

Vol. 3
Ascension of the Holy Maiden, Part One

From Villainess to Healer

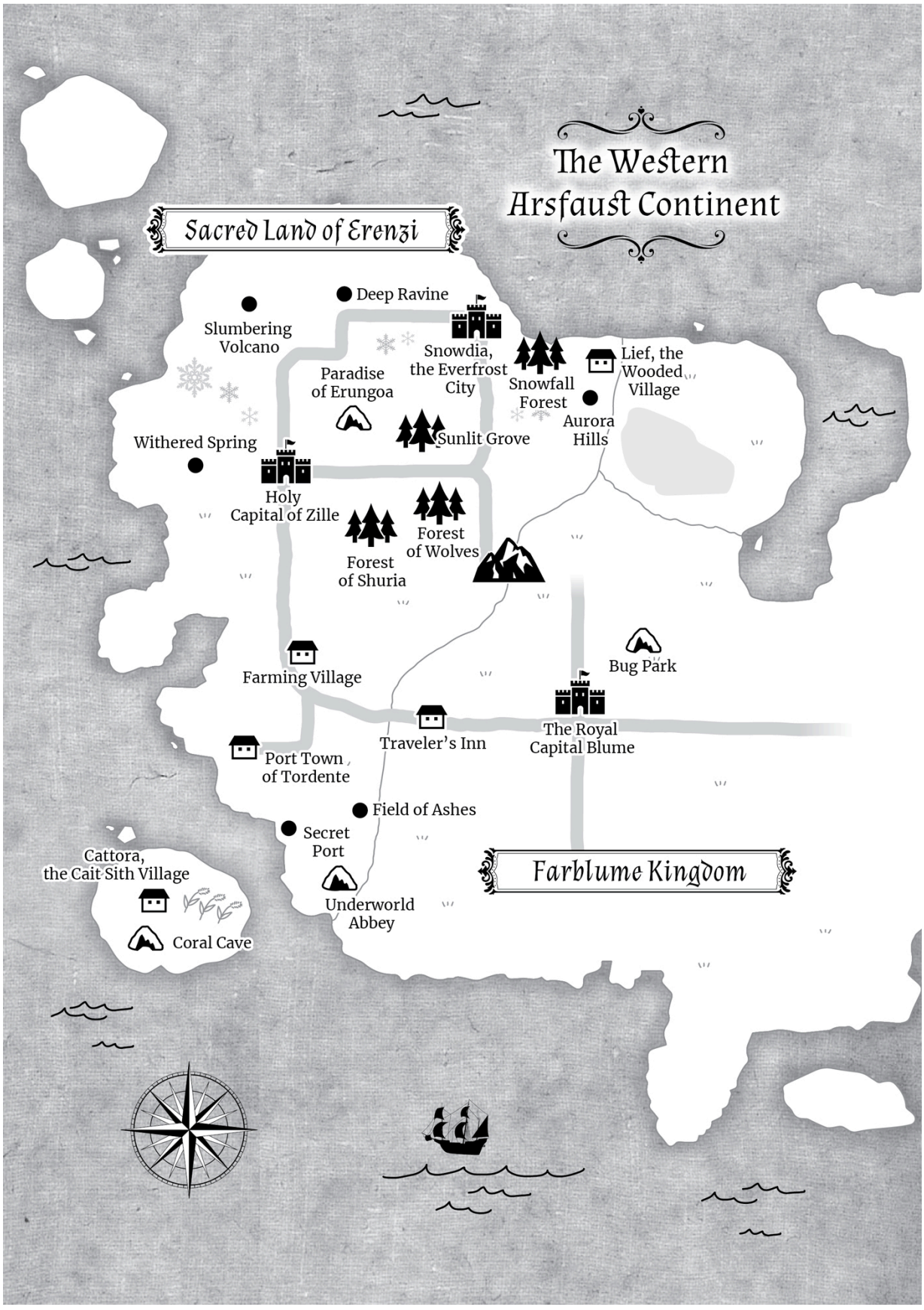
Author: Punichan
Illustrator: Yoh Hihara


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Leroy
Mimoza
Sharon
Cocoa
Blitz
Kent
Tithia
Tarte


“M-Meowster...”
“I wish I could tell you
that there’s nothing
to worry about...”
Our party took
a collective step back.


The Western
Arsfaust Continent
Sacred Land of Erenzi
Deep Ravine
Slumbering
Volcano
Snowdia,
the Everfrost
City
Snowfall
Forest
Lief, the
Wooded
Village
Paradise
of Erungoa
Aurora
Hills
Withered Spring
Sunlit Grove
Holy
Capital of Zille
Forest
of Wolves
Forest
of Shuria
Farming Village
Bug Park
The Royal
Capital Blume
Traveler's Inn
Port Town
of Tordente
Field of Ashes
Secret
Port
Cattora,
the Cait Sith Village
Coral Cave
Underworld
Abbey
Farblume Kingdom

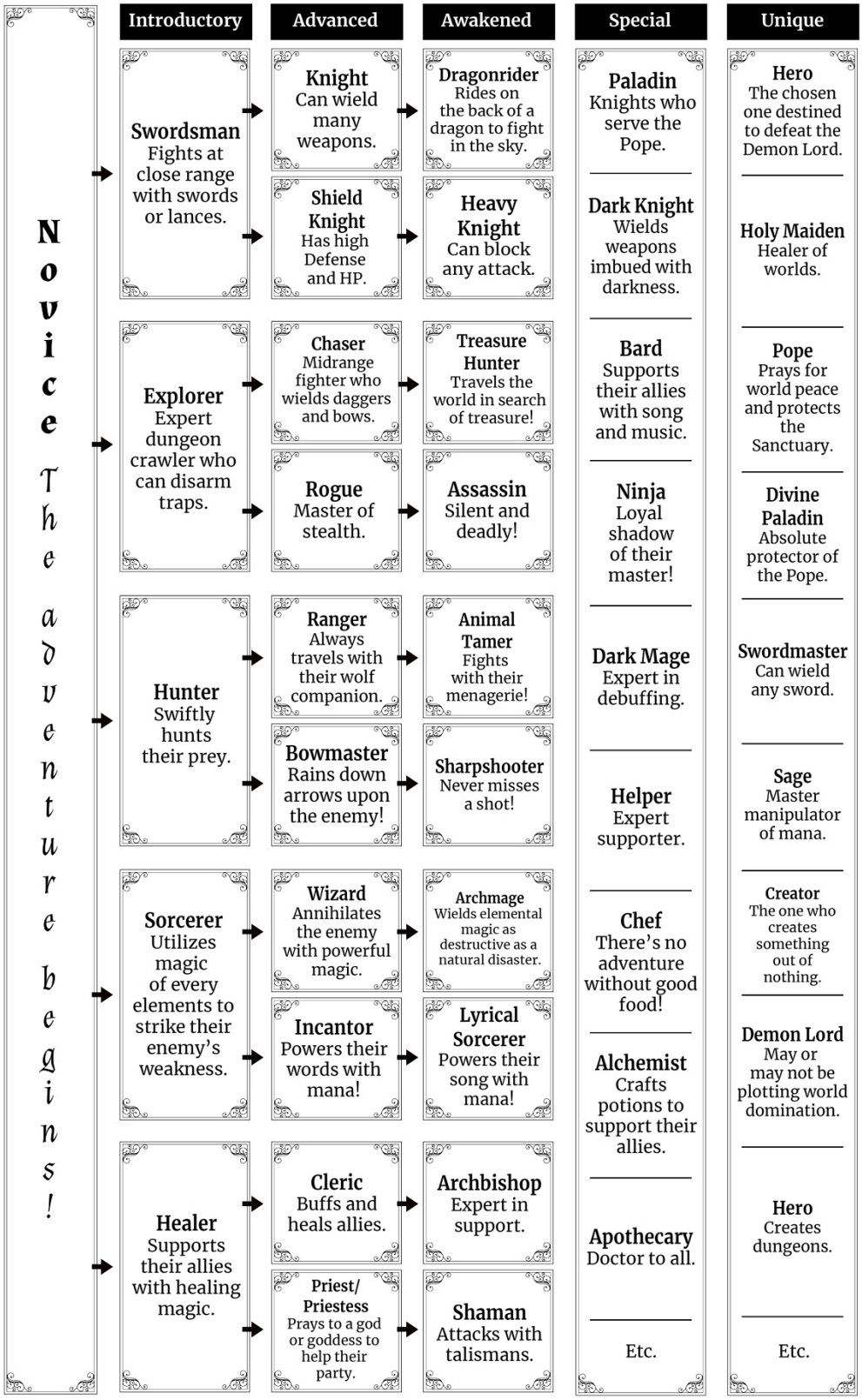

Novice The adventure begins!
Introductory
Advanced
Awakened
Special
Unique
Swordsman
Fights at close range with swords or lances.
Knight
Can wield many weapons.
Dragonrider
Rides on the back of a dragon to fight in the sky.
Shield Knight
Has high Defense and HP.
Heavy Knight
Can block any attack.
Explorer
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

At last, my era—the era of true divine rule by Rodney Hervas—had dawned. Reports had arrived that Pope Tithia, who'd been a thorn in my side for too long, had been dethroned, that many of her loyal Paladins were in custody, and that her right-hand man, Leroy, was gravely injured.

Oh, how long and hard the road has been.

"World peace... Ha! What a farce." What good had Goddess Flaudia done, for all the worship they offered her? A passive goddess did not help one survive this world. Only Goddess L'lyeh offered true protection—and money was the only thing in the world incapable of betrayal.

Just as the priestess I'd commanded to help finished dressing me, a knock came from the door.

