Some bosses took one or two *hundred* Molotovs to take down—sometimes only to miss out on a rare drop. *Enough of that,* I told myself, turning off my gamer brain.

“Are you sure you don’t mind using the Molotovs?” Kent asked.

“I want to become a Formulation expurrt, so Purrtion Throw is my only way to attack,” Tarte explained.

“I get it. If you don’t have another attacking Skill, then you can’t help it,” Kent chuckled. “If we come across any of the items on your list in the future, we’ll talk to you before selling them to the Guild.”

Tarte beamed. “That would be ameowzing! Thank you so much!” As her mentor, I was happy to see her building good relationships with other adventurers.

We hunted in Sunlit Grove for a while longer before heading back to the city. At that point, Tarte had five Molotovs left—a comfortable reserve in case of an emergency. We ended up taking out twenty-four Orcs and picking up eighteen Orc Rags—which meant Tarte could make more Molotovs!

We’d leveled up too, of course! I was now at level 26, Tarte was 27, and Kent and Cocoa were both 31. I might have been disappointed in my progress if I had been playing *Reas*, but it seemed like decent progress for a day’s work here. Kent and Cocoa seemed to think so, anyway, as they repeated their new level to themselves with amazement. Having distributed my Skill Points as I leveled up, I felt like I’d improved my stats quite nicely.

Overview:

```
Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 26
Job: Healer (Expert in healing magic. Supports
allies with buffs and barriers.)
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Titles:
Fiancée No More: +5% Resistance to attacks from Male enemies.
Flaudia’s Blessing: Healing Skills are 10% more effective. / Reduce mana cost of healing Skills by 50%.

Skills:
Blessed Light: Turns clean water into Holy Water. / Item Required: Potion Bottle
Heal (Level 5): Heals the target.
Wide Heal (Level 1): Heals all targets within a 7-meter radius of the user.
Regeneration (Level 2): Recovers HP every 10 seconds.
Mana Rations (Level 5): Recovers mana every 30 seconds.
Strengthen (Level 5): Buffs physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).
Goddess’s Smite: Doubles the damage of the next attack used.
Goddess’s Protection (Level 3): Creates a barrier around the target.
Cure: Heals status conditions.

Equipment:
Head: Hairpin of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Physical Defense / +3% Resistance to all elements)
Body: Robe of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Magical Defense)
Right Hand: Staff of Bloom (+3% Healing / +10% Holy element)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: —
Feet: Boots of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Physical Defense)
Bonus: Compassion Set 3/3 (+15% Healing / +5%

Physical Defense / +5% Magical Defense / −10% Mana cost for Skills)

After our hunt, we cashed out at the Guild and headed to the tavern to celebrate with a rewardingly carnivorous dinner. The tavern was lit by warm ambient light. A dancer twirled on a stage near one wall, accompanied by a band of musicians. It must have been a popular joint because it was packed almost to the brim. Waitresses tirelessly maneuvered around the floor, answering order after order with a “coming right up!”

Luckily, we didn’t have to wait to find a seat. Tarte sat next to me, across from Kent and Cocoa. Other adventurers sat at tables around us, clearly having a good time.

“I’m so exhausted, but I’m not going to sleep without eating *meat*! Cheers!” Kent declared.

“Cheers,” we answered, clinking our glasses of fruit water together.

A plate with a thick steak was soon slid onto our table. “Nothing like a slab of meat to fortify you after a hard day’s work,” I said, greedily lifting my knife and fork. Hunger growled in my stomach, demanding satisfaction.

“It looks purrsitively scrumptious,” Tarte purred.

“Let’s eat!” Cocoa urged.

They were both staring at the hefty slab in the center of the table as if enchanted by it. Even though I’d already spent a decent amount preparing for today’s hunt, I’d sprung for a nicer cut to celebrate us raising our levels so much. It was perfectly marbled, the aroma of melting butter and steak sauce threatening to make me forget every semblance of table manners.

I quickly cut the steak into four parts and watched three forks each stab and slide a piece off of the plate. There was no way I was going to fall behind, so I took a bite straight out of my piece. I easily bit a chunk off the tender meat, which melted in my mouth in an explosion of flavor, the aftertaste of butter and the prickly spice of the sauce echoing on my tongue.

“Mmm, that’s divine!” I exclaimed.

“Ah, that’s good!” Kent slammed his empty glass on the table.

Cocoa laughed. “You sound like my dad. But I think I understand how he felt now.” She went on to tell us about her

father, who'd sit down with snacks and ale after he came home from work each night. Kent was nodding along, chiming in with similar anecdotes.

I used to have a drink when I beat a hard dungeon, I reminisced about my days in Japan. Drinking alone in my room hadn't been nearly as raucous as this, but I would think back on good plays I'd made that day.

"Sh-Should we order another one?!" Kent asked.

"It was so delicious..." Cocoa sighed.

No piece of the massive steak was left anywhere on the table. Kent and Cocoa seemed to be itching for another helping.

Children! There are more meats to be had than steak! "Other things on the menu look good too—let's try those out. If we're still hungry after that, I'll order another steak!" I suggested, pointing at the menu pasted on the wall. Unlike restaurants in Japan, there were no printed menus at the tables. Perhaps they would have them in the city's fanciest restaurants, but not in a tavern like this.

"Good thinking!" Kent agreed. "I've been eyeing the cheese sausage."

"Just the sound of that makes my mouth water," I said. "I want to try the meat buns!"

"Sounds amazing."

As Kent and I continued listing off dishes we wanted to try, Tarte and Cocoa began giggling.

"Everything sounds ameowzing," Tarte said, her tail as straight as a flagpole.

"You have to get what you want too!" I told Cocoa and Tarte. "Or you're going to end up with what Kent and I want. This is not the time to hold back! The battle's already begun!"

Tarte's and Cocoa's eyes darted to the menu.

"Uh...fried chicken!" Cocoa said.

"Crispy chicken skin, purrlease!"

Now that I'd gotten a dish from everyone at the table, I put the order in, along with refills of our fruit water. Even without alcohol, this felt like a proper party. *The joys of being an adventurer!*

While our second order was being prepared, we picked at bar snacks and talked about this and that.

"Oh, right. I met Lulua and Molly. They were very worried about you," I mentioned.

“What?!” Kent and Cocoa blurted.

Lulua was Cocoa’s mother and Molly was Kent’s. I’d met them when I’d spent the night in Farming Village, where Kent and Cocoa were from. They’d practically run away when they left home, so their parents had been asking other adventurers about them.

“What are you doing, mom…?” Kent muttered, his cheeks a little flushed. “So embarrassing.”

“She’s worried because you don’t write to her,” I told him. “She said Cocoa is the one who writes her regularly.”

“Oh…” Kent said, quietly averting his gaze. Hopefully, he’d write Molly after this.

Not long after that, our second round of food arrived. We were brought a link of sausage already bursting with cheese, meat-and-vegetable dumplings that reminded me of dim sum, tulip-shaped fried chicken, and salted crispy chicken skin. Every single dish made my mouth water.

“Food!” we all shouted, each shoving something into our mouths at once and moaning from its deliciousness. My dim sum was so hot I thought I might have burned my mouth. After huffing and cooling the dumpling, I bit down and it exploded in a harmony of meat and vegetable flavors. *I could keep eating forever…*

Eventually, we all waddled our full bellies out of the tavern. I felt like my stomach was going to burst, and my friends looked like they felt the same. It was safe to say we’d all gorged.

“I might have to swing my sword around to make the food settle,” Kent said, rubbing his belly. “I’m tired, though!”

Cocoa and Tarte were both mirroring his gesture.

“Then why don’t we take a scenic route back to the inn?” I suggested.

“Agreed!” Cocoa and Kent chimed.

“Meow!” Tarte added.

So, we took a stroll through the streets of Zille, which had taken on a new aura of enchantment in the nighttime owing to the Crystalline Cathedral towering over the north of the city.

“It’s glowing,” Tarte purred in amazement.

“Spectacular, isn’t it?” I said, desperately wishing for the Camera feature, as I’d done countless times since rediscovering its existence.

We wandered the city accompanied by the sound of water

rushing through the aqueducts until we heard some hustle and bustle around a corner. Somehow, we'd walked back to the food stall district.

"It's just as popular at night," I said.

"For drinking, looks like," Kent noted. The stalls had set up more makeshift tables to serve drinks to people looking to unwind at the end of the day.

"It doesn't look like a place for kittens," Tarte said.

I chuckled. "They *are* mostly serving alcohol," I agreed. Maybe it was time for us kids to head back to the inn and get some rest for tomorrow. Just as I thought to turn around, I spotted a brilliantly colored stall. "What are they selling there? Knickknacks?"

I watched a few women buy something at the stall before moving to a nearby table and writing something down.

"Postcards!" Tarte cried and ran toward the stall.

"She said she wanted to write to her sister's party," I explained, following Tarte with Cocoa and Kent.

The stall's main ware was a series of postcards painted with scenery from around the city, marketed to tourists. Tarte was staring at the postcards, mesmerized by the myriad of art they featured. "I want to send a letter on one of these!" she crowed.

"Great idea," I said. "I think Torte and everyone will love it too." Tarte and I decided to write everyone we'd left back in Cattora.

Picking the postcard was easy for me—I had to go with the Crystalline Cathedral design. Tarte must have been really impressed by how accessible water was in the city, because she was sorting through a selection of postcards featuring the aqueducts.

"You should write to your mom too!" Cocoa told Kent. "She'd love a postcard from you."

"A postcard? That's not really my style—"

"Just write one!"

"O-Okay..." Kent relented and began searching the display. There was no doubt who'd be in charge in their relationship when they inevitably got married someday. He ended up choosing the same design as mine, while Cocoa picked out one featuring Zille's nightscape to send to her own parents.

These postcards would be rolled up and delivered by owls. While it was hard to tell how long a card sent by owl would take, they were a surprisingly reliable method of delivery. After

submitting our postcards, we walked on to the inn, enjoying more of the sights Zille had to offer at night.

We Really Need Protective Masks

“Can’t we do anything about this smell?!” Tarte yowled.

“Well…” I offered my apprentice a weak smile as she slaved away crafting Molotovs, the stench of the Orc Rags bringing tears to her eyes.

As for our party, we’d taken the day off from hunting Orcs. I’d suggested it, just in case my friends had worn themselves out more than they’d realized taking on monsters they’d never fought before. As “Go! Go! Go!” as we were, there was no sense in pushing beyond our limits.

“If only we could deodorize the rags or get you a mask or something,” I said, contemplating our options. Even if I could successfully clean the rags and remove their stench, would they still be Orc Rags? It wasn’t like I had a way to do that anyway. The more realistic solution was to get her a mask. If I recalled correctly, there had been an item called Protective Mask in *Reas*—but I’d never used one, so I didn’t remember how to get my hands on one.



“Either option would be ameowzing…” Tarte whined.

“Do you want to check the item shop tomorrow?” I suggested.

“Can we go right now?!”

So, Tarte and I walked over to our favorite item shop.

“Protective Mask? I don’t have any of that,” the shopkeeper said, brutally dashing Tarte’s hopes and dreams.

“Okay…” Tarte sighed, her ears drooping in dejection.

“Sounds like serious business. What do you need it for?” he asked Tarte.

“I want to do something about the stinky Orc Rags…”

“Oh…” the shopkeeper said, his face darkening—he must have had firsthand experience with the stench. “You’d need something powerful to block that smell out. Have you tried asking the Guild?”

“No! We might find a lead there—that’s where we bought some of our rags.”

“Let’s try, Meowster!”

We thanked the shopkeeper and made haste.

When we walked into the Guild, we found Prim at the counter. I called to her, slightly regretting not taking the chance to ask when we’d completed our quest yesterday.

“Hello, Sharon, Tarte. Can I help you with anything?” she asked.

“Yes, actually. We’re having a tough time with how bad the Orc Rags smell. Any chance you have an item that could help with that? Maybe a mask or something…?” I said.

“Oh!” Prim chuckled. “It’s horrible, isn’t it?” Apparently, the Orc Rags were infamous for their stench. “We do have something called a Protective Mask…but it’s not for sale.”

“Really?!”

“Fur real?!”

My apprentice and I slumped in devastation at the news. How was it fair that the Guild was hoarding such a god-tier item?! Didn’t we also deserve one—or two—or like, five, including spares?

“Please…!” I implored. “Can you at least spare one…?”

“What do you mean ‘at least’?” Prim thought for a moment. “Well… You’ve helped us out a lot already. Just a minute,” she said, reaching for a map from the shelf behind her and spreading it out on the counter. It was the same one I’d had access to in *Reas*—except this one lacked a lot of details that the

in-game map had contained. “We can’t sell you any, but we can tell you how to obtain some.”

“Really?!”

“Purreally?!”

Tarte and I responded again, brimming with hope this time. If there was no way to buy them, I’d have no problem going to score one ourselves. “Where do we need to go?!” I asked, leaning over the counter.

“Right here.” Prim pointed to a location called Withered Spring.

“Oh…” I said, furrowing my brow.

“Meowster?” Tarte asked while Prim wore a pitying smile.

Withered Spring had once been a fresh burbling spring, luscious and beautiful. Now, it was a toxic swamp full of Poisonous Weeds and ruled by witch monsters. The sight of the poisonous mire I’d glimpsed in game was fresh in my memory. “That’s right! Venom-Spewing Witches have a chance of dropping a Protective Mask!” I said, finally putting my finger on where I’d seen them—I’d always sold them off immediately anytime they dropped. For an equippable item, the drop rate wasn’t too bad. We wouldn’t have to hunt for too long before scoring one for me and one for Tarte.

“You knew that too, Sharon?” Prim asked.

“I thought I’d seen a Protective Mask before. I’d forgotten all about it until just now,” I laughed.

“One of these days, I’d love to take a peek into your mind,” Prim said, probably not entirely joking.

“Meowster! We can hunt for Purrotective Masks here?!”

“That’s right! Let’s do it!” I cheered.

“Yes, Meowster!”

In order to take down the witches, Tarte would have to craft more Molotovs. *Best not to burst her bubble,* I decided and didn’t remind her until later.

***

The next day, Tarte and I arrived at Withered Spring, our journey hastened by our rented steed. We tied off our horse at a tree, ready to hunt some witches!

After speaking to Prim the previous day, we’d bought whatever Orc Rags and Fire Shrooms had been turned in for the

quest we'd posted. Tarte had gotten down to business as soon as we'd returned home. Now she had thirty-one Molotovs handy. There was a reason I hadn't invited Kent or Cocoa—this field poisoned players left and right. Once poisoned, your breathing became pained and your HP was rapidly drained. Only an Antidote Potion or Cure—my newly acquired Skill—could heal that status condition. Popping Antidote Potions at every turn would burden Kent and Cocoa physically and financially, and it would have been too difficult for me to keep up my Cures on all four of us.

An armor with poison resistance could have made all the difference, I thought, but there was nothing to be done now. Just one piece of armor like that would have cost a significant sum.

Fortunately, though, the only monster that spawned in this field was the Venom-Spewing Witch. It had a decently threatening attack, but it never swarmed, so even with just Tarte and me, we should be able to fight them two-on-one most of the time.

First, we need those Protective Masks so Tarte can make Molotovs to her heart's content! I thought. *Then, we'll invite Kent and Cocoa back so we can grind levels together!*

"It's dark in the forest…" Tarte mewled.

"There's a truly wicked type of witch monster here. Just stay close to me."

"Yes, Meowster!" Tarte answered, nervous but determined.

I followed up by casting Strengthen, Goddess's Protection, Regeneration, and Mana Rations on both of us as we stepped into Withered Spring.

It was a dark and damp wood carpeted with moss. Our footing was made even worse by the pools of poisonous murk around every corner—not to mention poisonous plants that made you break out just from touching them. Since neither of us had a lick of poison resistance, we were bound to get poisoned if we so much as stepped one foot into a poisonous puddle.

"There it is." I pointed.

"She's flying on a broom?" Tarte hissed, watching as a witch flew leisurely over the poisonous swamp. She wore pitch-black robes and a gold chain around her neck. A lantern and—for some reason—a bundle of Poisonous Weeds hung from the handle of her broom. Tarte's surprise made me realize that this was my first time seeing someone fly on a broom too.

“I’m going to draw her attention—it’s up to you to take the shot. Goddess’s Smite!”

“You can count on me, Meowster!”

Making sure Tarte was ready, I stalked toward the witch. The Venom-Spewing Witch was a bit of a glass cannon, so Tarte should be able to one-shot the monster with a Molotov.

“Look down here, you witch!” I shouted. I didn’t have a Skill to draw enemy hate, but I could make the witch target me by moving closer to it than Tarte and drawing its attention the old-fashioned way. Tarte’s attack would draw the witch’s hate to her—if the first Molotov didn’t take her out. As soon as the witch screeched and began its charge at me, I shouted, “Now!”

“Yes, Meowster! Purrtion Throw!” Tarte threw the Molotov and a pillar of flame erupted a hair’s breadth away from me, like I was living in an action film! I was okay, though, thanks to my Goddess’s Protection barrier. *Not even singed.*

“We did it!” Tarte crooned.

“Great job!”

Tarte and I high-fived and reached for the items the witch had dropped—a Witch’s Brew and a Broken Broom, which were both as useful as garbage.

“A purrtion?” Tarte asked.

“It’s an item called Witch’s Brew. Don’t drink it, though—you’ll get sick.”

“So it’s not a purrtion…” Tarte said.

Here’s a tip, little apprentice. Never drink anything a sketchy witch carries in her robe pocket. “All right, let’s keep up the pace and hunt more witches.”

“Yes, Meowster!”

I set out walking in high spirits—we had to make our own fun in this dreary wood.

“There they are!” I announced. “There’re two flying in tandem, but that doesn’t change anything—stay calm.”

“You got it!”

As one of the witches came flying in my direction, I picked up a rock and threw it at her—which locked both monsters’ attention on me. A supporter had to be resourceful. I charged toward the witch. Inevitably, I sprinted through a poisonous puddle, but I didn’t pay it any mind beyond casting Cure on myself.

“Goddess’s Smite!” I used my Skill just as I corralled the pair of

witches together.

"Incoming!" Tarte trilled. She was already getting the hang of when to attack—what a fast learner. "Meow! Purrtion Throw!" Her call heralded another Molotov and another spectacular explosion—it was a work of art, really.

"Awesome job, Tarte!"

"Awesome!"

We high-fived to our victory again and continued with our hunt…until the twenty-ninth witch finally dropped a Protective Mask.

"Yay!"

"Purray!"

We'd gotten what we'd come here for! I was tempted to keep hunting for more, but I didn't want to waste any more Molotovs. Though we'd been able to take out more than one witch at a time on several occasions, we'd burned through twenty-four Molotovs, leaving seven in Tarte's Inventory. Instead of springing for the additional mask, I'd just excuse myself from the room when Tarte formulated in the future.

"Now we can go home and—" Just as we turned to leave, the scream of a young girl pierced the murky woods. Tarte and I shared a look—we weren't going to leave her behind. "Tarte, even if you feel like you have to rush and help, never go before me. Goddess's Protection. Strengthen. Regeneration. Mana Rations. And here's Goddess's Smite for you," I said, controlling my own urge to run straight into the woods. We weren't particularly strong yet. It was more prudent for us to take a moment to fortify ourselves rather than sprint ahead recklessly.

"Got it!" Tarte answered.

Once I buffed us as much as possible, we began running with caution. If we let ourselves get attacked by more than one witch at once, we wouldn't be able to help whoever had screamed.

Tarte hissed, having stuck one foot in a poisonous pool.

"Cure! Are you okay, Tarte?!"

"I'm all right! We can keep moving!"

"Make sure you keep up!"

"Yes, Meowster!"

We were off again, straining our ears to listen for another sign of the girl, and Tarte kept pace with me. After a while, we heard the screeching of witches and the panting of a girl—she was still alive!

There she is! Catching sight of the girl, I shoved my sudden surprise down so I didn't have to waste a moment. "Throw it, Tarte! Goddess's Protection. Heal. Cure."

"Purrtion Throw!"

A split second after my Skills had buffed the girl, the faint glow around her faded, and Tarte's Molotov burned the three witches swarming the girl to a crisp. *That was too close.* Everything had happened too quickly for me to be sure, but I guessed the glow around the girl had been an indication of some sort of protective Skill.

"Thank goodness."

"We made it... Mew!"

Tarte and I sighed in relief, just for a moment. We couldn't afford to dillydally now.

"Are you okay?" I asked the girl as I scooped her up from the ground, bringing her out of a loop of being poisoned and healed. I used Cure on her again and waited for her to stir.

"Hang in there now," Tarte encouraged her.

Soon, the girl's eyes slowly opened. "I feel a bit better now. Thank you for rescuing me."

"You're welcome. First thing, though...we need to get out of here." I entrusted Tarte with the girl and began leading us toward the exit, patting myself on the back for keeping my cool even after recognizing whom we'd just saved—at first glance, one might think she was just an adorable girl of about seven.

"Two witches ahead..." Tarte hissed.

"Goddess's Protection! If there are only two, it won't be a—"

"I'll protect you!" the girl declared with a voice like the ring of a bell before I could finish my sentence. "Goddess Flaudia, lend me your strength," she continued. "Goddess's Sanctuary." Then, a gentle light emanated from her.

Tarte meowed loudly, but I was speechless as I watched the mysterious light spread, cleansing the poisonous swampland as it went. Wherever the light touched, plants sprouted from the ground, restoring this place to what it must have been like before the spring was tainted—at least inside a circle of light with a radius of five meters or so. The witches were unable to breach the divine light as they screeched along its border.

"I almost forgot. Goddess's Smite!"

"Thank you, Meowster! Purrtion Throw!"

As soon as I cast my spell, Tarte knew what to do. Not only did

she one-shot the pair of witches, one of them dropped a Protective Mask—lucky us!

And the girl who'd used that divine Skill was none other than Pope Tithia. Her silky silver hair fell below her waist. Even though they'd been splattered with poisonous musk, she wore her signature white robe and hat, both accented with blue. Her wide sleeves seemed to hang low now that they were soaked. Her definitive identifier, though, was her staff, which was taller than she was.

Tithia was a child blessed by Flaudia. In *Reas*, she had been a named NPC who could be found at Zille's Crystalline Cathedral. There had been several storylines in the game that featured her, including some that I had played through. She was an admirable and extremely noble-hearted girl who dreamed of world peace. Her innocence and position often left her caught up in dangerous situations, according to her backstory in the game.

What's she doing here? I wondered. She was supposed to be guarded by a ton of Paladins who'd never let her wander off by herself, much less into a place as dangerous as Withered Spring. I didn't have the answer, and there was no time for me to either think on it further or ask Tithia about it.

Eventually, we were able to celebrate making it out of Withered Spring.

"Phew. We made it out!"

"Meow!"

"Yay!" Tithia chimed in, in her calm and slightly monotonous way of speaking.

We had safely made it back to the entrance of the wood, where our horse was grazing on grass by the tree we'd tied it to.

"Now, I'm going to use this on you two," I said, taking out my Pristine Ring.

"What is that?"

"I've never seen that before either," Tithia said.

"I forgot this was a rare item... I'll show you what it does," I said.

"Okay," the two girls said in unison.

Smiling at the adorable, simpatico duo, I tossed the ring into the air. It grew to the size of a toy hoop, then fell perfectly around me—and voilà! All the grime from the swamp vanished from my body!

"Th-That's ameowzing!"

“Wow.”

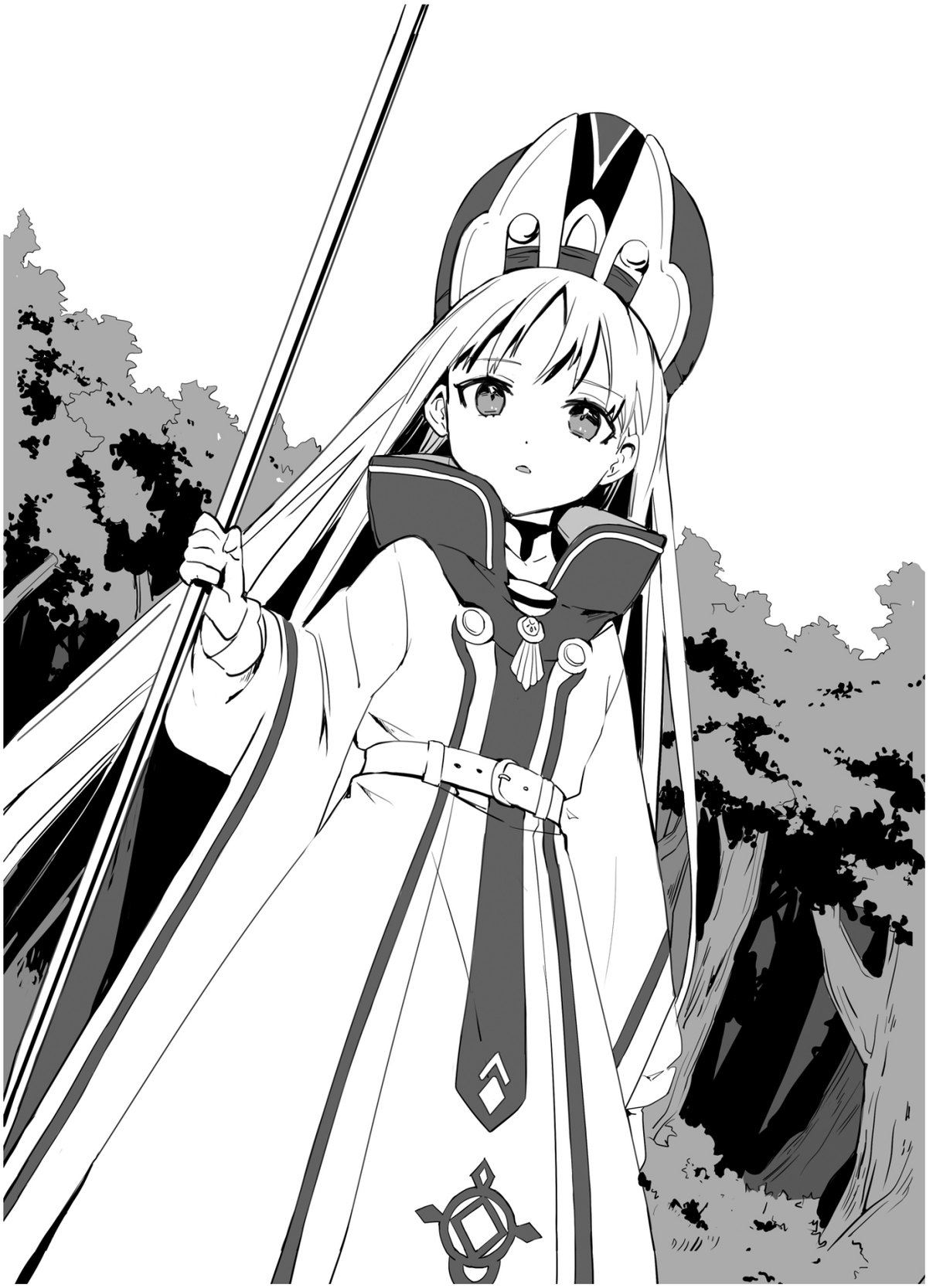
The girls applauded as they eyed the hoop, clearly eager for their turn. I obliged their silent request and cleaned them right up with the ring. Standing side by side in their pristine outfits, they somehow seemed even more adorable than before.

“Let’s introduce ourselves, shall we? I’m Sharon. I’m a Healer,” I began.

“I’m her apprentice—Tarte the Alchemeowst.”

“Thank you for rescuing me. My name is Tithia. I’m the Pope.”

Tarte yowled in surprise as she jumped into the air.



He Who Serves

After we'd made our introductions, I noticed that something about the little Pope Tithia seemed off.