A Templar, one of my loyal servants, poked his head in. "We are ready, Cardinal."

"Finally," I breathed. My patience had been worn thin by their dawdling, but now all was well.

"Please ride in the carriage which awaits you out front. It will take us to the entrance of Dark Cave. From there, we will travel to the Underworld Abbey on foot," the Templar explained.

"Very well," I answered, reaching for the staff leaning against one wall. With Tithia gone, I was the ruler of Crystalline Cathedral. All I needed to do was to pledge my soul to the goddess L'lyeh in the Underworld Abbey. Then, I could freely use my powers and no one would dare stand in my way.

I'm trembling with anticipation...!

***

"Move it, you slugs!" I bellowed.

"I-I'm sorry, Cardinal!" one of the Templars answered.

If only I'd known how useless they would be. A third of the one hundred Templars I had brought had taken serious wounds in the cave leading to the Abbey, rendering them incapacitated. I simply didn't have enough mana to use Heal on all of them. I hesitated to imagine how we'd fare in the Abbey itself.

We finally came face-to-face with the Abbey after trudging through the dank and murky cave. What must have once been a glorious display of L'lyeh's power was now a crumbling ruin of broken pillars and cracked walls. Clearly, there was no upkeep whatsoever being performed. The Abbey seemed to wait silently for its collapse.

And that could come any minute now, I guessed. I would have sent a handful of Templars to scout ahead, if I hadn't seen how miserably they'd fought in the cave. The monsters in the Abbey were supposed to be much more formidable than those we'd encountered so far. The safest option would be to have the whole battalion protect me as we inched forward.

"Keep attacking! Two ghosts ahead!"

"Hounds rushing at us from the rear!"

"Cardinal Rodney, we need your support...!" The Templars babbled.

"Have you no shame?!" I shouted. How was it that I was the one carrying the expedition when it was their sworn duty to protect me? "Wide Heal! Now, I am going to concentrate on recuperating mana," I ordered.

"Thank you, Cardinal!" the Templars replied.

My healing would not get them very far. There was no telling how long it would take to reach L'lyeh at this rate. *Don't they train at all?* I wondered. Several of the Healers and Clerics had been taken out already, leaving only a few of them to support the Templars.

You good-for-nothing sluggards!

Then, I heard a clash of metal behind me—a Templar had defended me from a monster. "Well done. Keep it up!" I commended the Templar in black armor, then urged the others, "Take it out already!" I would die of old age before we reached the Abbey, at this

rate.

Guide us to you, L'lyeh, I pray...!

Let’s Go Over Those Skills

Yet again, an explosion rumbled through the woods. However, explosions erupted around us so often while we were hunting that I’d become perfectly accustomed to them. An Orc was blown sky-high by the latest Molotov impact, turning it into nothing more than a burst of light and a drop item.

My party and I were in the middle of a hunt in Sunlit Grove. Despite a name that evoked tranquility, hunting here could be quite taxing, considering that you had to face Orcs as well as snake and spider monsters. Still, our hunt was going off without a hitch.

Gone were the days of me adventuring alone. Now, I had my apprentice, the Cait-Sith Alchemist Tarte; we had recently been joined by Tithia the Pope and Leroy the Cleric, who was a bishop in the service of Tithia. They had been forced into exile when Cardinal Rodney Hervas had launched a coup and forcefully occupied the Crystalline Cathedral in the Sacred Land of Erenzi. Tarte and I had promised to help the Pope and bishop as best we could.

“We did it!” Tithia cheered.

“We got our paws on another Orc Rag!” Tarte joined in.



The two girls were getting into the rhythm of the hunt. Even Leroy, who'd been the least comfortable with our Molotov strategy, now played his role as a tank without breaking a sweat. To quote his own words on the matter, he'd stand in the middle of a thousand explosions to serve Tithia.

I guess that's what you call devotion, I thought.

"We're starting to lose light. Shall we call it a day?" Leroy suggested.

"Yes, let's," I said, and we returned to our temporary base, Snowdia.

Once we'd eaten together and taken our turns bathing, we had some spare time to do with as we pleased. Still, Leroy and Tithia were wanted by Rodney's agents, so they rarely left the inn without Tarte and me. We made sure to pick up anything they needed on our way back from hunts, and Tarte and I could always run to the store if something came up. We also all shared a suite at the inn. I'd asked Leroy if he wanted his own room away from us girls, but his priority of protecting Tithia outweighed other concerns. Fortunately, our stay in Snowdia had been nothing but peaceful so far.

While we all lounged in our suite, I was trying to map out a plan for our future. *I wonder what kind of Skills Tithia has? I have a good idea of Leroy's...* I'd played as a Cleric in the game, so I was pretty familiar with the Skills available to him and could make a good guess as to which ones he'd acquired after observing him in combat. Tithia, though, was the Pope—a unique job only available to one person. That had been the case in the game too, so I hadn't a clue as to what Skills came with the job.

Can I ask Tithia outright, or would that seem too nosy? I wouldn't have hesitated if she and I had been committed to keeping this party long-term, but she might've had secrets she wanted to keep from her temporary party mates just as I did.

"What are you groaning over?" Leroy asked from behind me. I gasped and turned to find a half smile on his face.

"Well, h-how should I put this..." I stammered.

"Go on."

"I wanted to know more about your and Her Holiness's Skills," I

finally said.

"Oh, we haven't discussed that, have we?" said Leroy. "I have Hammerfall, for starters, and—"

"W-Wait a minute!" I said. "Are you sure you want to tell me? That could reveal to me any weaknesses you might have."

"I don't mind that, Sharon. I trust you," Leroy said without hesitation.

I'd helped out Leroy in more than one way, but I was still surprised to learn how much trust he placed in me.

"I'll share my Skills too," Tithia said, having overheard our conversation. "It might have benefited us during the hunt if I'd told you sooner... I'm sorry I didn't think of that."

"Your Holiness... Thank you. Both of you," I said. The *Reas* player base would have paid almost any price to gain information on the Pope's Skills—not that I had any intention of selling Tithia out, obviously.

With a promise to share my Skills with them as well, I asked them to list out their Skills and levels, starting with Leroy. He was a level 47 Cleric with the following Skills:

```
Blessed Light
Heal (Level 10)
Strengthen (Level 10)
Regeneration (Level 5)
Hammerfall (Level 5)
Goddess's Protection (Level 5)
Boost Holy Element (Level 5)
Heavenly Feast (Level 2)
```

I was kind of impressed that his Skill set wasn't atrocious, despite him being forced to randomly acquire them like everyone else in the world. Strengthen and Heal would allow him to support the party at a basic level, and he had the option of protecting himself with Goddess's Protection while attacking with Hammerfall. He was basically a jack-of-all-trades and a master of none, but that might

not have been so bad since he'd have to travel with Tithia and protect her. Of course, there was some room for improvement.

Tithia was the Pope and she'd brought her level up to 28 by slaughtering Orcs. She had the following Skills:

```
Prayer of the Soul
Goddess's Sanctuary (Level 5)
Divine Favor (Level 5)
Compassion (Level 10)
Judgment Day
Miraculous Prayer (Level 2)
```

Yep. I've never heard of those. They didn't call it a unique job for nothing. I asked Tithia to walk me through each of her Skills' effects. I learned that Prayer of the Soul was an inherent Skill of the Pope that allowed her to create an item called Heart of the Pope—a pearl-like jewel that Leroy had swallowed to lessen the impact of the curse on Tithia; Goddess's Sanctuary purified her surroundings and set up a barrier; Divine Favor was a Passive Skill that buffed her own stats; Compassion healed everyone—both allies and foes—around her; Judgment Day had a fifty-fifty chance to either insta-kill or completely heal the target; and Miraculous Prayer triggered a random miracle to occur.

Now those are Skills I'd love to test out in the field...! A fifty percent chance to insta-kill was no joke. There might be some limitations to it, like the insta-kill failing on monsters of a much higher level than her own, but this was the Skill to use if she wanted to knock out monsters that offered oodles of EXP. *I wonder how much mana it costs?* I mused then realized that all she needed to do was chug some Potions to make the mana cost irrelevant.

"You should use Judgment Day to hunt monsters!" I urged her.

"Y-Yes, I suppose you're right. That Skill always scared me, but I should learn to use it if I want to become stronger," Tithia said.

"Oh..." I'd let my greed cloud my judgment. *Of course Tithia wouldn't want to use a Skill like that...* My penance was short-lived,

though, as I remembered how the little pope had been gleefully chucking Molotovs at Orcs earlier in the day. "We'll make sure to explore your Skills, Your Holiness. You'll never know how to use them well if you never try them out."

"Yes, I'll try my best!" Tithia said. "What are your Skills, Sharon?"

"Supporting Skills, mostly." I walked her through each of my Skills, and Tithia listened intently.

Leroy, though, had gone pale by the time I was finished. "How did you get Skills like that...?" he muttered.

Thanks to the Adventure Bracelet, I can choose my own Skills! I didn't say. Naturally, I had a pretty big leg up on both of them. Instead of spilling my secret, I just smiled.

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)

"Meowster is amazing," Tarte said as she brought us tea.

"Amazing is putting it lightly..." Leroy said. "Thank you." He took the tea and sipped from it. "There's no sense trying to figure it out," he added, as if I were some freak of nature who lacked a scientific explanation.

How dare he? I grumbled inwardly.

***

After hunting Orcs for a few days in a row, we took a day off to rest—but mostly to craft more Molotovs and healing items. Since

Tithia seemed perfectly happy to play assistant to Tarte—and Leroy content to babysit them—I decided to go to the Guild alone to see if they'd gotten any additional stock of the materials we needed.

Even as I walked down the street, my brain's cogs were turning at full speed. Since Tithia had been steadily grinding levels, I wanted to start looking at more challenging hunting grounds—as soon as we had a healthy stock of Molotovs. Without that in place, it was hard to dismiss the added benefit of picking up Orc Rags that came with hunting in Sunlit Grove. Our lack of a frontline fighter was another factor holding me back from changing locations—I couldn't expect Leroy to keep playing tank if we were to take on monsters much more challenging than Orcs. I couldn't help but think of Kent and Cocoa. The Swordsman and Sorcerer duo would be a perfect fit for our party and make our hunts much more efficient.

But... They were good kids. Kent acted reckless at times, but he thought through every battle, and it seemed like he was working hard to broaden his horizons. Cocoa paid great attention to detail and had a lot of domestic knowledge that had been of great use while camping. They were only on their Introductory Jobs and at a lower level, but the same could be said about me. I wouldn't mind grinding levels together with them.

But I can't rope them into this, I kept thinking. Because I was privy to game knowledge unavailable to others in this world, I knew I navigated it differently. I was an outlier whose actions were fueled by an insatiable lust to explore every view I could find in this world that I'd enjoyed playing in so much.

Kent and Cocoa still worked close to home—close to their parents. I'd feel incredibly selfish dragging them around for personal reasons, especially now that the threat of Rodney loomed around every corner. Their parents would also worry. When I'd stopped in the Farming Village, I'd met both of their mothers, who'd seemed terribly nervous about their children. *How could I possibly ask them to put their lives at risk?* Then I asked myself, *What about Tarte?* She was different, though, because she had thought she was going to die before she could explore the world. Now that she was able to pursue that dream, I felt confident in tutoring her as an Alchemist

while we traveled together.

"There's no sense thinking about this again..." I sighed as I pushed open the door to the Guild branch, hoping to find the ingredients needed to craft Molotovs. As soon as I walked up to the counter, Sara the receptionist began stacking bag after bag in front of me. Apparently, I'd become something of a regular, if she was bringing out Orc Rags and other ingredients before I could even ask for them.

"Hi, Sharon! I thought you'd stop by!"

"Good morning, Sara. Thanks for these," I said, surveying the mountain of materials on the counter.

Through my repeated visits to the Guild to stock up on Molotov ingredients, I'd befriended Sara, the Guild receptionist with honey-colored, natural curls and a beauty mark under one of her green eyes. She was cutesy but had a hint of sexiness to her.

"More adventurers are hunting Orcs now that you've listed a request for Orc Rags at a higher payout rate. In turn, that has raised the average level of the adventurers in Snowdia," Sara explained.

"Wow," I said. "And all thanks to Orcs." Who'd have guessed they'd strengthen the Snowdia adventurer community at large, especially when Snowdia had already had a strong pool of adventurers to take on the more formidable monsters in the area?

"We haven't seen many Fire Shrooms, though, with the weather up here and everything," Sara said. "You may have better luck at Zille's Guild branch."

"I thought so... I'll check with them when I get a chance," I said.

"Good luck."

I took 153 Orc Rags and 10 Fire Shrooms for Molotovs, as well as 3 Silence of the Flowers for additional Delay Potions to mitigate the curse upon Tithia and Leroy.

"Thank you!" I paid Sara, and pretended to stow the ingredients in my Magic Bag while actually putting them into my bracelet's Storage.

Next stop, Zille, I decided. Using the Transportation Gates, I traveled to the Holy Capital of Zille. All it would take would be for people of this world to use these Gates once and their lives would

never be the same again.

Luckily, my purchase request at the Zille Guild branch had come in clutch, netting me extra Orc Rags and Fire Shrooms. "Now I just need to bring these home and have Tarte whip up some Molotovs." I felt my lips curl into a smile. *Let the hunt continue!*

***

We'd returned yet again to Sunlit Grove to hunt more Orcs when I asked Tithia to give her Skills a try—she'd never used them before.

"Miraculous Prayer." Tithia's voice rang like a bell, and angelic feathers materialized around her, swirling on a phantom wind. Awestruck, I could only gawk at the divine display. The effect of this Skill was random, though, which brought a slew of questions to my mind: What kinds of effects were available? From a pool of how many effects were they randomized? Were any of the effects negative?

"How was it, Your Holiness?" I asked.

"It looks like...my Attack is tripled for three minutes," Tithia said.

"Bishop Leroy, bring us some Orcs. Now!" I said.

"On it!"

While Leroy went to lure additional Orcs, I started throwing rocks at an Orc nearby—we couldn't miss out on this god-tier buff!

"Start throwing!" I shouted at Tithia. I could barely spare the time to double her Attack with Goddess's Smite. I'd try my best to keep up with Tithia's chucking, though!

With an adorable grunt, Tithia lobbed a Molotov at the Orc I'd baited with my rock throwing. The explosive bottle formed a beautiful arc and smashed against the Orc, erupting into an overwhelming gout of flame. Tithia, Tarte, and I all yelped in surprise. Triple Attack was no joke!

As I stood there staring at the impressive inferno, Leroy returned, bringing two more Orcs with him. "Incoming!" It was a good thing he was keeping up a constant barrier with Goddess's Protection. Two minutes had already passed since Tithia had used her Skill, so we'd need to stop after taking out the Orcs Leroy had lured to us.

"Your Holiness!" Leroy called.

"Here goes!" Tithia threw the next Molotov, which turned into even more of an inferno on impact, thanks to the extra buff from my Goddess's Smite.

The Pope job is OP, I marveled. I scooped up the Orc drop items and turned to Tithia. "That's quite the skill..." I managed to say.

"Ameowzing..." Tarte muttered.

"I'm shocked myself," Tithia said, holding a hand against her heart, which must have been beating very fast.

Once she'd calmed down, I asked her to try the Skill again—only to have her announce, "Three percent buff to Dexterity..." That might have been a decent buff for physical fighters, but it didn't help Tithia in any way. It seemed like miracles didn't always cause a desired effect.

She tried it several more times, and it seemed that Miraculous Prayer most often triggered buffs to Physical Attack and Defense, set up a barrier, or healed her. The Triple Attack buff must have been a pretty rare one.

Tithia could experiment further with Miraculous Prayer when time allowed. I wanted to move on to checking out her other skills, but I was still debating whether or not I should have her cast Judgment Day. I was jaded enough already, but despite her Molotov rampage, Tithia was just an innocent—and real—girl. Was I really about to make her use such a terrifying Skill? Again, if I'd had it, I would have used it left and right without a second thought!

While I kept my brows knitted in indecision, Tithia tugged on my sleeve. "Please don't be nervous, Sharon. I can do it." She smiled, trying to reassure me.

"Your Holiness..." I muttered.

"And I will always support her," Leroy said from behind her.

Oh no... I made Tithia worry for me! "So I'm the only one dragging my feet... Okay! Let's do it!" I slapped myself on the cheek to whip myself into shape.

"Okay!" Tithia replied.

Now, we'll see what this Skill is all about.

Thus, Leroy the human tank sprang into action once more. When

he had the Orc pinned, I had Tarte use Potion Throw to weaken it—a little bit of a contingency in case something went awry.

"You're up, Your Holiness," I said.

"Okay." Tithia took deep breaths and focused her attention on the Orc trying to club Leroy. Her eyes shone with the gravity of her power—a look becoming of the Pope. "Judgment Day!" Her voice echoed across the wood.

At the same moment, I felt so much pressure in the air that it was hard to breathe. Forcing myself to draw breath, I kept my gaze glued to the Orc. Above its head, a winged angel with smaller wings for ears appeared, looking like a bona fide messenger of the Goddess. They raised a sword that looked unnaturally large for them and cast it down onto the Orc's head. At the moment of impact, angelic wings sprouted out of the sword, completely healing the monster—and Tithia fainted, collapsing to the ground.

"Your Holiness!" Leroy shouted. He bolted toward Tithia, apparently having forgotten about the Orc that was now on his tail.

"Wait— Goddess's Smite!" I cast my Skill on Tarte.

"Potion Throw! Meow!" Tarte immediately used her own Skill.

Great job, Tarte! Despite the unexpected turn of events, Tarte had known what she had to do. Fortunately, Leroy had only brought one Orc this time, so Tarte's Molotov immolated it without any issue.

There was no time to rest, though. Tarte and I ran over to Tithia. Leroy held her in his arms, calling her name over and over again, but the young Pope stayed unconscious.

What just happened?! Not that I knew all the Skills in *Reas*—especially when it came to unique job Skills—but I'd never heard of a Skill that made the user faint. Of course, fainting might just not have been an in-game feature. It wouldn't have made sense to have players faint, thus rendering them incapable of playing the game.

"Bishop Leroy?" I asked.

"She's asleep..." he finally concluded. "She must be drained of mana. I suppose that's not surprising, considering the Skill she just unleashed."

"Drained of mana..." I repeated. That made sense. There was no in-game text here to explain the effects of Judgment Day, but it

seemed plausible that it could cost all of the user's mana. Using all your mana hadn't made you faint in *Reas*, but this was reality. Tithia's body might have triggered a defense mechanism, forcing her to rest.

I blew out a breath and tried to steady my heartbeat. "It was reckless of me to have her use the Skill for the first time on an Orc. I'm sorry," I said to Leroy, planning to apologize to Tithia as well when she woke. Leroy was her de facto parent, and I'd made a mistake that had put her in danger.

Leroy slowly shook his head. "There's no need to apologize. You might have suggested it, but Her Holiness made the decision to use it. I didn't stop her either, so please don't feel responsible...unless you encouraged her because you wanted this to happen." Leroy smiled in a way that seemed more threatening than reassuring.