Is she still in pain? I cured her of the poisoning…

Even though she was giving me a perfect smile, it looked painted on. Of course, it was possible that she was still shaken up from the monster attack.

How frankly can I speak to Tithia? I wondered. As a former *Reas* player, I found the prospect of making friends with Tithia and getting involved with her exciting. On the other hand, from my experience of being raised as a nobleman's daughter in this world, I was calculating my risks. Getting involved with her would probably mean that I'd be roped into learning the deepest secrets of Zille—there'd be no returning to my carefree life of adventure then. Regardless, I wasn't going to let a little girl suffer. If I were being honest, I was curious to find out Zille's secrets too.

"Your Holiness, may I ask what happened?" I tried but Tithia shook her head. There was no sense in pressing the issue. "Well… Do you have anywhere to go right now? I can't just leave you here."

"That's right," Tarte chimed in. "Meowster and I can help you." She looked at the Pope with great concern, eager to help this girl who was as little as she was. Tithia's pensive expression made it clear that she was trying to keep us out of her troubles. Still, I was determined to help her with whatever she was going through.

"We're going back to Zille. Do you want to come with us…?" I prompted, and Tithia shook her head again—she didn't want to return to Zille. Maybe some enemy of hers was in the city. *Someone high up in the government?* I wondered, feeling my face tense up. *What are we getting ourselves into? There's no turning back, though—now that I've met her, I won't let Tithia deal with her troubles alone!* I decided, rather impulsively. "Okay. Then let's go to Snowdia, the Everfrost City. What do you say, Your Holiness?"

"What…? Are you sure? Didn't you come here from Zille?" Underneath Tithia's politeness, an unmistakable glimmer of

hope brightened her face.

"Of course! We'll just have to camp out tonight," I said.

"If you really don't mind..." Tithia whispered, her voice trembling. "I can't...repay your kindness right now...but someday, I promise...I will!"

It was my turn to shake my head. "I just want to help you with whatever you're going through. Don't worry about repaying us for anything. You can breathe easy."

"Whatever it is, Meowster can help you—she's the best adventurer ever!"

"Your faith in me is so precious!" There was no way I could let my apprentice down. I took quiet, deep breaths and planned out our next move.

Once we made it back to our horse, we started down the highway that led to Snowdia. I didn't think the horse appreciated us riding triple, but I told myself that Tarte's and Tithia's tiny bodies weren't too much of a burden. *If we could get our hands on a vehicle item...* I daydreamed. Those were pretty much exclusive to difficult dungeons. I still wanted to grind levels and work on the Holy Maiden quest... My to-do list was growing fast, and even though I was keeping up the calm exterior of an experienced adventurer, my mind was whirling with thoughts about everything that lay ahead of us.

***

After spending one night under the stars, we made it safely to the Everfrost City, where it was constantly snowing. Thankfully, I'd bought a thick coat in preparation for visiting a place like this. *Great job, me!*

As soon as we arrived in the city's vicinity, Tarte trilled with excitement. "Th-This is what snow is?! I've heard stories, but I never thought I'd see it fur real!" Her tail stood straight up as she took in the falling snow. Tithia was watching my little apprentice with a smile on her face too.

"Let's get a room and some rest. I think the inns here have hot spring baths," I said. Most lodgings in this world didn't come with a bath, but Snowdia had the wonderful benefit of being a natural spa! All the players had been stoked about it too when it'd first launched. Notably, there had been this terrifying feature that, should a player try to enter a bathing area that didn't match

their character's sex, a lightning bolt would strike them dead, as if the gods of MMO had smitten them for their perverted intentions.

"Hot spurrings… I've read about that in a book too. It said they were pawsitively relaxing!" Tarte said.

"I like hot springs too…" Tithia added.

"You are a treasure trove of knowledge, Tarte. And I'm glad you like them too, Your Holiness. Let's have a nice soak and rest well," I said. How fun would it be for us three girls to relax in the hot springs?

Just as I started off to find our inn, I spotted the Transportation Gate, conveniently located near the entrance to the city. Acting like a curious tourist, I inconspicuously touched the Magic Stone on the gate to register it, and Tarte followed my lead.

Now we're getting the hang of it.

We soon came across an inn called Dragon's Fire where each room came with a private hot spring bath.

How long has it been since I've been to a hot spring? I wondered. I'd certainly never been to one as Charlotte. Even in Japan, I'd never had the time once I'd become another cog in the machine, so…I must have been in college when I'd last gone. *Did I even go in college?* I couldn't remember—in any case, it had been a literal lifetime ago.

"Oh, right. I have to go out for a bit. Can you look after Her Holiness, Tarte?" I asked.

"Out… Yes, Meowster," Tarte agreed, catching on to my meaning. I was going to jump to Zille by means of the Transportation Gate.

"It's cold out, so I'll pick up anything you need," I offered.

"Can you bring me back some treats?" Tarte asked.

"You got it!"

After hunting witches, camping out in the wild, and making the trek to Snowdia without a real rest, a reward was definitely in order—for all of us! It was settled. We'd party it up with snacks after dinner tonight.

"How about you, Your Holiness?" I asked Tithia.

"But I…" She hesitated.

"Don't worry. It'd be a big help if you simply told me anything you'd like. I'm already going to get you a change of clothes. Anything else?" I encouraged her. As far as I could tell, Tithia had

nothing on her except the clothes on her back and the staff in her hand—not even a Magic Bag.

"Um, then… Could I ask for an Empty Potion Bottle?" she finally relented.

"We have plenty. You can take as many as you need," I said. What a meager request!

"Purrlenty!" Tarte announced, whipping out bottles by the handful before I had a chance to produce one of my own.

Tithia watched Tarte with surprise. "I have a Magic Bag too," she announced, flicking her sleeve aside to reveal a small pocket—her Magic Bag.

That's incredible! "I've never seen a piece of equipment with a feature like that! That's so high-tech!" I gushed.

"It's pretty handy. I can keep snacks in here too." Tithia pulled some lollipops out of her sleeve and smiled with a hint of mischievousness. "Here you go," she offered.

"Thank you," I said, taking one.

"Thanks," Tarte purred, taking another.

We all popped the candy into our mouths. It tasted like clear rock candy, soothing to our tired minds.

"Oh, but…this Magic Bag doesn't fit too much, so it would really help to have extra clothes. But otherwise, I'm really okay… Thank you, Sharon," Tithia said.

"You're welcome. Just let me know if you think of anything else."

"I will," she said.

With the intention of stocking up on food, snacks, and necessities, I left our new inn.

"The Holy Capital of Zille, Central Plaza," I announced as I walked through Snowdia's Gate. I stepped out the other side and into the plaza in Zille. My first intercity jump had been a success.

What I wanted to do now was to let Cocoa and Kent know that I'd be staying in Snowdia for a while, cancel my reservation at the inn here, and snoop around the Crystalline Cathedral to see if there was talk of the missing Pope. I'd already finished all the shopping I needed to do back in Snowdia.

I poked my head into the Guild to find Kent and Cocoa cashing out at a counter with a pile of Wolf drop items on it. They must have just finished a hunting quest.

I waited until they were finished and called to them. "Kent! Cocoa!"

“Sharon!” they both cried and ran over to me.

“You said you were going on a quick hunt and never came back! We’ve been worried sick!” Kent said. “There were powerful witches where you went, weren’t there…? Are you hurt?!”

“Are you okay?” Cocoa asked before I could answer. “What happened to Tarte?”

“We’re fine,” I said, feeling bad about worrying them. “Thanks for thinking of us. We ran into someone based in Snowdia during our hunt, so…we made a little detour.”

“Snowdia? The city where it’s winter year-round?” Kent asked.

“We’ve never been,” said Cocoa.

Kent turned to Cocoa. “How do you get there?”

“It should be as easy as following the highway north out of Zille,” she answered correctly. Most cities and villages here were connected by well-maintained highways.

“Are you going to stay there for a while?” Kent asked.

“Yeah. I’ll pop back every so often, but I’m going to work out of there for a while. Tarte’s still in Snowdia, so I can’t stay in Zille too long,” I explained. I really was a bit nervous about leaving the two girls alone for too long.

Kent and Cocoa were very understanding about my situation. “Got it!” Kent said. “I wish we could have gone with you, but the north is still too dangerous for us, especially with the stronger monsters up there.”

“Yeah, not with our current gear,” Cocoa agreed. “I’m planning on buying a new set once I gain a few more levels.”

“I think it’s about time you bought new equipment,” I agreed. They were still wearing equipment designed for green adventurers. They would benefit from buying new gear from a higher-end store.

“We’re going to keep putting in the work!” Cocoa smiled.

“Well, let’s go on a hunt together when you come back,” Kent said.

“We may not be able to do much, but let us know if you need any help in Snowdia,” Cocoa offered.

“Thanks, you two! I’ll take you up on that if anything comes up!” I promised. It was a shame to leave them again when we’d barely squeezed in a single hunt, but it couldn’t be helped. With a promise to form a party again soon, I left the Guild.

Then, I stopped by our inn in Zille to vacate our room before continuing to Flaudia Cathedral to gather information on Tithia’s

disappearance and, if time allowed, seek out Leroy. He seemed to be a key person in my Holy Maiden quest.

The cathedral was as majestic as always, the surge of visitors a testament to Flaudia's popularity. As far as I could tell, nothing seemed amiss. The priests and priestesses weren't whispering worriedly or anything like that.

So, I decided to ask at the reception. "Excuse me. I'm hoping to see Bishop Leroy today. Is he here?"

"Leroy, you said?" the priestess behind the counter repeated.

"Yes," I answered, pretending not to notice how her expression had shifted. *Maybe I should keep the information on that quest to myself.* "He showed me around the cathedral when I came to offer my prayers last time... I was hoping to thank him for his time."

"Oh, I see." The priestess smiled, apparently buying my statement of selective truth. "I'm sorry you came all this way. Bishop Leroy is no longer here."

"I didn't know," I said. "If you ever see him, can you tell him the adventurer he helped thanks him?"

"Of course."

It didn't seem prudent to pry for his location, so I left the counter.

What's my next lead...? I wondered as I walked farther into the cathedral. Leroy had left the cathedral for a reason... The question was why and where to. My gut told me it had something to do with Tithia.

"Hmm... Maybe I'll try to pray and clear my head," I decided.

"Why are you being so mean?" a familiar voice shrieked. My first instinct was to ignore the voice and march right out of the cathedral, but what I heard next made me stop and scowl. "I am going to be a Holy Maiden, if you must know. You should really show me some respect..."

She *thinks she's going to be the Holy Maiden?! What is she on about?!* I turned to find exactly whom I'd expected—Emilia, the current lover of my ex-fiancé. As to why she was standing there, I hadn't the faintest clue. Now that my first instinct of flight had passed, I wanted to stick around to gain more information. Before meeting Frey, I had heard rumors of the Hero and the prince of Farblume coming to Zille. I'd run into Frey shortly afterward, so I'd assumed that the rumor about Ignacia had been unfounded. It seemed like I'd assumed wrong. I'd written to

mother requesting information about the crown prince, so I'd have to let her know about this as soon as I could set a return address.

"The title of Holy Maiden is not one you can simply acquire. First, you must pray to Flaudia and further your training—" a priestess was explaining.

"You've said that already. Are you withholding the method of becoming a Holy Maiden because I don't work here?" Emilia demanded.

"As I've explained, there is currently no Holy Maiden and no one knows the process for becoming one." A tired drag in the priestess's voice belied her smile, making me wonder how long Emilia had been nagging her about it.

What could she possibly accomplish as the Holy Maiden? I wondered. *There's no way she's even activated the quest.* If Emilia was going to buzz around the cathedral out of a sense of entitlement, I'd have to be careful not to run into her. Wherever she was, my ex-fiancé couldn't be far behind.

So, I left the cathedral. Not only had I not found Leroy, I'd had to hear *Emilia's* voice, of all people's—what luck.

As soon as I was far enough from the cathedral, I ground out a breath. I didn't think anyone could have blamed me, though. Thanks to Emilia, my trip to the cathedral had been a net negative.

"What should I do now?" I wondered. I still believed Leroy was a key to the Holy Maiden quest. If not being able to find him now was a part of the quest's storyline...it was critical that I track him down. Without meeting Leroy, my quest wouldn't progress. There was no telling whether Leroy had simply been relocated or whether he had even left the church of his own volition... Whatever the case, there was a deeper reason behind his absence. I'd drawn that conclusion because he was a bishop—a considerably high position in the church—and because of the priestess's reaction when I'd asked about him.

Should I go to the Crystalline Cathedral? I turned my eyes north toward the structure that towered over the city—a worthy residence for the Pope. If he had been relocated there, though, I was sure the priestess would have told me. That would have been a promotion worth celebrating.

"What if he's locked in a dungeon cell?!" That was common in worlds of swords and spells, wasn't it? *A torturous prison to hold*

the likes of criminals and heretics… Or perhaps, could he have learned too many secrets…?

Does Flaudia Cathedral have a dungeon? I wasn't sure. I'd been to the cathedral countless times in *Reas*, but certain parts of it had only been accessible during specific quests, so I wasn't familiar with its entire blueprint.

Just as I passed a dark alleyway, someone reached out and grabbed my arm. First, I thought it had to be Ignacia—who else would want to detain me? *Did Emilia see me in the cathedral?* Quietly casting Strengthen and Goddess's Protection on myself, I prepared to run—then wrinkled my nose at the smell of blood. If the person grabbing my arm were one of Ignacia's men, they wouldn't smell like this. Was this just a random mugging or kidnapping? Whatever it was, I had to run—now.

Before I could move, though, the grabber whispered in my ear. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Bishop Leroy…?" I muttered, and his grip on my arm loosened.

Before I could wonder what he was doing in a dark alley, he'd pulled me into it. Sheltered from the din of the street, I could hear Leroy's rough breathing. That alone, and its stark contrast to the cool demeanor he'd worn the last time I'd seen him, set off alarm bells.