"I didn't! I swear!" I vehemently denied his accusation—I had no doubt that Leroy would hunt me to the ends of the earth if I so much as laid a finger on Tithia.

"Yes, I know. That's why we won't blame you for any part of this," Leroy reiterated.

"All right..." I said, feeling a little embarrassed by this unexpected declaration of trust from Leroy.

"Let's go back to town! Another Orc might find us here!" Tarte warned.

"Yes... We must take Her Holiness to safety as quickly as possible," Leroy agreed.

"To the inn, then," I agreed.

Once we'd made it back to the inn and tucked Tithia into bed, we were able to finally take a moment to relax.

I thought I'd have a heart attack, I sighed to myself. *I'm never going to have her test her Skills against a monster at our level again—I'll have her try the rest on a Jiggly or something.*

Leroy watched Tithia sleep, his face still shadowed with concern. I would have suggested we get something to eat, but he was refusing to move a step until Tithia woke.

Then, Tarte knelt beside Leroy. "Bishop Leroy, Pope Tithia will be all right. She'll wake up once she rests for a while. I know what it's

like to be drained of mana and how worried it can make people."

"Tarte..." Leroy looked at her, surprised. He hadn't known that Tarte had been afflicted by Mana Eater. "I didn't realize how much you'd been through."

"Meowster saved me. You and Pope Tithia will be all right—Meowster will make sure of it," Tarte said.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait...!" There I'd been, thinking that Tarte was about to be inspiring, but she was actually just chucking the responsibility at me! *Like she threw all those Molotovs!* "That only worked out because we were lucky," I reminded her. "I have my limits, you know!"

"You say that, Meowster, but I have yet to see you fail at anything."

"I've always known you had special talents," Leroy said, "especially after seeing you deal with our curse and command our hunts."

Those words seemed to burn my cheeks. "Flattering me won't solve anything..."

Either because she'd recovered enough mana, or maybe because we were being too loud, Tithia stirred.

"Your Holiness?!" Leroy and Tarte snapped their attention back to her.

"What...happened?" Tithia asked.

"Thank Flaudia you're all right...!"

"Leroy...?" Gradually, Tithia awoke from her muddled state. She blinked a few times and patted Leroy on the back as he held her close. "I'm sorry I worried you, Leroy. I'm all right now." She smiled angelically as tears formed in Leroy's eyes. "Sharon, Tarte, I'm sorry I fainted in the middle of our hunt."

"No, my reckless plan is to blame for that. I suspect Judgment Day costs all of your mana to use—it would be best not to use it at all," I said. I didn't mention that it could still be kept as a desperate Hail Mary if it ever came down to it. She was too young to think like that.

"Don't worry!" Tarte purred. "Your Holiness had it tougher than any of us. Let's have some sweet treats and warm drinks."

"Yes, please!" Tithia's smile bloomed again.

***

That night, I found myself staring out the window, unable to sleep for some reason. Maybe I was still running on the adrenaline from when Tithia had fainted.

"Something keeping you awake?" Leroy's voice suddenly asked, almost stopping my heart again. I hadn't so much as heard him stir.

"Bishop Leroy..." I turned to find him there. I guessed that something was keeping him up too. "Yes. I'm having trouble falling asleep."

Tarte and Tithia were both still sleeping soundly, as if they hadn't a care in the world.

"Here." Leroy had made me a cup of tea, and I took it with a sigh. It felt wonderfully warm in my hands.

"Thank you," I said.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said.

"What?"

"I was supposed to keep the Orcs at bay," Leroy explained, "but I left my post to rush to Her Holiness."

"Oh..." I offered him a smile. *True, he shouldn't have abandoned his role, even then.* On the other hand, I understood why he had—to him, there was no greater emergency than one that concerned Tithia. He saw her well-being as a far greater priority than any danger that might befall him. He'd probably still be more concerned about Tithia even if an apocalypse were upon us. Tithia was his everything, as far as I could tell.

"That's okay," I reassured him.

Leroy wasn't ready to let it go, though. "So..." he said, holding his chin in his hand. "I feel like we need to find a frontline fighter as quickly as possible."

"Yes... I guess you're right," I had to agree. Still, it'd be too risky to try and recruit a stranger to our party—we could end up with one of Rodney's agents or someone opportunistic enough to sell us out to him.

“If only we could find the Paladins... But I haven’t been able to get in touch with them. I hope they’re all right...” Leroy said.

Joining forces with the Paladins would have been deeply reassuring. Now that Tithia was catching up to us, if we raised our levels a little bit more, I felt like we could take on Rodney. The problem was that, with our current party structure, our level grinding was reaching a plateau. We did desperately need a frontline fighter.

“Do you know any fighter whom you can trust?” Leroy asked, his eyes burning with anxiety.

A face did come to mind, but I didn’t tell Leroy that. Instead, I only shook my head.

Reunion

"I think it's about time we share EXP," I announced. We hadn't been doing this until now because we'd wanted Tithia to catch up to our level...and catch up she had.

"I'm level 28 now," Tithia said.

"I'm 32," Tarte purred. She must have gained a level because she'd been picking off the occasional Orc with Potion Throw whenever we needed her help. *So jealous!*

"I'm falling behind my apprentice... I'm still at 30," I said.

"I'm also at the same level—47," Leroy added.

When all members in a party were within fifteen levels of each other, they could share EXP evenly. To take advantage of this, we all went to the Guild so the three of us—sans Leroy—could register as a party.

"All right, let's go throw Molotovs and grind more levels!" I cheered.

"Yes!" Tithia answered.

"Purray!" Tarte yowled.

"Let's do it," Leroy added.

After registering our party and picking up more Molotov ingredients, we walked out of the Guild—and ran right into Kent and Cocoa.

"Sharon!" they exclaimed in unison.

"What are you guys doing here?!" I blurted.

"So nice to see you again!" Tarte crowed.

Since fleeing to Snowdia with Tithia and Leroy, I hadn't been able to form a party with Kent and Cocoa again—mostly because they were still stationed in Zille and I didn't want to put them in harm's way by roping them into this business with Cardinal Rodney.

Kent smiled. "Cocoa and I are both level 33 now. We're not looking to relocate, exactly, but we've gotten stronger and I got a

new sword, so we decided to branch out and come see Snowdia. We figured if we were lucky, we'd run into you." Sure enough, the Iron Sword was gone from his belt, and a Gladius was strapped in its place. The Gladius didn't have any special effects, but it had decent enough Attack to carry Kent while he was still on his introductory job.

"You definitely surprised me, but I'm so glad to see you!" I said, and Kent and Cocoa both beamed. Then, I felt a tug at my sleeve—Tithia. "Oh, I haven't introduced you. This is Tithia and her guardian, Leroy. It's a long story, but we've formed a party for the time being."

"Nice to meet you both," Tithia said.

"Nice to meet you," Leroy echoed.

"I'm Kent. I'm a Swordsman."

"And I'm Cocoa. I'm a Sorcerer. The two of us are in a party together, and we sometimes join up with Sharon."

I nodded along as they introduced themselves. Even though it hadn't been that long since I'd last seen them, they seemed so grown up. The last time I'd spoken to them in Zille, they'd mentioned that they were hesitant to come to Snowdia because they were worried their levels and equipment weren't up to snuff. The only upgrade to their gear that I could see was Kent's sword, but they had definitely ground more levels. I was so proud of them for following through with that before rushing to Snowdia.

They should start thinking about their advanced jobs, I mused. Once you reached level 40, you were eligible to switch to an advanced job that stemmed from your introductory one by going to that job's designated location. I had it easy—I'd only have to go back to the cathedral in Zille. Tarte's was a special job without an advanced version, and Tithia's unique job meant she had no need to worry about that either. Leroy already had his advanced job, so his next step up would be switching to his awakened job when he reached level 100.

Leroy whispered to me, "He's a Swordsman, he said. Why don't you form a party with him? He must be a hard worker to have reached level 33 at his age. Of course, that's only if you trust him."

"Hmm," I murmured. Kent and Cocoa *were* very dedicated to

their work. Their levels were still on par with mine, but they always made safe and reliable choices. *Do I trust them? Absolutely.*

"I understand that you don't want to put them in danger—to a painful degree. However, as much as it would pain me as well, we do not have many options," Leroy said. I could see where he was coming from. As we spoke, Rodney was digging his claws deeper into the church—Leroy needed to take Rodney down as soon as possible. There was also another concern on my mind that I felt Leroy shared but hadn't mentioned—if what I feared came to pass, Kent and Cocoa wouldn't be safe anyway.

"What to do..." I scratched my head.

"Sharon!" Kent called. He and Cocoa were staring at me.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Aren't you in some kind of trouble? Though we weren't party mates for long, we'll always be your allies. We can help!" Kent said.

"He's right, Sharon. We're adventurers too. A little bit of danger—No, *no* amount of danger is going to scare us away!" Cocoa added.

You two warm my heart! "But I might put you in a lot of danger. *A lot*, a lot."

"Bring it on," Kent said.

"But in exchange, we're going to raise our levels a lot too," I said.

"Yeah, bring it o—?" Kent hesitated for a moment before recovering. "No, no, yeah, after you took us Orc hunting last time, you could tell us to hunt anytime anywhere and I wouldn't be surprised." Kent laughed, rubbing the tip of his nose.

"No, we won't," Cocoa confirmed with a chuckle.

My friends have grown so strong!

"Then it's settled... We'll form a party. As long as Tithia and Tarte have no objections," I said—Leroy obviously had no problem with this arrangement. As it turned out, the girls looked as excited as ever.

"I'm not as experienced as Sharon, but I won't let you down!" Tithia said.

"I'm so excited to form a pawty again!" Tarte said.

"We still have a lot to learn ourselves," Kent told Tithia. "But it looks like we'll balance out the party well!"

"I think we'll make a good team!" Cocoa agreed.

The four of them had seemed to hit it off right away, already engaging in pleasant conversation. Friendship was the cornerstone of an effective party—I couldn't have hoped for anything better.

"Before I get you up to speed, let's register our party," I suggested.

"Perfect," Kent agreed.

So, we turned right around and walked back up to a counter inside the Guild. Our plan was to first form a party of five until our levels were close enough to Leroy's for us to include him and still share EXP.

Once we'd registered our new party, I took a look around at my friends. Now, all we had to do was grind more levels.

"Now that we have a proper fighter on the front line..." I said, "Why don't we go to Deep Ravine?" Everyone fell quiet. Tarte and Tithia both gave me the same adorably curious smile, but Leroy's smile had frozen in place.

"There's no way!" Kent and Cocoa cried out.

You just said nothing was going to surprise you, I wanted to point out.

Deep Ravine was an area to the northwest of Snowdia. Its large monsters were perfect prey for us to hunt with our large party.

Well, there are Wyverns there... I thought. I expected that they were the object of Kent and Cocoa's trepidation. It was unfounded trepidation, though—Tarte would mow them down with Molotovs! A Wyvern's drop item was valuable too. But Dragon's Den, the dungeon next to Deep Ravine, was still way out of our league.

"That won't be a day trip, so we need to stock up on camping gear. We should also check if there are any quests we can take care of while we're at it," I said.

"Sharon... Are you serious?" Kent asked.

"Am I ever!" I was all in—we didn't have time to dillydally if we wanted to prevent Rodney from taking over the kingdom. The faster we raised our levels the better. "Tarte, Tithia, and I will go get the supplies. Kent and Cocoa, can you find quests here at the Guild? And, Bishop Leroy, if there are any errands you need to run, now's a

great time."

"Purrfect!"

"Okay!"

Tarte and Tithia quickly agreed, making me proud.

Kent and Cocoa shared a look. "She's going through with this?!" they exclaimed. Then, something seemed to click. "It is *Sharon* we're talking about..." *Why'd they say it like that?*

In any case, Wyvern hunts were profitable—there was no reason not to take a quest if one was available. As for Leroy, I was sure he had some method of contacting his surviving compatriots that I wasn't aware of. Hopefully, the line of communication was still open. *A lot of people who used to serve Tithia now side with Rodney,* I realized. *Can Leroy even trust his contacts?*

"Thank you," Leroy said. "I'll come back after I check in on my rendezvous spot."

"Got it," I said. Apparently, he'd set up a location to meet his contacts. Once we'd seen Leroy off, we split up to take care of our respective tasks.

***

"Wow..." I breathed, amazed by the wind that howled through the ravine. I'd never been to a *ravine* before!

"Wait, wait, wait. How are you so happy and relaxed?! I'm so tense my hands are—"

"Shaking," I noticed.

"Because of how hyped I am!" Kent insisted. Maybe he just couldn't stand how calm I seemed, but as far as I was concerned, we were equally excited to be here.

Well, if Kent was so happy to be here, I could only help him make the most of his time. *The fun part of being on the front line is fighting giant monsters,* I thought. There was a certain romance to it, now that I was living in a fantasy world. Of course, that also meant that our lives were really on the line, so I was always going to maintain maximum precaution.

The geography of Deep Ravine was exactly as its name

suggested. A powerful wind rushed through the ravine during most hours of the day. Though sparsely vegetated boulders blocked our view here and there, I could still see down the straight-running ravine all the way to the mountain that held Dragon's Den at its summit.

One day, I thought to myself, *when we're stronger.*

"Meowster, is there anything I should know about fighting in here?" Tarte asked.

"Let's see. The monsters we'll see here are Wyverns, Roly-Polies, Sylphies, and Mandrakes," I explained. Wyverns were just smaller dragons. They'd swoop down from above, but with Strengthen and Potion Throw, we could knock them out of the sky. Once a Wyvern was on the ground, we could gang up on it and finish the job. Roly-Polies were like sentient rocks that charged at you by rolling—in pretty much a straight line. They threatened quite a bit of damage, but it wouldn't be hard to dodge them if we kept our guard up. Sylphies were fairies about thirty centimeters in height who attacked with Wind magic...and they looked like adorable little girls. If I was nervous about anything, it was that I wouldn't be able to go through with taking out such a cute monster. Mandrakes were the same as their depictions in fantasy novels—a plant that screamed when you plucked it. There weren't many of them in Deep Ravine, and combat didn't start unless you plucked one, so we could walk right past them.

"You know so much," Kent said, his eyes gleaming with respect. "I tried to do some research, but I only found out the names of the monsters. If we'd had more time, I would have asked more adventurers at the Guild. I'm glad you know more about them, Sharon."

"Sharon really is insightful," Cocoa added.

"Right? Let's do this!" Kent said.

"Then I'm going to throw Meowlotovs like normal!" Tarte said.

"Then I... I..." Tithia stammered.

"Keep chucking them, Tarte! Your Holiness, can you support us with your Skills and keep an eye on our surroundings? The monsters here are stronger, so we need to be careful none of them take us by

surprise. We're still low level by comparison, so it's an important job. Bishop Leroy and I need to focus on supporting."

"That *is* very important. I can do it!" Tithia huffed and gripped her staff tight. Her hands were trembling a little, but her eyes were fierce with determination. *She'll be okay,* I thought. Leroy looked more attentive than normal, ready to shield Tithia at the drop of a hat. A healthy tension buzzed among us—the kind that would help us perform our best.

"Let's go," I announced, and we officially set foot into Deep Ravine.

Deep Ravine

As much as I was jonesing to level grind, we first had to build our base—especially since we'd be here for some time. Properly setting up now would keep us going for the long haul, allowing us to take frequent breaks so our performance didn't slack.

"Before we start hunting, we need to make a base! I have a spot in mind, so let's go there first," I said.

"S-S-Sure!" Kent stammered back, obviously daunted by the Wyverns soaring through the sky.

I don't think even a Wyvern would be much trouble to us, since we have a full party, I reflected. Considering how quickly Kent had gotten the hang of hunting Orcs, he'd get used to taking on Wyverns soon enough. He had great instincts when it came to combat.

Kent led the party, followed by me, then Tarte, Cocoa, Tithia, and finally Leroy. Our plan was for me to make snap judgments upon each encounter, with Leroy covering anything I'd missed. Because of my game knowledge, I was the one best suited to command the party here.

After walking for a while, Kent halted. "Is that...?" he asked.

"A Mandrake," I confirmed. "It'll attack if we pluck it out of the ground, but we'll be fine if you leave it alone... Unless you *want* to fight it?" I added. It was a viable option. Mandrakes offered decent drop items and EXP.

Kent shook his head. "Let's ignore it. Other monsters will attack us unprovoked, right? It's too risky to start fights ourselves. We're not ready to take on Mandrakes and something else at the same time."

"I agree," I said. Kent might have looked like a jock, but he had the brains to back up his brawn. *How fun it is to watch beginners grow!* I was already having a blast witnessing how reliable Kent and Cocoa had become.

As we walked past the Mandrake without disturbing it, a continuous, tumbling-rock sound began to echo throughout the ravine—a Roly-Poly was coming for us.

"We're entering combat!" I announced. "Goddess's Smite!"

"Okay! Divine Favor!"

Almost as soon as I'd cast my Skill to double Tarte's Attack, Tithia used a Skill that buffed herself. She was getting used to being in combat. A moment later, Leroy cast Goddess's Protection on Kent, only delayed by that much because he'd been scanning our surroundings—no Roly-Poly yet. It entered our field of vision just as we finished readying ourselves for battle. The Roly-Poly was a spherical monster comprising a bunch of rocks clumped together.

"Here we go! Taunt!" Kent used his Skill and leaped forward—the Roly-Poly veered toward him. Without flinching, Kent kept his eyes locked on the rolling boulder. Just before impact, he dove aside to evade it. "Phew, that's scary!" Kent shouted. "It's doable, though!" A few deep breaths later, Kent shouted, "Attack!"

Tarte, Tithia, and Cocoa were all ready.

"Here goes! Purrtion Throw!"

"Go!"

Tarte and Tithia each threw a Molotov, though Tarte's was heavily boosted by her Skill. The explosions peeled off a few rocks from the Roly-Poly, but it wasn't going down.

"I can help too—Fire Arrow!" Cocoa's spell must have finished it off—the Roly-Poly burst into light.

Good...! That had been a lot easier than I'd expected, thanks in large part to Kent playing his role without letting fear hold him back. *Our party's awesome!* I looked over my incredible party and saw Kent clenching his fists in triumph as Tarte and Tithia jumped up and down while holding hands.

I quickly did the math. Because I'd used Goddess's Smite on Tarte, her Potion Throw had been worth two, plus Tithia's Molotov, and Cocoa's Spell. Cocoa had raised her level, so I didn't expect her Fire Arrow to be much weaker than a Molotov. *Next time, I wonder if I could swing casting another Goddess's Smite on one of them...* Of course, I wouldn't need to keep buffing their attacks for long.

Because of how quickly our levels should grow while we were here, I'd soon have no need to cast Goddess's Smite at all.

Tarte scooped up the Roly-Poly's drop item and we went on our way. We faced a few more of the boulder monsters along the way, but we took care of them without a hitch.

Eventually, we arrived at the spot I'd been thinking of: It was a clearing with a sheer cliff towering over it. Within the cliff's face was a shallow cave about ten meters deep. Back in *Reas,* this had been designed as a spot for players to rest more easily since monsters didn't spawn here as often.