I took him in. "You're covered in blood! Heal!" I began casting. "Heal again! Regeneration! Mana Rations!"

Immediately, his breathing steadied. "Thank you for that." If he couldn't even heal his injuries, he must have been completely out of Mana and HP Potions—he was in a dire situation. "Let's go somewhere we can sit down."

"Agreed," I said.

He led me farther into the alley, to a small house. We climbed an exterior staircase before stepping into a room on the second floor—a simple studio apartment. Although it was furnished with a basic table and bed, the room was far from well-kept. Leroy was in a more precarious situation than I'd thought.

Once Leroy lit the room, I stopped him before he could step farther into the apartment. "Your clothes are soaked in blood. Stand right there. I'm going to clean you."

"Clean me…?" While Leroy stood looking confused, I used the Pristine Ring on him. "What was that?!" I'd given him quite the scare, but we still weren't even, considering how he'd gotten my

attention earlier. “You cleaned me right up… That’s incredible. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied with a smile.

Leroy finally sighed in relief, offering me a chair. “If I had any tea, I would serve it… My apologies.”

“Don’t worry about that… You were going to tell me what happened,” I urged.

“Yes,” he said, then confided that he’d been looking for me. “I know this is sudden…but I need your help.”

“I’m just a low-level Healer. Are you sure I can help you?” I challenged him.

“I really do. Besides, you finished my quest when no one else could. I was quite surprised. Levels are not the only indicator of prowess.”

It didn’t feel half bad to have someone acknowledge my talents beyond my level. I was confident I could go toe to toe with any Archbishop when it came to using Skills smartly.

I met Leroy’s gaze. “So…what enemy did you make?”

“Cardinal Rodney Hervas.”

I didn’t recognize that name at all. There had been too many NPCs in *Reas* to remember them all. Perhaps he’d never been an important character in the game, or else…

“Rodney is working to seize Erenzi for himself. He’s been clandestinely gathering support for his cause… He finally made his move the other day.”

“Just the other day?”

“Yes,” Leroy confirmed. He continued to explain how the Crystalline Cathedral was currently under Rodney’s control. The Pope and her supporters had all been forced to retreat from Rodney’s proponents, which far outnumbered the well-trained Paladins who protected the Pope and the church.

“We barely managed to get Her Holiness out through a hidden passageway. It didn’t take long for their agents to pursue us and whittle down the Pope’s defenses,” Leroy went on. The hidden passage must have let out near Withered Spring where I’d met Tithia. That seemed like a terribly irresponsible spot to make a getaway to, but maybe the spring hadn’t been poisoned back when the ancient passage had been built.

“You’re loyal to the Pope,” I said.

“Yes. My body and spirit belong to Her Holiness.” Leroy placed a hand on his heart, softening his expression and tone for the

first time since I'd met him—it was clear his devotion to Tithia was genuine. "That's what I need your help with—to find Her Holiness. We have been searching without rest but to no avail… Her life may be in danger if we don't find her soon."

"Her life?!" Right when I'd been about to tell him I knew where she was, he dropped that bomb. I couldn't ignore a threat to Tithia's life. "You mean…she may be killed by those agents?"

"No," Leroy said. Apparently, she didn't exactly have Assassins on her tail. "Let me show you." He stood from his chair, turned, and slid his robe down to his waist to show me his back.

I gasped. "That's…!" Leroy's back was marked by a cursed sigil—L'lyeh's Lament—as if some sinister creature had carved the black-and-purple mark into Leroy's back with its talons.



“We never expected Rodney to be connected to the Abbey,” Leroy said. The Abbey—as in the Abbey that worshipped L’lyeh, the Goddess of Darkness, who diametrically opposed Flaudia, the Goddess of Light. It was hard to imagine anyone from the two churches working together.

Maybe this goes deeper than I thought… I recognized L’lyeh’s Lament from the game. It was an insta-kill attack used by the boss L’lyeh, who could be found in the Underworld Abbey.

Wait, insta-kill? “How are you alive?” I asked.

“I didn’t realize you could be so blunt,” Leroy said.

“Oh… Sorry. But that curse is—”

“Yes. A cursed magic circle that causes instant death.”

“Right,” I said. Even in *Reas*, L’lyeh had been no joke. Game knowledge alone wasn’t enough to beat the Goddess of Darkness. You obviously had to have all the right equipment and a healthy stock of healing items, then execute every step of the battle correctly.

“This is only half of the lament,” Leroy said, cutting my train of thought short.

“Half? Oh, it *is* incomplete.” I finally noticed. Maybe the curse had failed.

Before I could think too long on it, Leroy provided the answer. “The curse was meant for Her Holiness. I used an item to take half of it onto myself.”

“You split a curse in half…?” I’d never known that was even possible. I restrained myself from asking what item, exactly, he’d used.

“Since the curse was halved, neither I nor Her Holiness perished from it,” Leroy said.

“That makes sense,” I said, wondering if Tithia was currently afflicted by the other half of the curse. Leroy was shrugging his robe back on, slightly out of breath. Now that I thought about it, Tithia had remained out of breath even after I’d healed her. It hadn’t been because she was scared or in shock—*I should have found this out sooner!* I thought, even though there was nothing I could have done, even if I had known that it was a curse.

As far as I knew, the only way to break a curse was to use a particular Skill only an Archbishop could learn. That being said, many of the unique jobs’ Skill sets had never been shared with the player base at large, so there was no knowing what they could do.

If I had to guess, the curse would probably activate when the magic circle completed itself. In that case, we only had to slow its progress until I figured out how to break the curse entirely.

"To make a Delay Potion…I need a Silence of the Flower, a Holy Water, and a Star Mana Potion," I recalled out loud. I could make Holy Water and buy a Star Mana Potion at the item shop. I didn't know if the shop would have Silence of the Flowers but I knew how to get one of those too. I had to assume Leroy and Tithia didn't have much time left—there was no helping them without first slowing the curse.

Leroy's eyes widened as he watched me plan. "You think you can break the curse, Sharon?"

"I've never tried breaking an instant-death effect, but I think we have a shot. I can't do it right now, though. Let's assess our situation and work to delay the curse as much as possible," I said. If one of Leroy's compatriots was an Archbishop, they could use their Skill to break the curse, which would be easy enough. Judging by Leroy's current situation, though, I had little hope that his friends were in any position to help. I pitched my idea to Leroy anyway.

"Almost everyone who serves Her Holiness is a Paladin," he said, shaking his head. "I'm a Cleric, so I certainly don't have a curse-breaking Skill…and who knows how many of the world's Archbishops even have that Skill?"

"Then we're back to delaying the curse," I said.

"I agree…but how?" he asked.

"There's a potion that can do it—and it can be crafted by an Alchemist. Let's round up the ingredients," I said. It felt like the remaining moments of their lives were ticking away with every second. I wasn't going to let someone I knew die of a curse when I could do something about it.

"Sharon!" Leroy stopped me just as I turned to go.

"If we don't hurry, you're going to die!" I cried. There was no time for chitchat now!

"I know! But I must find Her Holiness first!"

"Oh." I'd forgotten, in my panic over the curse, that Leroy and his companions had been desperately searching for Tithia. "Actually…Her Holiness is under my care," I said.

"Huh?" Leroy said, his well-proportioned face crumpling for the first time. He looked around the room, as if he'd find an explanation scribbled on a note somewhere. "Huh?" he repeated.

“Pope Tithia is safe. She’s with me,” I stated as clearly as I could.

After freezing for a few seconds, he returned his gaze to me. His eyes were rarely open wide, but now I could see the beautiful burst of amethyst within them. “Thank you, Sharon. You have my eternal gratitude.”

“Oh, please,” I said and explained that Tithia was with Tarte in Snowdia, which I thought was an acceptable location since it was in the opposite direction from the Abbey’s location. Of course, Rodney’s agents could be stationed anywhere. “Let’s go to Snowdia right away.”

“Yes, let’s.”

So, Leroy and I did exactly that.

The Glorious Hot Spring Resort

Before departing from Zille with Leroy, I traveled back to Snowdia alone by Transportation Gate, planning to explain the recent development to Tarte and Tithia at the inn before jumping back to Zille and traveling by horse to Snowdia. *I have a tough schedule,* I thought, but there was no way around it. *Time to gird my loins.*

"Meowster!" Tarte shouted as soon as I arrived back at the inn.

"Tarte, are you crying?! What's wrong…?" I asked. Tithia was sleeping on the bed, occasionally tossing and turning. "Deep breaths. Calm down," I told my apprentice.

"Me…ow. Me…ow," Tarte breathed before settling herself with a huff. Then she looked up at me again. "Meowster, Tithia and I used the hot spring in the room, and…"

"Oh," I said in realization. Tarte must have seen the mark on Tithia's back. It must have been quite the shock to see a sigil made by dark magic.

Seeing that I was already aware of the cause of her distress, Tarte asked, "You knew already?"

"I just learned about it," I said. "In Zille, I met a friend of Tithia's whom I also happen to know." Whether it had truly been a chance encounter was yet to be seen.

I explained that I needed to return to Zille for now to bring that person here. We'd be traveling by horse, so we should make it in two days' time, but I'd be going as quickly as possible.

"I can't be with you during that time, so I want you to stay at the inn," I said.

"Yes, Meowster. I'll take purrfectly good care of Tithia too."

"Thanks, Tarte. I'm counting on you," I said, adding that the plan was for her to craft a Delay Potion that would slow the magic circle's growth. Any ingredients we couldn't buy, we'd go get ourselves. While we were in Snowdia, I also wanted to see if they sold Orc Rags at their shops and buy however many Fire Shrooms we could. On the other hand, we might want to leave some Fire Shrooms for others if we didn't want our first impression in the city to be as item hogs.

“I’m leaving what I bought today. There are some clothes in there, so use whatever you need for you and Tithia,” I said.

“Thank you, Meowster.”

There were easily enough clothes to last several days and Tarte already had a stockpile of necessities in our Inventory.

“Okay. I’m gonna get going,” I announced.

“I’ll be waiting for your return.”

I went through the Gate once more to return to Zille, and it didn’t take long for me to find Leroy standing in the shadow of a nearby building, all ready to go. He had been able to pack without being detected by Rodney’s agents.

“Thank you for waiting,” I greeted him. “Are you all set?”

“Yes. I crafted a few bottles of Holy Water as well,” Leroy said.

“Oh, that helps a lot.” We couldn’t have too many of any ingredient necessary for crafting the Delay Potion. I’d make sure to craft some myself once we were in Snowdia. “Let’s go rent our horses. We’ll camp out on the road and arrive in Snowdia sometime during the day after tomorrow.”

“Wonderful,” Leroy said.

This also meant that I would be riding on my own much sooner than expected. I straddled the familiar horse Tarte and I had ridden to Zille on, trying to hide how nervous I was. *Okay, horsie. Please listen to me…!*

“Sharon, are you all right?” Leroy asked.

“What? Oh, yes, of course!”

“It’s just that…I thought you were shaking.”

I laughed to mask how scared I was. On the other hand, this was my chance to up my horse-riding game. If I could master this, Tarte would be so impressed! Pretty soon, I’d be able to run up cliffs on horseback— *Okay, probably not.* “Let’s get going,” I said. “Strengthen.”

“Thank you,” Leroy said. “I never thought to use Strengthen like this.” Clearly, it wasn’t common to use Strengthen outside of combat—what a shame, especially since most supporters didn’t have much physical endurance. I’d happily share this idea with anyone who’d listen so people could start recognizing the true value of support jobs.

Out of concern for Leroy, I kept us riding at a slower pace than normal. When I saw that the sun was starting to set, I decided to stop our horses for the night. My previous experience riding with just Tarte had paid off because I’d gotten used to

riding alone fairly quickly.

"Phew. Let's camp out here for the night. We'll leave first thing in the morning," I said.

"Great," Leroy agreed and tied his horse to a tree. I followed suit and took out our camping gear—I'd bought enough for both of us in Zille—and we began pitching our tents.

"You're pretty handy, Bishop," I observed.

"This is easy enough," Leroy answered. Maybe not all bishops spent their days bossing priests around in the cathedral. My opinion of him had improved, just a little bit.

Once our tents were set up, I laid out sleeping mats and lanterns to complete our five-star lodging for the night. We should be able to rest decently. That was when I noticed Leroy watching me with a keen gaze. "Um... Is something wrong?"

"I just noticed how much you fit in your Magic Bag. You are incredible, Sharon. It's no wonder you were able to finish that quest."

"Oh, the quest..." I said, deliberately ignoring the topic of my bag. I'd turned in the Jewel of Lament that no one else had been able to find. *Maybe now's my chance to ask.* "What did you use that item for anyway?"

"I... Yes, I suppose I should tell you," Leroy began. "I already mentioned how Rodney worships L'lyeh, the Goddess of Darkness. We're still investigating the jewel...but we were told that it could be used to open a particular door."

"It's a key?! To a door in the Abbey?!" I demanded. I'd been to the Underworld Abbey dungeon, and I didn't recall any locked doors. If Leroy's information was correct, there was something hidden in the Abbey that I'd never discovered in my years of playing *Reas*.

Oh no. I want to go to the Abbey right now.

"Why do you look so excited?" Leroy asked.

"Oh, no reason whatsoever," I mumbled, averting my eyes from Leroy's gaze.

"There's something special about you, Sharon. It's strange," Leroy murmured. "We're not sure if the Jewel of Lament is a key to the Abbey. It could also unlock one of Rodney's hideouts." Still, he explained that his best guess was that the Jewel of Lament had something to do with the Abbey, judging by its name.

"But I don't think your level is high enough to brave the Abbey," I said.

“I was hoping to go with a party of Paladins… I don’t suppose we could take it on with just the two of us,” he said.

“That is *not* happening,” I agreed.

The Goddess of Darkness’s place of worship was no joke. Monsters were at a very high level, and many of them were completely immune to physical attacks. Also, the abandoned building was a difficult map for beginners to traverse.