Kent and Cocoa immediately began inspecting the area—an important precaution for an adventurer.

"This is a great spot! You can see far enough that we'd know right away if a monster attacked," Kent said.

"Yeah. That boulder over there would be perfect to keep watch from," Cocoa added.

Once everyone had set down their packs, I said, "I think our goal for the time being is to get everyone to level 40."

"Forty?!" they all repeated in surprise...even though that should have been a reasonable level to make sure we could split EXP with Leroy, who was already at level 47.

"It won't take us long to get to 40 here. It'll be fine!" I said.

"I thought it'd take me another year to get there..." Kent said. "I should have expected another surprise from Sharon."

"My level is still 28..." Tithia murmured.

Believe it or not, I *would* get them to level 40, and quick—we needed to get stronger fast so that Tithia could retake the cathedral in Zille...and so that I could become the Holy Maiden!

"Sharon's always full of surprises," Cocoa said as if she'd finally come to terms with some deep truth of the universe. "Let's set up camp!"

"Yes. We should get it done before any enemies pounce!" Tarte puffed, pulling out her tent.

"Right. Let's make this quick," Kent said. "There's no sense thinking about it." He began taking on the heavy lifting of setting up the tents.

"What should I do?" Tithia asked.

"Can you and Bishop Leroy gather some firewood without leaving our sight? We'll be staying for a few days, so we can't have too much firewood," I said.

"Okay!" Tithia chimed.

"We'll be right back," Leroy added.

Meanwhile, Cocoa was double-checking our food supply. It was a huge benefit to have someone in the party who could cook a decent meal—when camping out, good food heals your soul as well as your body.

While she was doing that, I was doing a lap of the perimeter to check the terrain. I climbed on tall boulders to see if there had been any changes from the game's map. From what I'd learned about the discrepancies between this world and the world of *Reas*, nothing should be too much of a problem. The only difference I noticed was a shift in my depth perception, which was to be expected since I was comparing real life to a video game. It was always important to confirm things with your own eyes.

Even the Wyverns seemed content to maintain their altitude. They would probably leave us alone unless we attacked them first. Once we set up our base camp, we planned to spend the rest of the day hunting Roly-Polies, then move on to Sylphies and Wyverns tomorrow.

"Hmm... We may get to level 40 quicker than I expected," I said. Once we reached level 40, some of us could switch to an advanced job. Busy but fun seemed to be the pattern for our party.

With excitement in my heart, I rejoined the others.

***

"A Roly-Poly! Behind you!" Cocoa shouted, spurring everyone into position.

"Got it! Taunt!" Kent used his Skill again to draw the Roly-Poly's attack—a rolling charge that could easily be dodged.

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Fire Arrow!"

Tarte and Cocoa landed their attacks one after another, until the Roly-Poly burst into light, dropping a Rock, which was just an ordinary rock you could pick up anywhere.

"All right, we're getting the hang of it!"

"Yeah!"

Kent and Cocoa high-fived. Tarte and Tithia mimicked the gesture, which was ridiculously adorable. If anyone was expecting me to high-five Leroy, though, they were doomed to be disappointed.

Once we'd set up our base camp, we had begun a casual hunt. We wouldn't go far until tomorrow. This was just a chance to make sure we were working well together—and working well we were!

None of us were intimidated by Deep Ravine anymore. It looked like the others were even having some fun as we took out Roly-Polies.

Suddenly, Tarte's tail puffed up. "What?!"

"Oh, it's a beautiful fairy!" Tithia called.

The girls had spotted a Sylphy—the first of the day. The fairy stood at about thirty centimeters and wore a green outfit with accents of yellow and pink. It was a great showcase of the *Reas* design team's talent.

This isn't going to be easy...mentally, I thought.

"Let's go! Taunt!" Kent shouted, rushing to attack the Sylphy just as though it were another Roly-Poly!

"You're going to attack such a cute fairy...?!" Tithia asked.

"If we go easy on it, we're going to lose! Adventurers can't go judging monsters by their looks! This one *is* strong and ready for a fight!" Kent shouted as the Sylphy began attacking him with Wind magic.

Tithia's expression sharpened—she'd gotten over the Sylphy's looks. "Miraculous Prayer! Yes! An Attack boost!" she announced then chucked a Molotov. *How far she's grown.* Unfortunately, the Molotov missed its mark, much to Tithia's devastation. The Sylphy definitely made for a smaller, more difficult-to-hit target than a Roly-Poly.

"It dodged Her Holiness's attack...! Hammerfall!" Leroy attacked

the fairy next. Hammerfall, at level 5, actually made for a decent avenue of attack. What really made the difference in a Skill's damage output was the user's gear, though. Maybe I could talk to Leroy about exploring a more aggressive play style.

I used Goddess's Smite on Tarte, refreshed everyone's buffs, and cast Regeneration on Kent, while Leroy applied Goddess's Protection to everyone. The Sylphy shrieked, sending blades of wind my way, which simply bounced off the Goddess's Protection shield.

"Finish it off, Cocoa!" I called. "Goddess's Smite!"

"Okay! Fire Arrow!" Cocoa's attack, doubled by my Skill, took out the Sylphy at last, leaving behind a Small Flower and a Medicinal Herb.

"All right!" Kent pumped his fist in triumph. There was something special about the first victory against a new monster. I stowed the drop items in my Bag and we continued hunting for a while longer.

***

After watching the butter sizzle and melt inside the pot, I began adding in broccoli, mushrooms, and diced meat. The smell of cooking butter was almost intoxicating.

"What spices would you like, Sharon?" Leroy asked.

"The butter is already salted, so you can put this on bread as is," I explained.

"That seems so quick and easy. I'll have to try making it next time," he said, watching with interest as I made an ajillo-esque sauce.

I'd used such an egregious amount of butter that I didn't even want to think about calories... So I decided to tell myself that I'd burned enough calories through our hunt. Skewers of meat and vegetables were grilling on the bonfire to accompany our bread, ajillo, and cheese. We had all gathered around the fire, ready to eat.

I poured the ajillo onto a slice of bread and topped it with mushrooms. "Mmm!" I moaned. It was so delicious that words had failed me. Across the fire, Kent was chowing down on meat while Cocoa was pairing some bread and cheese. Tithia was practically

drooling over the ajillo on her bread while Leroy removed one piece of meat from the skewer at a time so Tithia could eat it more easily. He had elevated taking care of Tithia to an art form.

"So delicious!" Tarte purred, chewing on big bites of meat next to me.

We chowed down on our well-deserved feast with great concentration for a while. Then, we poured ourselves some tea and slowed down to a leisurely place. I hadn't brought any alcohol, but I would have loved for us to all drink together one day.

"Hey..." Kent said when there was a lull in conversation. "Um... Now that we've fought together for a bit, I'd like to have proper introductions. If that's all right," he said to Tithia and Leroy in particular—Kent knew that they were no ordinary adventurers.

I should have come clean from the beginning. He might have heard Leroy or me address Tithia by her title, and their fine attire was a major giveaway of their rank. Still, Kent hadn't hesitated to help us, which was a testament to his kindness.

"Yes, we haven't really paused since deciding to hunt together," Tithia said.

"We were kind of busy fending off powerful monsters," Cocoa added, and she and Tithia shared a laugh.

These two aren't thinking about their situation too deeply!

"This might take a while. I'll make us more tea."

"Thank you, Tarte," I said.

"Any time, Meowster," Tarte grinned and poured us a fresh batch of tea. Now that Tarte had an Adventure Bracelet, she had a stockpile of foods...and snacks.

I looked toward Leroy, and he gave me a nod—I had permission to talk about them. After a deep breath, I began explaining who exactly Tithia and Leroy were, going back to how I'd met Tithia and continuing on to the threat of Rodney Hervas...

Getting to Know Each Other

"So...Leroy's really a bishop."

"And Tithia is...*the* Pope?!"

Kent and Cocoa were so surprised that they began trembling. Leroy's position was one thing, but Tithia being the Pope—the most powerful person in this country—had been an earth-shattering revelation...which was understandable. Who would have guessed that the Pope would turn out to be an adorable little girl?

Tithia went up to them and knelt on the ground, looking the pair in the eyes. "I'm sorry I kept that a secret from you. Sharon is helping Leroy and me retake the cathedral from Cardinal Hervas."

"The cathedral...!" Kent squeezed his fists and took deep breaths, eyes tilted toward the ground. He had a tough decision to make. The battle to regain the cathedral would be a bloody one. We were still underleveled for it, and our deaths were a real possibility.

Maybe I should have Kent and Cocoa evacuate to another country once we're done grinding levels. Once they reached a certain level, traveling wouldn't be dangerous. They could even cross the border into Farblume, where Kent could switch to his advanced job.

Cocoa gently placed her hand on Kent's shoulder. "It's not like you to overthink."

"Hey..." Kent grumbled.

"You've made your choice already," Cocoa chuckled. "And I think it's the right one." After growing up alongside him, she seemed to know Kent's mind better than he did.

"All right!" Kent finally said, lifting his gaze. "We'll help you too, Tithia! We're not strong yet, but Sharon can train us!"

"Right. Erenzi is our home. We're not going to let the bad guys take over without a fight!" Cocoa chimed in.

Tithia and Leroy stared back at them, clearly surprised that Kent and Cocoa hadn't been scared off by the truth. Tithia seemed to be

swallowing tears before folding her hands in front of her chest. "Thank you both. I know your decision wasn't made lightly."

Kent smiled and shook his head. "Thank you, Pope Tithia, for always protecting our country. I want to go on adventures and travel the world, but that doesn't change how much I love my home."

"That means a lot to me," Tithia answered, and we all shared a smile, determined to protect this country together.

Now that we'd formed an official party, we discussed our plans for the future—although our course hadn't changed much: We would raise our levels and advance our jobs so we could take back the cathedral. Once that was settled, I was going to explore more of this world! It wouldn't be realistic for Tithia and Leroy to join me then, but Kent and Cocoa might—they seemed eager to see more of the world.

So, I now had a conundrum on my hands: *How many of my secrets should I share with my new party mates?* I didn't share the game knowledge I had lightly—it was like introducing a new concept of reality. Still, we couldn't take back the cathedral as a mere group of six without optimizing our Skills.

I took in everyone's faces while I weighed my decision. Even though I hadn't known them for too long, I could already see how much Kent and Cocoa had matured. Tithia and Leroy were ready to fight for their faith. In the end, I decided that I could place my trust in these friends.

I turned to Tarte, who was seated next to me drinking her tea. "Tarte, I'm thinking of having the other four go through the bracelet quest."

"Of course," Tarte purred. "You can trust them!"

"I think so too." Tarte and I were in agreement.

"Can everyone swear that the information I'm about to share with you won't leave this group?" I asked with even more gravitas than when we'd been discussing our next moves.

Leroy was the first to speak. "The information you have is that impactful?"

I grinned a fearless grin. "World-changing."

Leroy gulped, apparently thirsting for whatever I had to say.

"I swear it," Tithia started. "I shall never speak a word of what you tell us."

"I swear it too," Leroy followed.

"I swear!"

"Me too!"

Kent and Cocoa quickly joined. Now that they were all sworn to secrecy, I began explaining how the Adventure Bracelet and Skill selection worked. As I went on, the initial looks of disbelief on their faces settled into solemn understanding.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait..." Kent stammered. "That can't be— No, *that's* how you could use so many Skills from the get-go!"

"This explains a lot about Sharon," Cocoa added.

"So it must be true," Kent and Cocoa muttered in unison. Their having watched me wield several Skills even when I was at a low level seemed to have helped a lot in convincing them.

"That's incredible!" Tithia said, not a shadow of doubt in her voice. The same couldn't be said for Leroy, whose eyes shone with suspicion.

Fine, I pouted to myself. *If you think this is hard to swallow, wait until you drink your Reset Skill Potion.*

"First, we should all attain our advanced jobs," I concluded. "Then, we'll take back the cathedral. It shouldn't take longer than a few days to rise to the levels we need."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. A few days?" Kent repeated.

"Right. You only have to reach level 40 before moving on to your advanced job. That would be Knight or Shield Knight for you, Kent. Knights become Dragonriders, and Shield Knights become Heavy Knights further down the road, so that's something to keep in mind when you decide," I explained.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. What? Dragonrider? Heavy Knight? It's that easy? Hold on, I need to process... Wait, wait, wait..." Kent repeated, mind thoroughly boggled.

"It's a hard choice, I know. I recommend Heavy Knight if you plan to form parties most of the time, but a Dragonrider has enough firepower to hunt solo," I added.

"That's not what I'm hung up on!" Kent said.

You had to reach level 100 to attain awakened jobs like Dragonrider, which would require a fair bit of grinding in a suitable location. That wouldn't be possible without decent gear...

While I was pondering the path to level 100, Kent let out a loud sigh. "There's no sense in being surprised at anything Sharon says, is there?"

"You can say that again," Cocoa chimed in, and they both sipped on their tea. Beside them, Tarte and Leroy were nodding as if they couldn't agree more.

"Cocoa, you could become a Wizard then an Archmage, or an Incantor then a Lyrical Sorcerer," I said.

"I can't believe it's that easy to get an awakened job..." Cocoa said. "I heard somewhere that only a handful of people have them in each country."

"That's it...?!" I blurted. Even though "handful" was probably an exaggeration, that was way fewer than I'd expected. But then, I remembered how little this world's dungeons had been explored.

Once we'd taken back the cathedral, I'd bring to the discussion table the question of whether or not we should publicize our knowledge of Adventure Bracelets. If more adventurers could conquer more dungeons, that would lead to more robust commerce and perhaps a better world.

For now, our discussion concluded with the consensus to work toward level 40...partially because Kent implored, "I need some time to process all this!"

Wild Wyverns Appeared!

"Phew..."

Bending an ear to the crackling of the bonfire, I gazed up at a night sky filled to the brim with brilliant stars. Another sigh escaped me. "The air is so crisp out here. I love it!" I stretched, settling into my seat. Behind me stood two tents—one for the girls and one for the boys—where the rest of my party slept. Leroy, Kent, Cocoa, and I would take turns keeping watch, and I was enjoying the view during my shift. I hadn't had too many opportunities to camp out in a field like this.

I boiled water over the bonfire and poured myself some tea, planning the moves ahead. "Kent and Cocoa have joined our party and I've told them all about the bracelet and Skill selection..." I recounted. "There's still a lot to do. I need a schedule."

The first item on that schedule was for all of us to reach level 40 and switch to our advanced jobs. I'd become a Cleric at Flaudia Cathedral; Kent would choose Knight or Shield Knight at the Royal Capital Blume; and Cocoa would choose between Wizard or Incantor at Lief, the Wooded Village. Before that, though, we would go see Luminous in Zille to have her craft Adventure Bracelets for everyone—which meant we should show up with the ingredients we would need. They only had to hunt Jigglies and Flower Bunnies and pick a few White Herbs, so I wouldn't have to be there. Tarte and I would prep Reset Skill Potions while they were getting their bracelets made. After that, we'd form a party again and grind the last few levels we would need to take the cathedral back from Cardinal Hervas!

Perfect plan! I patted myself on the back. *Oh, and we'll want a mode of transportation.* There was nothing wrong with renting horses, but it would be much more convenient to have our own vehicle. Most vehicles were tucked away in the recesses of

dungeons, though... *One day we'll figure it out.* As I sat there relishing the thought of it, Leroy came out of his tent.

"It's my turn," he said, holding back a yawn.

"Good morning," I greeted him.

"Good morning. No monsters, I take it."

"It was perfectly peaceful," I said, pouring Leroy a cup of tea. This clearing had been designed as a safe haven. The odd monster was known to wander in from time to time, but nothing had interrupted my strategy meeting of an internal monologue.

Leroy sipped from his teacup and let out a breath. "I'll take over. You should get some rest, Sharon. Today will be our first full day of hunting, won't it?"

"It will. I'm going to sleep a little more so we can hunt even more than usual!" I said.

"Wonderful..." Leroy replied with a tight smile, but that didn't keep me from my sleep one bit.

***

"Yes! Another level-up!" Kent shouted, a Roly-Poly's drop item lying near his feet.

After breakfast, we had jumped right into grinding more levels, targeting Roly-Polies and Sylphies. We'd gotten the hang of the hunt and were working like a well-oiled machine. *Chef's kiss.*

"Me too!" Tarte's tail shot up.

"My level just went up as well," Tithia added happily, while Leroy gazed on with a smile on his face.

After hunting a few more monsters, my own level reached 35, announced by the telltale tune in my head. This felt like a snail's pace compared to how quickly I used to grind levels in the game, but we were making great time compared to how quickly most people trained in this world.

We might be ready for a Wyvern. Just as I thought that, I heard a familiar screech—a Wyvern. I'd heard that sound plenty of times in *Reas*.

"What was that?!" Kent shouted, immediately on guard. Leroy

was already giving us a fresh set of buffs as he scanned the area. They were both the kind of fighter that made the rest of the party feel safe behind them.

"That was a Wyvern," I explained. "Someone else might be fighting one."

"Fighting a *Wyvern*...?! Maybe if they're a veteran... That's so cool," Kent muttered.

We can take one on too, I wanted to say. If we worked together we could, anyway.

Soon, we heard faint voices calling for help—they weren't fighting a Wyvern but running from it.

Tarte twitched her ears. "Meowster! I hear a lot of rumbling and footsteps!"

"Rumbling...?" There was only one explanation for that, and it wasn't a pleasant one.

"Wh-What should we do?" Tithia asked nervously. "If we don't help them now, the Wyvern may devour them...!"

"Oh, yes. It wouldn't take more than a few bites," I said jokingly, apparently to the horror of the Pope. "But they seem fine for now. Look." I pointed.

"What?"

Everyone followed the direction of my finger to where a dust cloud approached. Two panting figures ran at its head, followed by a Wyvern and a total of twenty or so Roly-Polies and Sylphies.

I knew it. The Roly-Polies were the source of the rumbling.

"What the...?" Kent muttered.

"We can't take on that many!" Cocoa said.

"They must have drawn the attention of the other monsters while they were fleeing the Wyvern," I said, watching the impressive conga line as it fast approached.

While I contemplated our options, Tithia took a step forward. "Mimoza! Blitz!"

"Those are Paladins! They serve Her Holiness!" Leroy cried.

"Then we have to give them a hand," I said. "Tarte, we're going to brute-force it! Give everyone a Molotov. We'll throw them in unison!"

"Yes, Meowster!" Tarte immediately followed my direction. We didn't have time for me to buff them all with Goddess's Smite, but a coordinated throw would deal a decent amount of damage.

"I'll support the female Paladin; you support the male," I commanded Leroy. "Strengthen! Goddess's Protection!"

"Strengthen! Goddess's Protection!" Leroy soon echoed.

"Throw!" I shouted, and everyone lobbed their Molotovs toward the stampede. As soon as the bottles left their hands, I cast Goddess's Smite on Tarte—who used Potion Throw again.

"Ahhh!"

"What was that explosion?!"

As Mimoza and Blitz cried out, I reapplied their buffs.