“Now that Rodney has made his move, it’s become more difficult for us to research the jewel without risking him finding out about it. We’ll have to sit on it for a while,” Leroy said, and I nodded my agreement. If anyone on his side were captured by Rodney, they’d make for a perfect hostage for Rodney to leverage. Still, the item might also be the trump card we needed to turn the tide against the rogue cardinal. In the meantime, I would try to remember anything from the game that could benefit us.

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Two days after leaving Zille, Leroy and I reached Snowdia without a hitch.

As soon as we arrived at the inn, Leroy knelt before Tithia. “Oh, Your Holiness…! Thank Flaudia you’re safe!”

“Leroy…! I didn’t think I’d see you again so soon,” Tithia answered, gently placing her hand on Leroy’s head.



Is this how they normally act...? That's one devoted bishop.

"Sharon, thank you so much for bringing Leroy to me," Tithia said.

"I'm glad I could help," I replied, noting the tears forming in their eyes. I was happy I'd been able to reunite them safely. Before they could get lost in their own little world, I decided to make the introductions. "Bishop Leroy, this is my apprentice, Tarte, the Alchemist I told you about."

"Oh, pardon me," Leroy said, rising to his feet. "You're the one who'll make the potions for us. I admire your talent and discipline at such a young age. Nice to meet you. My name is Leroy."

"I'm Tarte!" my apprentice repeated, clearly intimidated by Leroy's title. Most people never got a chance to meet someone so high up in the church. "Very nice to meet you!" Leroy, on the other hand, maintained his usual haughty demeanor. Tithia, meanwhile, watched the exchange with true happiness on her face.

"Well... We hurried our horses here without much rest, so let's take a little break. Would you like a room to yourself?" I offered.

"Thank you for your consideration, but since we could still be in danger...I'd like for us to stay in the same room," Leroy said.

"Oh..." *The same room?* I glanced at Tithia, who looked genuinely relieved after hearing Leroy's suggestion. Tarte didn't seem to mind one way or the other. With the two little girls in the room, I supposed I could live with sharing a room with Leroy too. "Okay. I'll ask for a larger room that we can move to."

"Thank you," said Leroy.

As soon as we switched to the new room, Tithia and Leroy fell asleep—they must have been exhausted.

"Are they all right?" Tarte trilled.

"Once they wake up, I think they'll be well rested. Maybe Her Holiness hasn't been able to sleep well because Leroy wasn't with her," I said. I had a feeling they'd both sleep in past noon.

"Then let's have some delicious chow ready for when they wake up," Tarte suggested.

"Great idea," I said. Nothing helped you recover like a hot meal. Since they weren't physically hurt—aside from the curse—the best remedy for their spirits was to take the time to rest.

Careful not to wake them, Tarte and I moved to a corner of the room, where I had her take out her Formulation kit. "Let's

make some Delay Potions that will slow the effects of their curse," I said. "We're going to need Holy Water, Silence of the Flowers, Star Mana Potions, and Empty Potion Bottles."

"A new purrtion..." Tarte trilled. "I got this!"

Lucky for us, we found Silence of the Flowers at Snowdia's item shop. They didn't have many in stock, though, so I still wanted to plan an outing to gather some on our own. Just in case something urgent popped up like this in the future, I'd feel better if we had a stockpile of materials in our Inventory. *Maybe I'll take Tarte on an Alchemist's scavenger hunt,* I mused.

"I made it!" Tarte crowed, holding up a bottle with a stylish clockface design—the Delay Potion.

"You've really gotten the hang of Formulation, Tarte," I said.

"I had a lot of purractice making Molotovs. Let's gather more ingredients so we can make more for them—I'm sure they'll need it!"

"I'm so proud of you, little apprentice!" I squeezed my adorable Tarte.

"I got this, Meowster." Tarte smiled.

As we packed up her gear, a yawn slipped out of me. *Right. I didn't get too much rest either.*

"You should rest too, Meowster."

"I will. But before I do..." I went to the door at the end of the room to find what I'd been so looking forward to—our very own hot spring bath! The door opened directly on the wet room, which contained a stone-lined bath open to the elements on one side. There was something special about how the falling snowflakes melted upon the surface of the bathwater.

"The bath *was* purrfect!" Tarte said. "You should enjoy it before going to bed."

"It *is* the star feature of this inn," I said. I wasn't going to miss out on that. I slid a partition in front of the door, just in case Leroy happened to wake up.

"Take your time, Meowster," Tarte said, and I intended to do exactly that.

Although it lacked the traditional *ka-plunk* of bamboo watershoots I would have heard at a Japanese hot spring, I could feel all the tiredness melt out of me as I soaked in the tub. "I've been using Heal to recover along the way, but soaking in a hot spring bath is a whole other level of refreshing." For a moment, I was dangerously tempted to lay my head back and close my

eyes, but I stayed awake by force of will. “Right. My level’s gone up quite a bit.” I activated the Menu to double-check my Skills.

Overview:
Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 30
Job: Healer (Expert in healing magic. Supports allies with buffs and barriers.)

Titles:
Fiancée No More: +5% Resistance to attacks from Male enemies.
Flaudia’s Blessing: Healing Skills are 10% more effective. / Reduce mana cost of healing Skills by 50%.

Skills:
Blessed Light: Turns clean water into Holy Water. / Item Required: Potion Bottle
Heal (Level 5): Heals the target.
Wide Heal (Level 3): Heals all targets within a 7-meter radius of the user.
Regeneration (Level 2): Recovers HP every 10 seconds.
Mana Rations (Level 5): Recovers mana every 30 seconds.
Strengthen (Level 7): Buffs physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).
Goddess’s Smite: Doubles the damage of the next attack used.
Goddess’s Protection (Level 5): Creates a barrier around the target.
Cure: Heals status conditions.

Equipment:
Head: Hairpin of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Physical Defense / +3% Resistance to all elements)
Body: Robe of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3%

Magical Defense)
Right Hand: Staff of Bloom (+3% Healing / +10% Holy element)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: —
Feet: Boots of Compassion (+5% Healing / +3% Physical Defense)
Bonus: Compassion Set 3/3 (+15% Healing / +5% Physical Defense / +5% Magical Defense / −10% Mana cost for Skills)

After defeating those Venom-Spewing Witches with Tarte, I'd made it to level 30, while Tarte had reached 31. I was almost caught up with where Kent's and Cocoa's levels had been when I'd last checked, but I had a feeling they'd gained a few levels too since then.

I had decided to power up Strengthen and Wide Heal this time. I'd acquired all the Skills I wanted for now, so I was working on maxing out Strengthen at level 10. However, I'd spent two Skill Points on Wide Heal because Tithia and Leroy had joined our party. In a larger party like this, Wide Heal would come in very handy.

"Once we reach higher levels, I'll need Heal More…but I won't worry about that for a while—especially with Leroy on the team." It was pretty nice having two supporters in a four-person party. "Oh, I'll have to ask Tithia what her Skills are when we get a chance!" That would determine our party's strategies. I couldn't help but hope she had some radical attacks that would complement Leroy's and my supporting Skills. Speaking of, I'd need to check the bishop's specific Skills too. Surely he possessed some cool ones, considering his position. There was so much I still needed to find out about our party!

"Meowster!" Tarte called from beyond the door.

"What is it? Something wrong?" I asked, panic creeping in.

But Tarte just peeked her head in, holding a glass of fruit water. "The hot spring felt wonderfurl, but it was really hot. I brought you some fruit water," she said.

"Wow, thank you…!" How thoughtful was my little apprentice?! The chilled fruit water felt heavenly as it went down my throat,

cooling me from the inside.

Hot spring baths are the best! I thought again as I sprawled over the edge of the tub. Then I noticed Tarte watching me with a smile. “Do you want to join me?”

“If you don’t mind, Meowster.”

“Of course not.”

“Then I’ll join you for a bit!” Tarte quickly tossed her clothes aside and climbed in. “That feels ameowzing!”

“I’m glad you like it,” I said. “But Cait Sith don’t handle heat well, do they?” That was why she’d thought to bring me water. Even though Cait Sith had faces that were almost the same as humans’, their bodies were covered in fur. Moreover, I guessed that they didn’t really like being wet either.

“We really don’t,” Tarte agreed. “It takes a long time to dry our fur too, but I can’t resist the hot spurring…!”

“I get that!” I said.

“How is that, Meowster?!”

“See how long my hair is? It takes a long time to dry all of it, so I think we have that in common.”

Tarte’s hair hung down to her waist like mine did. I’d happily say it again to anyone who didn’t understand—it was really annoying to dry long hair!

Tarte nodded furiously. “I can’t remember how many times I’ve wished I had short hair like my sister…”

“Yeah, Torte’s hair is much shorter.”

“Mm-hmm,” Tarte purred.

Even with all the work involved, I still liked my hair…but that didn’t stop me from thinking that a shorter cut would make it easier to crawl dungeons and camp out in the wild. “Oh, I don’t want us to get overheated,” I said. “Come here, I’ll wash your hair for you.”

“Thank you, Meowster.”

I sat on the wooden stool in the wet room, scooping up a pail full of hot water. Using the provided soap, I took my time washing Tarte’s hair, which was light and curly unlike my straight hair. *Mm… So fluffy.*

“We all have long hair, don’t we? Including Tithia and Leroy,” I mentioned.

“You’re purright!”

Leroy’s hair only reached his shoulders, but that was a long style for a man. *We could start a band.*

“I’d love to get some good shampoo for us,” I muttered.

“I want ones that smell nice!” Tarte said.

“Love that idea!” I agreed. I might have been an adventurer, but I still cared about how I looked. Besides, I shuddered to imagine my mother’s wrath should my hair have grown all wiry by the time I next saw her. “We have to keep Tithia’s hair maintained too.”

“She has a beautiful coat!” Tarte said.

“Once we have the time, we’ll shop for hair products,” I promised. “Okay, I’m going to rinse it off. Close your eyes.” When I poured the hot water over her head, Tarte let out a meow. Maybe she didn’t like being doused with water. “Are you okay?”

“I’m all right!” Tarte shook her body like a cat, spraying water all around. It was so adorable that I barely noticed getting splashed. “Meow, I’m sorry! I shook the water off by habit…”

“Don’t worry about it. Why don’t we get out and have some more fruit water?”

“Yes, Meowster!”

We dried off, cooled ourselves down with fruit water, and talked for just a little bit before going to bed.

I had a feeling I’d dream well that night.

The Holy Maiden Quest Progresses

By the time the hustle and bustle outside our inn woke me, the sun beyond our window was already high in the sky. I'd slept like a rock.

"My body must have been exhausted from all the traveling and hunting..." I mused. *I didn't think I'd be the one to sleep in the latest...* I looked around to find...everyone else still asleep. They were lined up in a row, with Tarte next to me, then Tithia, then Leroy, who slept closest to the door. "Turns out, I was the early bird." How peacefully they were sleeping... Leroy, in particular, slept like he was dead. "It must have been tough," I muttered. I doubted I'd ever forget the stench of blood in that alley. *As I go on to explore more of this world, though, I might encounter more situations like that... I need to be stronger.*

I changed behind a simple partition and slipped out of the room, careful not to wake the others. They were finally safe—the least I could do was let them rest while they had the chance.

Then, I had brunch in the inn's dining room before heading to Snowdia's Adventurer's Guild in search of materials for Tarte to craft Molotovs with—we could never have too many of those! At the same time, I needed to find another source of income. Thanks to the reward money from turning in the Jewel of Lament to Leroy, I was pretty well set up, but that wouldn't last forever. Ideally, I'd figure out a good way to farm both levels and cash. Determining Leroy's and Tithia's levels and hunting as a party would be a good start. With potential threats closing in, it was a matter of life and death for us to gain as many levels as we could. If Rodney's agents attacked again, we might not be so lucky as to get away, especially if the four of us were found before reuniting with Tithia's Paladins.

In front of the Guild, someone had built a snowman about my height which seemed to be welcoming adventurers in. The sight of it warmed my heart a little—but that relaxed feeling was knocked right out of me the moment I walked through the doors. The adventurers here looked more hardened and intense than those in Zille. Many of them were heavily armored, and I spotted quite a few sets that weren't available in stores. Since

Snowdia was closer to more dangerous dungeons and stronger monster spawns, the levels of the adventurers here must have also been higher. The tension in the air made me straighten my back.

I walked up to a counter that had just become free. The receptionist, a beautiful woman who looked to be twenty or so, had fluffy honey-colored curls atop her head and a beauty mark below one of her green eyes. She wore the same uniform as the staff at Zille's Guild branch.

"Hello," I greeted her.

"Welcome. I don't believe we've met. Is this your first time in Snowdia?" she asked.

"It is." I showed her my Adventurer's Card—my ID that contained my level and a record of my adventures.

"Sharon. Would you like to hear a little bit about Snowdia?"

"Yes, please!" I answered with vigor.

The receptionist chuckled, but this was my first time in Snowdia since regaining my gameplay memories! Even though, in light of our current predicament, I'd tried to keep a stoic mindset, I was still bursting with wanderlust.

"As you have seen," the receptionist began, "it stays winter in Snowdia all year long. The sun sets early, and the nights are very cold. Watch out for icicles when you walk through the streets. Snow-shoveling quests are always available, posted by both residents and the Guild. If you'd like to help, you can accept a quest here. Excluding the highways that connect Snowdia to other cities, you can expect fields of snow all around. Snow piles deeply in Snowdia, so we recommend purchasing or modifying your shoes to suit the terrain."

"Snowshoes. Got it," I said. Even on my way here, I'd nearly slipped a few times. I liked the buffs my current shoes gave me, so I would prefer modifying them to buying a whole new pair. A quick glance at the quest board showed me plenty of snow-plowing quests—maybe living in constant snowfall wasn't all fun and games. "I haven't spent much time where it snows, so that helps a lot."

"I'm happy to have helped," said the receptionist. "Also, directly to the north of the city is a dungeon teeming with dangerous monsters. Please do not leave the city in that direction unless you are prepared. We've lost several adventurers to that dungeon..."

“Directly to the north…” I muttered, recalling the name of that location: Santa’s House. A dungeon called Underground Factory lurked beneath it. I had no reason to go there now, but I remembered how much fun I’d had exploring the Christmas-themed locations as a player—though it seemed that the place terrified the people of this world.

“And the Snowfall Forest to the east is very easy to get lost in. Even locals frequently lose their way. Be careful if you plan to go there,” the receptionist continued.

“I definitely will,” I said. Beyond the Snowfall Forest lay Lief, the Wooded Village, where elves lived. It didn’t seem like the people of Snowdia had made it over there yet. It was extremely easy to get lost in the Snowfall Forest if you didn’t know the correct route. I, of course, had it memorized.

Then, the receptionist went over the common monsters found around Snowdia, which mostly matched up with what I remembered from *Reas*, thankfully.

“That’s about all I can explain about Snowdia. Do you have any questions?” she asked.

“I don’t have any questions right now. Thank you so much. That helped a lot,” I said.

“Any time. It’s our job here at the Guild to help you get your job done. If you think of anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I won’t. Thanks again,” I said, ready to take her up on her offer. “I’m looking to purchase materials, if you have them. I’m hoping for Fire Shrooms and Orc Rags. Oh, and Silence of the Flowers.” Since they’d be hard to get my hands on, I decided to skip to the question asking, just like I’d done at Zille’s Guild. The other ingredients (Magic Stones, Oil, and Empty Potion Bottles) were available at almost any time and almost anywhere. For Leroy and Tithia’s sake, I wanted as many Silence of the Flowers as possible.

“Let’s see… We have a decent number of Orc Rags. There’s an Orc habitat not too far from here… But we don’t have many Fire Shrooms—they don’t grow anywhere near Snowdia,” the receptionist explained. That reminded me that Fire Shrooms only grew in warm climates. They were in shorter supply and sold at a higher price here than in Zille.

Next chance I get, I’m going to a desert to overhunt Fire Shrooms, I promised myself. Tarte couldn’t fight without Molotovs, so even though they were more expensive, I bought all 45 mushrooms

that the Guild had in stock, along with their entire store of Orc Rags, which was a whopping 416. This was a huge help, and the receptionist even thanked me for buying them out—naturally, people here were turned off by the stench too.

"We have ten Silence of the Flowers in stock," she added, "and we don't know when we'll next receive any more of those rare flowers."

"Hmm… May I post a purchase request?" I asked.

"Of course."

Since I wanted them urgently, I posted the request with a price even higher than their market value. *Here's hoping the stalwart adventurers of Snowdia are willing to go looking for some.*

After leaving the Guild, I stopped by a few item shops before making my way back to the inn…where the others were still asleep just as I'd left them—they must have been truly exhausted. Thinking they might want something to nibble on without leaving the room, I went down to the dining room to order sandwiches and bowls of stew.

When I returned to the room, Tarte was sitting up in her bed, nose wrinkling as she sniffed the air. "Good morning…" Looked like I'd made the right play by picking up food.

"Good morning, Tarte. Did you get some good sleep?"

"Yes, Meowster." Tarte looked out the window. "Meow! How long was I napping?!" She had had a trying day yesterday, after formulating for a long time and finding out about Tithia's curse. She'd even had to look after the young Pope while I was gone. It was no wonder she'd also been exhausted.

"Why don't you wash your face and get changed? Let's eat," I suggested.

"Yes, Meowster!"

Just as Tarte finished getting dressed, Tithia woke up…kind of. She sat up in her bed, looking only half conscious. She definitely didn't appear to be a morning person.

After some time, Leroy awoke too. He was so surprised that he'd overslept, he began apologizing at once. I told him not to worry about it and pointed out the partition so he could change.

Once we'd all eaten, Tarte and I shared a look. Then she took out the vials of Delay Potion we'd prepared last night.

"Is that…?!" Leroy asked, wide-eyed. He must not have expected us to have them ready so quickly.

"Tarte's a talented Alchemist," I said by way of explanation.

“I see… Thank you, Tarte. Perhaps I should call you Master Tarte? You are Her Holiness’s savior, after all.”

“Meowster?! No, purrlease call me Tarte—just Tarte!” she insisted, probably because Leroy was noble born and looked it. I cracked a smile at how desperately she wanted to avoid the title.

“Then, Tarte, allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude for giving me hope that Pope Tithia can be saved. Thank you.” Leroy put his hand over his heart and knelt on one knee. This kind of genuflection was generally reserved for persons of very high status. For a bishop to offer this gesture to an ordinary adventurer was a sign of Leroy’s genuine gratitude.

“P-Purrlease! I’m just happy to lend a paw with my Alchemy.”

Leroy smiled at this. “How humble.” Then, he looked to Tithia, clearly eager to have her take the Delay Potion.

“Here you go,” Tarte trilled, handing them each a bottle…and Leroy looked surprised that we’d made one for him.

Of course we made you one, Leroy! “You should slow the curse at the same time,” I said, giving him an excuse to take the potion without a fuss. “If the curse progresses in one of you, it could still mirror some effect in the other, potion or no.”

Tithia nodded in agreement, her concern-filled eyes glued to Leroy. Just as Leroy would give his life for Tithia, I could see that he was equally precious to her. “You must drink it too, Leroy,” she said.

Before they could drink, though, Leroy turned to me.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“I thought we should monitor what happens when we drink it,” said Leroy. “Could you watch to see if the mark changes?”

“Okay,” I agreed and Leroy slid his robe down to reveal his back. “The circle’s progressed since yesterday,” I noted at once. A completed circle most likely meant instant death for both of them. The cursed magic circle looked stationary for now—but it must have been growing imperceptibly. I expected the one on Tithia’s back must be doing the same. *I’d be terrified too, if that thing was on my back…*

“Is there anything you don’t know, Sharon? Did you memorize the mark when you first saw it?” Leroy asked, sounding aghast.

“There’s plenty I don’t know,” I said sincerely. “As for the mark…I have a pretty good memory.” *When it comes to video games, at least,* I added silently. There were some details about this world that I’d forgotten since playing *Reas* on my VR kit but I

still remembered most things—the majority of the maps, dungeon gimmicks, methods for beating bosses… I even remembered aspects of many special jobs that I'd played as or found particularly useful. There were too many jobs to memorize the features of all of them, though.

"How reassuring to have you on our side." Leroy smiled. "I will gratefully accept this." He lifted the potion bottle.

"As will I," Tithia said.

As they drank the potions, the magic circle on Leroy's back glowed faintly—it was working. I stared at his back, hardly allowing myself to blink so as not to miss any changes in the mark. *He has a well-muscled back, especially for a bishop.*

"Oh…!" I saw it. As the glow of the mark faded, the ends of the magic circle shifted into knots, as if they'd been tied off. That seemed to indicate that the circle would not be growing any further. I'd never paid much attention to it in the game, but it was interesting to see these little changes caused by the Delay Potion. "The ends, where the circle was cut off, turned into knots. My guess is that the curse won't progress while the knots are there."

"I didn't expect that… Thank you for checking," Leroy said.

"Do you think it's the same on my back too?" Tithia asked, tilting her head to the side. Tarte and I mirrored the gesture. My guess was that the mark on her back would look the same as Leroy's.

"Sharon, could you take a look at Her Holiness's back? I certainly can't," Leroy said.

"Yes." I took Tithia and Tarte behind the partition and helped the Pope disrobe.

"Is it?" Tithia asked.

"There are knots, just like Bishop Leroy's," Tarte trilled.

"The magic circle itself looks the same, so your marks must be on the same schedule. We should keep a close eye on the knots and make sure to have you drink Delay Potions before they untie," I said.

"That makes sense. Thank you—for everything," Tithia said.

"No problem." I smiled and fixed her robe for her. After a night (and day) of restful sleep, some color had returned to her cheeks.

Stepping out from behind the partition, I relayed to Leroy the news that their marks looked identical. "We'll make sure to check

the marks regularly," I said.

"That would be wonderful," Leroy said.

Suddenly, my Magic Bag glowed softly and a quest window appeared before my eyes. I deserved major props for keeping a straight face.

Ascension of the Holy Maiden (Unique Job): The Pope's disciple is relieved by a ray of hope. In thanks for saving her loyal disciple, the Pope will give you the key.

I knew *Leroy was the key to the Holy Maiden quest,* I thought as I read the words. What was more, the Pope herself was involved. According to the pop-up, Tithia was about to give me a key. *But a key to what?*

"Sharon," Tithia called.

"Uh...yes?" I snapped out of my reverie.

The young Pope approached me with a gentle smile and took my hand. "I truly can't thank you enough for what you've done, Sharon."

"I'm just happy you're okay," I said, my face catching her infectious smile.

"Perhaps I can begin to repay you with...this." Tithia produced a key from her Magic Bag, the hidden pocket in her robe.

"A key."

"Yes."

The key was rusted all over, but I could make out the crest of Flaudia on it. I couldn't tell what the key unlocked—or whether I could use the rusted thing at all. Nevertheless, it was definitely a key (pun intended) item in progressing the Holy Maiden quest.

As I stared at the key, Tithia's brows drooped. "Um, I thought it might serve as a token of my thanks, but I don't know what the key is for either—only that I can feel Flaudia's power through it."

"You can sense her power in it...?!" I muttered. That meant that this was a lot more than a simple key that would grant me access to a specific map. The key in my hand felt heavy with the added significance—I really was on a unique job quest. "Thank you, Your Holiness. I'll take good care of it."

"Wonderful," Tithia said, sounding relieved. Maybe she'd thought I would turn down the rusty key altogether. Now that I

had the key, I took out the relief fragment—Ancient Memory of the Cathedral—and a different pop-up appeared. *Good. The quest is progressing.*

Ascension of the Holy Maiden (Unique Job): Only when the curse upon the Pope is broken will peace be restored in the Holy Capital of Zille.
Goddess Flaudia loves peace more than anyone.

I read the next blurb, then stashed the key and fragment together. As I'd expected, the quest was directing me to become an Archbishop to cure the curse on Tithia and Leroy. *I guess becoming an Archbishop wouldn't be that difficult,* I reasoned. *A million times easier than becoming the Holy Maiden, anyway.* Besides, I'd played as an Archbishop several times in *Reas*.

I sipped on my tea to steady my heartbeat so we could talk about what came next. "Personally, I'd like to stay with you both until this curse is broken. I think I'm in too deep to leave now."

"Me too. I may not have many levels or a lot of knowledge of Alchemy…but I really want to help."

"Sharon… Tarte… Thank you." Tithia beamed. *When I first rescued her, I never expected things to turn out like— Well, I did kind of have a sneaking suspicion since I first found out who she was.*

"Thank you," Leroy said.

Our most urgent task was to find a reliable source of Silence of the Flowers so we could continue crafting Delay Potions. At the same time, I needed to work toward becoming an Archbishop so I could break their curse; that would also progress my Holy Maiden quest. Even if I hadn't been on the quest, I would have chosen to do the same. I hadn't known Tithia for long, but she seemed like a sweet girl. There was no way I could have moved on without helping an innocent child.

"Then, it would behoove us to grant you each an official title," Leroy said.

"Title?" I repeated.

"Yes. Why don't we appoint Tarte Her Holiness's Personal Alchemist? While the cathedral is under Rodney's control at the moment, many in the church are still devoted to Her Holiness. That title alone may aid you in some way," Leroy explained and I agreed with him.

I grinned. How funny that my apprentice had rocketed past me on the career ladder! Personal Alchemist to the Pope? That was a huge deal.

Tarte yowled in surprise. “I’ve only just start purracticing Alchemy! I couldn’t accept a position like that!”

In her place, I would have accepted without a second thought. *How humble of you, my sweet apprentice…*

“You were so brave when you fought, Tarte…but if you don’t want to be my Alchemist, I can’t force you,” Tithia said pitifully.

“Of course I want to!” Tarte blurted.

“Then you shall be,” Leroy murmured, smiling in a way that said it had been only too easy to ensnare little Tarte.

At Leroy’s calm declaration, my young apprentice jumped up with a sharp, surprised meow. *Adorable.*

“It’s settled, then. Tarte will be Pope Tithia’s Alchemist,” I reiterated. “And I need to become an Archbishop in order to break your curse, so we need to raise our levels. What are yours?” I asked Tithia and Leroy.

“Mine’s 10,” Tithia answered.

“I’m at 47,” said Leroy.

“I see…” I muttered. Their levels were too different from Tarte’s and mine for us to form a party and split EXP. In fact, Tithia’s level was so low that it was a small miracle she hadn’t been killed by the Venom-Spewing Witch. If I had found her any later, she might not have survived. “First, let’s raise Her Holiness’s level. As soon as she’s high enough to form a party with Tarte and me, we will grind until we can form a party with you, Bishop Leroy.” That would boost her HP and Defense, making her less likely to die. Grinding levels really was the key to survival.

“Do you think I will ever be that strong…? Enough to fight alongside Leroy?” Tithia asked.

“Of course,” I answered. “Trust me. I’m a whiz at grinding levels.”

“It is unusual for someone to claim that as a talent, but of course, you are an unusual person, Sharon,” Leroy said. *What’s that supposed to mean?* “I would like nothing more than to help Her Holiness raise her level. I’ll stick to a support role,” he concluded.

“Okay,” I agreed. There was much for us to do, especially now that I needed to pour my all into becoming an Archbishop. Things were about to get very busy.

Epilogue

“Put this on, right away!”

As I crumpled to the ground with tears in my eyes, Tarte rushed over and placed a mask on my face, which she later explained was an item called Protective Mask that shielded the wearer from any smell. Immediately, the stench of the Orc Rags that had made me tear up became almost unnoticeable. “This is incredible...! What an amazing item!” I said.

“I’m surprised by how well it works too,” Tarte trilled. “Do you remember the witches in the swamp where we first met you? The witches there drop these masks.”

“I didn’t know...” There were many things I didn’t know and Tarte always explained them to me so patiently. Before the attack, I’d seldom left the cathedral. I might have been the Pope, but there was so much I didn’t know about the real world.

Currently, we were in our room at the inn crafting Molotovs—a powerful item Tarte had used to defeat the witches. She told me that she and Sharon used them to raise their levels quickly. Sharon and Leroy were out shopping just now.

“It’s amazing how you can both formulate and fight, Tarte. I can hardly believe you’re the same age as me.”

“All thanks to Meowster. She’s the ameowzing one!”

“M-My Leroy’s amazing too!” I countered, as if it were a competition.

Tarte stared at me for a moment, then began laughing. So did I. “They’re both ameowzing,” she said.

“Yes. They really are,” I replied.

Now that we were in agreement, we turned our attention back to the Molotovs. Tarte was excited to craft a whole stock of them, now that she and Sharon had acquired plenty of the necessary ingredients.

“First you put in the Empty Purrtion Bottle, then all the ingredients, stirring each one in,” Tarte instructed. She trilled and stirred until the cauldron lit up—at which point she put in the next ingredient and repeated the process.

So this is how Alchemy is performed, I thought, excited to learn something else I hadn’t known.

Tarte made Molotov after Molotov with what, to me, looked like expertise, until seventy-three Molotovs covered the surface of the table and most of the floor.

"Wow!" I couldn't help but applaud the brilliant Alchemist. Tarte was just as amazing as Sharon and Leroy! *I'll have to work really hard to catch up...!* I promised myself.

Just as Tarte finished stowing the freshly crafted Molotovs, Leroy and Sharon walked through the door, holding bags in their hands that smelled divine.

"We're back," said Leroy.

"Hi, you two. I bought some snow cream," Sharon said.

"Snow cream?" Tarte and I repeated, the Alchemist purring a little. This was another thing I'd never heard of... *It sounds like something cold and sweet,* I guessed.

"Here it is. They said you can only buy them in Snowdia." Sharon took out what appeared to be two balls of ice cream stacked like a snowman, with a cute little face drawn on the top one with chocolate.

"It's so cute!" Tarte purred more loudly, her tail standing up straight. I'd been told that that meant Tarte was happy. Although I'd been tempted to stroke her tail every time, I had to show restraint—what if Tarte didn't like that?

"I'll pour us some tea. Let's eat them before they melt," Leroy suggested.

"Yes, please," I said. I always loved Leroy's tea—it tasted of kindness.

As soon as our teacups were set out, we lifted our forks to enjoy our snow cream...but the snowman looked so cute that I hesitated to stab it with my fork. Meanwhile, Tarte had impaled her snow cream with force—she really was amazing. I took a deep breath, raised my fork and...decided to scoop the snow cream into my mouth instead. I still couldn't bring myself to stab it. The moment the sphere went into my mouth, the cold sweetness of the white chocolate coating almost made me swoon. "It's so delicious..." But when I bit down, I realized the inside was filled with crushed ice. One crunch, and it melted in my mouth... *If only I could enjoy it longer.*



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"You want *Her Holiness* to defeat Orcs? Are you serious?" Leroy asked incredulously, while I stared at Sharon, speechless.

Leroy, Sharon, Tarte, and I had shared two horses to travel to a place called Sunlit Grove, where violent Orcs, as well as snake and spider monsters, lived.

"Orcs are a solid choice to raise her level quickly," Sharon said. "And we could use more Orc Rags—"

"The rags are the only reason you brought us here," Leroy jabbed.

Sharon laughed. "There's no time to endlessly hunt Jigglies or Wolves. Orcs are still the best choice."

I wanted to believe I'd heard her wrong the first time, but it really sounded like I was supposed to defeat those Orcs. *How am I going to survive?* My knees were shaking.

"It's all right," Tarte said with a reassuring smile. "You can take these."

"The Molotovs you made...?" I asked.

"That's right—we're gonna throw them at the Orcs."

I'd never thought of that. *But if I just need to throw a bottle...that feels doable.*

"Here's the plan. Are you ready?" Sharon began.

"I-I'm ready!" I said.

"Good answer." Sharon smiled and explained how we were going to fight the Orcs. By the time she was done, I was still nervous about whether I could do my part. *But all I can do is try my best!* "Here we go!" Sharon continued. "Strengthen, Mana Rations, Goddess's Protection! These are for you, Tarte, Your Holiness—Goddess's Smite!"

"Thank you!" I said, holding a Molotov against my thundering chest. Tarte had given me thirty of them so I could throw them at Orcs and take them down. According to Sharon, if she doubled my attacks' power with Goddess's Smite, three or four Molotovs would be enough to take out an Orc. I could hardly believe I was really doing this. *But I have no other choice!*

"Bishop Leroy? It's your time to shine," Sharon said.

"Very well... I shall lay down my life for Her Holiness's sake," Leroy said.

"You're exaggerating," Sharon laughed.

As I watched Leroy step into the forest, an unpleasant feeling trickled down my back. Sharon's plan was kicking into motion.

"I never thought I'd stand in the front line of a party," Leroy said.

"You have the highest level in the party by far, Bishop, and you're wearing a good robe. You just need to *survive* the Orcs. Piece of cake."

"If only it were that easy..." Leroy sighed. Sharon had asked Leroy to fight at the front of the party, shielded by her Goddess's Protection...even though he was a Cleric. But Sharon was a Healer and Tarte was an Alchemist, so none of us were really trained for a frontline job. Leroy, at least, had the highest level out of all of us.

"An Orc and a snake!" Tarte hissed.

"Let's begin! Hammerfall!" Leroy's Skill created an iron cross in the air that came down on the Orc like the swift fall of a hammer. Hammerfall was an offensive Skill available to Healers which dealt magical damage.

"Now!" Sharon called, signaling me to attack while the Orc was stunned by Leroy's Skill.

A girl's gotta have guts! I threw the Molotov as hard as I could...but it only flew about seven meters, falling short of where Leroy and the Orc were fighting. *I am an abject failure...!*

"It's okay! Stay calm. Try again," Sharon said. "Goddess's Smite!"

"O-Okay!" Sharon's voice helped me regain my cool. When I faced forward again, I saw that even my first Molotov that had fallen short had dealt damage to the Orc and had defeated the snake. *Tarte, your Molotovs are incredible!*

Leroy walked toward us as the Orc continued attacking him. It was nerve-racking to see him being attacked, even if he was safe under Goddess's Protection.

"Goddess's Protection..." Sharon reapplied her Skill.

Seeing that Leroy was protected again, I threw another Molotov. I wouldn't deal as much damage as Tarte, who had the Potion Throw Skill, but it was still an incredible attack—a pillar of fire erupted, greatly damaging the Orc.

"Splendid job, Your Holiness!" Leroy called.

"Thank you!" I whipped another Molotov from my Magic Bag and had Sharon cast Goddess's Smite on me again. I threw it as hard as I could, and up came another roaring flame. This time,

the Orc turned into sparkles of light. “I did it…!” Feeling a rush of excitement, I wrapped my arms around Tarte. *I defeated an Orc!*

“Great job, Your Holiness,” Sharon called. “Let’s keep going!”

“Yes. Let’s!”

I glanced over to where the Orc had stood and saw a rag, which would let Tarte craft another Molotov…even though I’d spent three Molotovs to do it. *I have to do better.* I focused my attention forward, readying for the next Orc to appear.

Side Story: What Happened in the Cathedral (Leroy)

“I found my time here very illuminating. Thank you.”

“Please come back to pray again soon,” I said to the visitor at the entrance to Flaudia Cathedral, Goddess Flaudia’s house of worship in the Holy Capital of Zille. Yet, the most sacred place in the city—and in the world—was not here. I looked to the north, where the Crystalline Cathedral shimmered in a sea of sunset orange. “I hope you are well, Your Holiness,” I quietly prayed.

I, Bishop Leroy, served as Pope Tithia’s loyal disciple. I, too, had resided in the Crystalline Cathedral, until I’d been relocated to Flaudia Cathedral as a result of Rodney Hervas’s machinations.

Rodney Hervas was avarice incarnate. Under the clothing of an obedient lamb lurked a wolf with deadly-sharp fangs. If I’d had my way, he and Pope Tithia would never have been in the same city, let alone the same cathedral.

“If I were stronger, I would not have burdened Her Holiness like this,” I whispered to the burning sky. I might have been able to remain by her side—to protect her. Never before in my life had I felt so powerless. “It’s time to close the doors to visitors.” With a sigh, I turned toward the cathedral. Soon, a priest or priestess on night watch would lock up.

Just then, I heard a faint scream. The voice was unmistakable, yet there was no feasible way for me to have heard *her* scream all the way from the Crystalline Cathedral. Nevertheless, a dark cloud began to form in my chest. “Your Holiness…” I blurted as I sprinted off without a second thought. I had certainly misheard—there was no way her scream could have reached me—but I couldn’t shake that dreadful feeling.

I bolted north up the main street that ran through the city—the shortest route to the Crystalline Cathedral. Soon, I began to hear the clashing of swords. *What’s happening?!*

All around me, everything was as it should have been: people walking along, stopping to shop at booths and stores. No one else seemed to pay the clash of metal any mind. “Where is that sound coming from…?” I strained my ears and determined that

the sounds were coming from the courtyard of the Crystalline Cathedral. They were so faint that I could believe no one other than myself had noticed—thankfully, I'd often observed my surroundings by taking in the sounds, which gave me an advantage in moments like these.

When I reached the courtyard, I discovered a battle in which Paladins fought Templars. Paladins served Pope Tithia directly, while Templars worked for the church.

"Rodney has made his move," I realized. With me pushed aside to Flaudia Cathedral, the time had been ripe for a coup. That was why I had arranged for Paladins to constantly guard Pope Tithia... Taking in the battleground, I bit my lip. There were too many Templars. Rodney held many more of the cathedral staff in his grasp than I'd anticipated—I hadn't considered that so many Templars would work to harm Pope Tithia.

I called out to a pair of Paladins who were still fighting. "Blitz! Mimoza! What happened?!"

"Leroy!" both of them answered, cutting down the Templar attacking them.

Blitz blew out a breath and raised his hand to me in a brief greeting. "I kept thinking things were smelling pretty fishy around here as of late..." he said. "It's safe to say at least half of the Templars have sided with Rodney."

"Half," I muttered. Just about a thousand Templars were stationed in Zille. Against five hundred of them, we had only thirty-two Paladins here, including those in training. Those were impossible odds if I'd ever seen them.

"Her Holiness?" I dared to ask.

"We had her escape through a hidden passage. Some Paladins went with her, but...we're far outnumbered."

"Indeed. I need you both to follow Her Holiness. I will remain here and gather more information."

Blitz looked shocked by my command but quickly agreed.

"I can't!" Mimoza objected. "You're telling us to leave you behind?!"

"Pope Tithia's safety is all that matters. I'll only slow you down—for now, you must leave me behind. Strengthen. Regeneration."

Once I used my Skills on them, Blitz put a hand on Mimoza's shoulder. "I get it, Mimoza. But we need to keep Her Holiness safe. That passage opens onto Withered Springs. We can't risk

letting Her Holiness find herself alone."

"I know, but…!" Mimoza trembled, squeezing her fists tight. It pained me to force this choice on the kindhearted Mimoza, but we all needed to put Her Holiness first. We were replaceable; Pope Tithia was not.

Our conversation had drawn the attention of three more Templars, who didn't look too well trained.

I put myself between them and the two Paladins. "Keep Pope Tithia safe."

"Fine…!"

"Stay alive, Leroy."

The pair left, to my relief. That would improve the chances of Her Holiness's survival. *Now I need to get out of here and reunite with her too.* I scanned the courtyard and found several Paladins on the ground amid the Templars—we'd lost some of our fighters as well. I cast Strengthen on myself and began running. I wasn't foolhardy enough to take on three Templars when I was a mere Cleric. *How far will I make it?* I wondered. My hope was that I would draw the attention of the Templars in the opposite direction of Pope Tithia's escape route, but that seemed like wishful thinking.

"Hammerfall!" I used my Skill with as much flair as possible, alerting the Templars to my existence.

"There's Bishop Leroy!"

"Get him!"

The Templars rushed toward me as I'd planned, but I hadn't expected dozens of them to swarm me at once. I left the cathedral behind and dashed down a dark alley.

***

"Looks like I survived…" I panted. I'd been injured, but I'd managed to scatter the Templars. There was no returning to the cathedral, though. Somehow, I made it to a hideout I'd been leasing for a while. Leaning my back against the wall, I slid to the ground.

I don't even have enough mana to use Heal. As much as I longed to chase after Her Holiness, I had to recover first…and I'd need to gather more information. *Is Rodney sitting on the Pope's throne right now?* The mere thought made my blood boil. *I will drag you down from your throne of lies,* I vowed. Pope Tithia alone deserved

to lead the church.

After a few minutes, my breathing had slowed somewhat, so I reached into my robe pocket and took out Heart of the Pope—a one of a kind mirror of the Pope's heart that resembled a shimmering pearl. This item mirrored Her Holiness's condition. If she were to die, the pearl would be consumed by darkness and shatter to pieces. For now, it shone white—she was safe. Just as I breathed in relief, the Heart of the Pope began to heat up, prickling my own heart with a horrible presentiment.

"It's never done this before… Your Holiness?!" I called out to the empty room as my heart hammered unnervingly fast. A sickly dark-purple haze swirled around the sphere as if to mar her soul. "A curse…?" I recognized the haze itself, though I'd never seen it on the Heart of the Pope before. Although I didn't have the ability to break curses, I had witnessed their effects with my very own eyes.

Her Holiness is about to be cursed! I realized. I couldn't let that happen. Instinctively, I swallowed the Heart of the Pope…and then, my body—my back—began to burn. I groaned in pain. It felt like a dragon was scoring my back with its claws. I desperately tried not to think of Pope Tithia experiencing the same pain. I collapsed onto the floor, holding myself tight. Soon, overcome by the searing agony, I let go of my consciousness.

When I awoke, I was surrounded by darkness. I healed my earlier injuries and then inspected the new damage—I had definitely been cursed. *I felt the burning in my back.* A mirror was a luxury I didn't have in this hideout, so I went over to the window to observe my reflection in it.

"The mark of L'lyeh, the Goddess of Darkness! I knew Rodney had connections with the Abbey!" I gritted my teeth. "But that's only…half of the Mark of Lament I've seen transcribed in our records." Dread poured through me. The mark was supposed to kill its victim instantly.

If only half of the curse is on my back, where's the other half? I already knew the answer, though. *Her Holiness!*

"Damn…!" My blasphemy was warranted. I'd failed to take the entirety of the curse upon myself. "So she suffered as I did…!" I realized, my heart nearly failing in the face of my dreadful imaginings. I'd failed as her disciple if I'd subjected her to such agony. In addition to showing the holder the condition of the Pope, the Heart of the Pope would allow anyone who swallowed

it to take on anything afflicting Her Holiness at the time. If I had swallowed it while Pope Tithia drank poison, for example, I would have been the one poisoned. Although she disliked using the Heart of the Pope at all, I considered it an important safeguard to keep Her Holiness alive. It had been an ordeal for her to craft the Heart of the Pope in the first place. It was excruciating that now I could only pray for her safety—I must gather the information we needed as soon as possible so I could follow after her.

***

A few days later, I was searching for intel in the city when Templars spotted and attacked me again. I managed to flee, but I'd expended all my mana, leaving me unable to heal myself at all.

I'll have to hide in this alley before I return, I decided. Then, I caught sight of a familiar woman walking down the street. *What luck!* Hiding in the shadows of the alley, I pulled her arm as she was about to pass.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I could barely whisper into her ear.

Side Story: A Letter from Our Daughter (Angela Cocoriara)

I escorted Belle around the tea party room myself, bathed in relaxing melodies played by the hired musicians. Floral art lined the pale blue walls, lit by warm rays of sunlight from the large windows framed with lace curtains. The comfortable sofa was covered in off-white fabric embroidered with pink flowers. I loved everything about this room. Belle and I had set this date in advance so we could talk things over. Today's party would also serve as a quiet celebration that the dust had finally settled around Lottie's scandal.

As soon as my maid brought the tea and snacks which had been prepared and took her place behind me, Belle said, "I feel most at home at your tea parties, Anne."

"Oh, thank you."

Queen Belltiana Farblume sat across from me, one of my oldest and greatest friends. She wore her brilliant blonde hair half up and half down and exuded quiet elegance in her gray dress. Her honey-colored eyes glinted with infectious excitement. At thirty-eight, she was two years younger than I was, yet I always admired her proud composure.

"I saw Theodore out the window earlier, whipping those poor new knights into shape," Belle chuckled; she meant the window in the castle's hallway. My husband, Theodore, was commander of the Order of Knights, so he worked at the castle. Lately, he'd been taking out his concern over Lottie—who'd gone to Erenzi—on the knights. *At least those knights are being trained well,* I decided.

"He's waiting for a letter from Lottie," I explained. "If I don't keep a close eye on him, I'm almost afraid he'll run straight to Erenzi."

"Oh my!" Belle said, in complete amazement.

"Have you any idea how difficult it is to stop Theodore once he starts a charge?" I asked, suggesting that it was no joke to me.

"I can imagine. But you were always the only one who could rein him in. You know I so enjoy seeing you two together,

especially when you gush about each other."

I shrugged, not exactly apologetic for having treated her to another round of gushing. Belle was the only one I could talk to about things like this. After chatting with her for a while longer, I requested a fresh cup of tea before excusing the maid and the musicians from the room.

A few moments of silence passed before Belle asked with concern, "Are you sure I don't need to call Ignacia back…?"

"I'm sure," I said. "Wouldn't he only rebel all the more fiercely if you forced him to return?"

"He probably would…but I hate to make you suffer because of it. Though she is no longer destined to become a member of my family in a legal sense, I still think of Charlotte as a daughter."

We moved to discussing how Prince Ignacia, Lottie's ex-fiancé, had gone to Erenzi—most likely to chase after Lottie. *What does he intend to do if he catches her?* I wondered. According to whispers relayed to me, he was traveling with that commoner Emilia. How badly must he insult Lottie? *I suppose he's realized the mistake he's made,* I thought. Even if he managed to bring Lottie home, we'd never approve a marriage between them now. And I suspected that Belle and King Vilhelm shared my sentiment on the matter.

"Thank you, Belle. It means a lot to me that you care for Lottie so much."

"Of course I do. I've known Charlotte since the day she was born. I'd do anything for her."

I smiled at that. On the occasion of Lottie's birth, Belle and Vilhelm had sent a mountain of gifts. "Lottie is strong," I said. "She has her own beliefs and knows how to stick to them. So, even though I'm a little worried…I trust her."

"Yes, I agree," Belle said. "But physically, Charlotte is a dainty lady. If Ignacia resorts to using force…" Belle tightened her fists in her lap, worried that her son would hurt my daughter terribly.

I would have been lying if I'd told her that the thought hadn't crossed my mind. Our spies had told me that Lottie had been having fun camping out and raising her level. *Lottie may come back much stronger than when she left,* I considered. Lottie was Theodore's daughter too. One of my sons had become a scholar, but my eldest son was one of the strongest knights Farblume had. Lottie certainly had plenty of potential.

"Anne?" Belle asked nervously.

“Oh, I’m not worried about that,” I said, continuing our earlier conversation. “I was just thinking how strong Lottie is going to become.”

“Your little Charlotte?” Belle asked incredulously before reaching the same conclusion I had. “She *is* Theodore’s daughter too… I hear Rudith can hardly find competition among the other knights. Perhaps Charlotte is raging across Erenzi like a storm as we speak,” the queen mused.

“We certainly neglected nothing in her education,” I said, easily imagining Charlotte doing exactly that.

Rudith was my eldest son. He held the awakened job of Dragonrider and served as a royal guard knight. Because of his dreadful temper, I hadn’t yet told him that Lottie had left. As soon as he discovered her departure, he’d drop everything and fly to her at once.

“Then I shall expect Ignacia to return teary-eyed.”

“Oh, Belle… He might have been cruel to Lottie, but Prince Ignacia is your dear son.”

“That is exactly *why*…I can’t stand it.” Belle’s eyes wavered for just a moment before brightness returned to them. She smiled.

Speaking of strong women… “How about another cup of tea?” I suggested. “I think ours have gone cold.”

“That would be wonderful.”

Just as I began to call over the maid, a knock sounded at the door. Everyone in the house knew that Belle was visiting, so they wouldn’t interrupt us without good reason.

“It’s Matthew, Your Ladyship.”

“Come in,” I said.

“Forgive me for interrupting,” Matthew said dutifully. Even as he did so, my gaze fixed on the silver tray in his hand, which carried a single envelope.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked.

“A letter from Lady Charlotte. It just arrived.”

Belle and I shared a smile. I practically snatched the envelope from him and slit it open with a letter opener. From inside, I removed a sheet of cute stationery decorated with a sheep design.

“Lottie…” I murmured, her name pulled from my lips involuntarily, and began reading, relieved to see her familiar handwriting at last. *She’s doing well,* I thought.

Once I finished reading, Belle began shifting in her seat,

itching to hear what Lottie had written. It seemed she couldn't help but worry about Charlotte too.

"First of all, Charlotte says that she is well. She has suffered no serious injury, and she even seems to be enjoying herself," I relayed.

"Oh, that is wonderful to hear," Belle replied.

Belle and I both breathed sighs of relief. My mind had reasoned that Charlotte must be safe, but that hadn't meant I'd stopped worrying about her. I could finally relax now that I'd read her letter. *The only remaining source of trouble seems to be Prince Ignacia…*

As I considered what to do, I passed the letter to Belle. She read silently, her brows dropping farther with every line, until she let out an exasperated sigh. "Of course… It's only natural that she never wants to see Ignacia again. The entire royal family will back Charlotte in this matter!" she declared.

"You don't have to go that far, Belle," I chuckled and reread the letter.

I took up my pen to write today, my spirits raised by the fields of blooming flowers. It's been quite a while, hasn't it? Mother, this letter may take ten days to reach you. I greatly apologize for not writing you sooner. I have been happily passing my time in Erenzi. I hope you and father are well. My only concern is that I left you two to deal with the aftermath of my departure…

I've registered as an adventurer and traveled all over Zille and beyond. Fortunately, I met people who were kind enough to form a party with me, and I even have an apprentice! I hope to introduce her to you someday… But I'm afraid I can't do that for a while, as I've kept my identity a secret. I look forward to the day when you can meet her. She's an adorable Cait Sith girl.

This may not please you, but my days have been joyful and adventurous since leaving home. I've been moved by sights I'd never seen before, and I feel that I grow stronger every day as I overcome obstacles I would never have known. I suppose I'm father's daughter after all. Oh, but I haven't become all muscle like Brother Otis.

Finally, I have heard that Prince Ignacia is in Zille. Unfortunately, I have no information beyond that. If you discover anything regarding this, please let me know. I do not wish to meet him now that he's exiled me. Once I settle down, I will send you an address where you can write back to me. I hope you, father, Rudith, and Otis are all well.
—Charlotte.

She'd rarely spoken her mind before, but it seemed that escaping her engagement, the crown prince, and her house had freed her heart from its fetters. In hindsight, I realized we'd been putting too much pressure on her. As she'd written, she was Theodore's daughter all right. Otis was a scholar but had a build that rivaled his father's. *Thank goodness Lottie doesn't resemble her father in that way,* I thought, finding a touch of humor in the image.

"Could you include a letter from me when you write back? I'll have information on what Ignacia is up to by then."

"Of course I can, Belle. Thank you."

"Oh, I should be the one thanking you."

At that moment, we heard thundering from outside. Soon, the sound of the front door opening reached us, followed by stomping footsteps rushing up the hall.

"She wrote?!" Theodore bellowed as he nearly ripped the door from its hinges. "Oh, Your Majesty. Forgive me, but I must read Lottie's letter immediately. Is that it?!" Without so much as a greeting, he eyed the letter in my hand like a starving predator sighting prey. He'd been waiting day after day for any news from Lottie. I smiled and handed him the letter.

"Lottie...!" Tears formed in his eyes as he read. *He needn't be* that *concerned,* I thought...but I decided not to tease him about it today.

"I'll have more tea brewed," I offered.

"Thank you. I think we'll all enjoy speaking of Charlotte today," Belle answered.

"I think we will." I beamed.

***

"Are you sure I shouldn't go to Zille? I think I ought to drag Prince Ignacia back here before he can find Lottie. Her Majesty agreed, didn't she?"

"Calm down, Theodore," I said, trying to stop my husband from dashing out of the country the moment Belle was out of sight. We'd just decided to trust in Lottie's abilities. His suggestion that we take a "vacation" to Zille was a little tempting, though.

"Lottie is finally free," I said. "You can tell from her letter that she is having so much fun. She has good friends too. I want to

support her decision, so you mustn't go," I said, placing a finger on his lips and giving him a smile. I found it adorable that he still blushed bright red when I did something like this... Of course, he'd turn red to the ears if I ever spoke such a thought aloud.

"Hmm... I suppose you're right. I should support her decision too. She's an adventurer now, she said... Why don't I send her a weapon to use? How about the heirloom blade—"

"Lottie is a Dark Mage, Theodore." She'd have no use for a sword, and I couldn't imagine her slender arms wielding one anyway. "Besides, you said Rudith, your heir, would inherit that sword," I pointed out.

"Th-That's right. Of course."

I suppressed a sigh, wondering how to keep Theodore from jumping into reckless action. The strong and reliable commander suddenly turned so soft when it came to his daughter. "Let's keep calm and wait for Lottie to write again. We could...recommend sightseeing spots in Erenzi? You've traveled all over and she wrote that she enjoys witnessing new vistas."

"That's a great idea. Snowdia is nice, and the view from the Aurora Hills was spectacular," he began, listing off possible suggestions. It sounded like we'd have a lot of ideas to write in our letter.

"But there are dangerous dungeons around Erenzi..." he grumbled.

"I'm worried about that too, but Lottie knows that dungeons are dangerous. She'll stay safe."

"I hope so..."

There were dungeons near the capital of Farblume too. Such places were only dangerous if she decided to venture into them.

"Speaking of... There was a breakthrough in one of Erenzi's dungeons," Theodore said.

"My," I exclaimed. I'd heard that dungeons became more difficult to traverse the farther in one went, as the monsters became more dangerous. Most dungeons remained half discovered at most; that was true anywhere in the world, including Farblume and Erenzi.

"Erenzi has gained an advantage. The items from dungeons can aid in war too, after all."

"I agree," I said quietly, wishing that Farblume would end this incessant series of minor battles with Erenzi. "Which dungeon is it? The Adventurer's Guild is neutral. Didn't you get information

from them as well?”

“Paradise of Erungoa, very close to Zille. It was a dungeon full of traps, including a poisonous one that had prevented adventurers from progressing for a long time…until someone figured out how to get past it.”

“Erungoa…” I repeated. If it was close to Zille, I imagined that plenty of adventurers would be flocking to the dungeon now to complete it. *Hopefully, Lottie won’t be tempted…* As much as I trusted her, I couldn’t help but be worried at the same time.

“We should definitely go see how she’s doing.”

“No, Theodore.”

“Go for a vacation, I mean.”

“What about your work?” I reminded him.

“Hmm…” Theodore grunted, still desperately thinking of an excuse to take us to Zille.

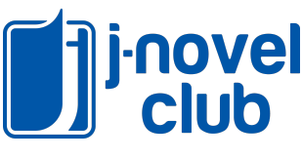
Perhaps when Lottie wrote again, we could sneak off to Zille for a vacation. For now, I decided to look forward to the next letter from my dear Lottie.


Vol. 2
The MMO Way
to Train an Alchemist
From Villainess to Healer
Author: Punichan
Illustrator: Yoh Hihara




Torte
Frey
Luna
Lina
Kent
Cocoa
Sharon
Tarte


“Goddess Flaudia,
lend me your strength.
Goddess’s Sanctuary.”
Then, a gentle light
emanated from her.



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