The immolation had wiped out all the monsters except for the Wyvern, and even it was half dead. *This might be a great segue into hunting Wyverns,* I thought, then began instructing the party in how to finish the job. "Stay in the front, Kent. Bishop, keep up the buffs. Wyverns have deadly attacks."

"Taunt!"

"Understood. Goddess's Protection."

I stayed to the back of the party, settling into my usual role: casting Goddess's Smite on Tarte and watching the fireworks.

"Here it goes! Purrtion Throw!"

"Goddess's Smite."

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Goddess's Smite— Oh, you took it out already." I was ready to keep up the barrage of Molotovs, but the Wyvern had already burst into light, leaving an item behind and raising my level in the process. Tarte was trilling with exhilaration while Mimoza and Blitz plopped onto the ground, dumbfounded.

"Mimoza! Blitz! Thank Flaudia you're all right," Tithia called.

"Your Holiness!" the Paladins answered.

Tithia and Leroy ran over and assessed their injuries. Leroy cast Heal, indicating that they'd been banged up a little, but they looked fine, all things considered.

"Great job, everyone!" I called and reapplied their buffs. Although it had been unexpected, I was glad we'd successfully taken down a

Wyvern. It had left behind a Dragon Scale and a Torn Dragon Wing—two common drops that could be used to craft items. Wyverns also had a chance of dropping an accessory called Roaring Pendant that boosted Fire attacks by 3%, which was significant for starting players. It'd be a perfect addition to Cocoa's wardrobe.

"Phew, what a scare... We did it, though. We took out a Wyvern...even if we did it with Molotovs." Kent stared at his palm before closing his fist tightly. His hands seemed to be trembling a little but not from fear.

"I'm so glad everyone is all right."

"We would have been in deep trouble without your Molotovs, Tarte," Cocoa said.

"I'm happy to lend a paw!"

I interrupted them by clapping my hands twice. I felt bad cutting short their reprieve, but we needed to regroup at our base—especially because I had a few questions for Mimoza and Blitz. "More monsters could find us here. Let's go back to base."

"Yes. Thank you, Sharon." Leroy turned to the Paladins. "This way." As Paladins, they served Tithia directly—mostly as bodyguards, I presumed. Even though they looked somewhat worse for wear right now, I thought they looked gallant in their armor. However, they seemed to be suffering regret over having been unable to protect Tithia.

As soon as we returned to the base, Mimoza and Blitz knelt before the young Pope.

"We failed you, Your Holiness... I humbly accept any punishment you see fit."

"It was all we could do to make sure Your Holiness escaped... I am unworthy of the Paladin title."

Tithia slowly shook her head. "No, you both saved my life... Thank you for staying alive and returning to my side."

"Your Holiness...!" Mimoza and Blitz exclaimed with tears in their eyes. "Thank Flaudia you're alive," they kept repeating.

"Tea, Meowster."

"Thank you," I said. There had to be a ton they wanted to catch up on, but we all needed to take a deep breath first. Taking some

snacks out of my Bag, I gestured for everyone to sit. We needed to make some quick introductions first.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Sharon. I'm a Healer," I began.

"I'm her apurrentice, Tarte, an Alchemeowst."

"I'm Kent, a Swordsman."

"I'm Cocoa, a Sorcerer."

"My name is Mimoza. I am a Paladin."

"Blitz. I'm also a Paladin. We serve Pope Tithia."

Mimoza had a face with hard lines and striking emerald eyes. Her blonde hair was pulled into a tight braid behind her head, bound by a ribbon with a feather design that matched the color of her eyes. She wore the Paladin's uniform of pristine white with gold embroidery. From her left shoulder hung a deep-blue cape. She was the picture of a noble knight who had pledged her loyalty to the Pope. I recognized the blade on her belt as Briar Rose Rapier, which gave a 1% buff to Physical Attack. Back in *Reas*, it had mostly been used by those with a lower level or those who just liked the name of the sword.



Blitz had a soft, gentle face that made me think he was a good peacekeeper. His short, ash-colored hair was slicked back, framing his face nicely. He wore the same uniform as Mimoza and carried a Dual-Winged Spellsword—a decent sword that buffed his Physical Attack by 3%.

Once we'd said our nice-to-meet-yous, I cut right to the chase. We didn't have time for small talk. "As far as we know, Rodney Hervas is in control of the Crystalline Cathedral. Is that true?"

Mimoza nodded. "Yes. He invaded the cathedral in an attempt to usurp Pope Tithia. Most of the Templars on her side are imprisoned in the cathedral's dungeons."

"I see..." I murmured. If most of Tithia's allies were locked up, we'd have to rescue them too, whether before or after we took back the Crystalline Cathedral.

"Um..." Blitz began. "You're all adventurers, aren't you? Retaking the cathedral will be no simple task. You'll still aid Her Holiness?"

"I've thought it over again and again," I admitted. "In particular, I didn't want to rope Kent and Cocoa into this...but we love this country and want Her Holiness to continue to rule it. That's why we resolved to help her." I understood Blitz's hesitation. Tithia had been betrayed by her own people, in a way. It might have been hard for him to believe that we were her friends when we'd never met her before. Blitz and Mimoza had no guarantee that we weren't Hervas's spies.

Just as I was beginning to wonder if my word alone wouldn't be convincing enough, Leroy said, "I asked Sharon to help us. You can trust her."

"Yes," Tithia agreed. "Sharon, Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa are all strong adventurers and I would trust them with my life," she gushed and began to retell our adventures together so far.

Blitz and Mimoza looked a little shaken when she came to the part where we'd immolated Orcs with Molotovs, but in the end, they concluded that "She sounds wonderful," which was a little embarrassing.

"Well then, let's take back the cathedral from Hervas!" I declared.

"We're in!" Mimoza and Blitz responded with determination.

***

The next day, our hunting became so much more consistent, thanks to the addition of Mimoza and Blitz. Having two additional fighters on the front line was great, but Blitz was also giving Kent pointers on how to wield his sword or how to navigate the front line of a battle. While I was able to give general directions, I couldn't really instruct him on how to use his body. Blitz, on the other hand, was saying things like, "Kent, bend your knees and raise your sword. Don't try to move with your feet. Move with your whole body."

"Okay!" Kent answered. I had a feeling he was going to hone his craft quite a bit through this hunt.

Meanwhile, Mimoza was telling those of us in the back line how we could better help the front line in battle—how to navigate being flanked by a monster, for example, or when exactly to launch our attacks. Tarte and Cocoa listened diligently and asked all sorts of questions.

Then, Mimoza turned to me. "Everything about you is perfect, Sharon, from your maneuvering to your support Skills. I fear there's nothing else I can teach you... In fact, I'm learning a lot just by watching you move. Are you sure you're a Healer?"

Uh-oh. "I'm actually a Healer! Really! Heal! Strengthen! See?" I demonstrated.

"Those *are* Healer Skills..." Mimoza said, clearly unconvinced. "Hmm..." she grunted. Tarte and Cocoa giggled.

"There's no explaining Meowster's abilities," Tarte said.

"Sharon hasn't stopped shocking me since the day we met," Cocoa added.

"Guys...!" I tried to stop them, but the floodgates had already opened.

"Sharon is incredible."

"It's certainly a challenge to find the words to describe Sharon."

"Your Holiness?! Bishop Leroy?!" I blurted, taking offense at how I was being introduced, even though I knew that my game knowledge was far more advanced than everyone else's knowledge of this world. "Look! Two Roly-Polies incoming!" I pointed out,

jumping into action. This was no time for a chat. Until we raised our levels some more, there was still a chance a single mistake could kill one of us out here!

"Meow! That's right!"

"Here we go! Fire Arrow!"

"Have another Goddess's Smite!"

In the end, we hunted monsters to our hearts' content.

The next day, we began targeting Wyverns as much as possible—the EXP they gave was just too good.

"Purrtion Throw!" Tarte shouted, throwing a Molotov at an airborne Wyvern. A direct hit would bring it down to the ground where we could gang up on it.

"All right, Taunt!" Kent said.

"Fire Arrow!" Cocoa followed.

"One more Purrtion Throw!"

With the added bonus of Blitz and Mimoza attacking with their weapons, it didn't take us long to defeat each Wyvern. Of course, it also helped that we had been raising our levels little by little.

"Phew... It's tough on my mana to use Skills continuously." Wiping the sweat from her forehead, Cocoa chugged a Star Mana Potion. Tarte had crafted plenty of these mana-healing items. As we leveled up, we'd eventually move on to Moon Mana Potions and Sun Mana Potions.

"Purrtion Throw!" Tarte shouted again before I could so much as take a breath. She was especially worked up today—nothing was going to stop her rampage. *I'm sure immediately recasting Goddess's Smite on her each time isn't helping,* I mused.

After we'd defeated more than one hundred Wyverns, Kent called out, "What's this?"

One of the rare drops?! I jumped up and walked toward him.

"It's some kind of pendant," Kent announced. "Do you recognize it?"

"Yes, yes, yes, I recognize it! I've been waiting for this!" I said. As expected, Kent was holding up a Roaring Pendant that would boost the holder's Fire attacks by 3%. A long ribbon stretched down from

the pendant's red jewel. More jewels and designs in the shape of a dragon's claws adorned the ribbon. I walked the group through what the pendant did, then said, "Cocoa should wear this one to boost her Fire abilities."

"Perfect. Cocoa does mostly use Fire Skills," Tithia said. "It is really beautiful..." she added, still staring at the pendant.

"Then if no one has any objections, Cocoa will use this... What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't mind, of course, but it's rare, isn't it? We can't afford to buy it from you," Kent said, shoulders drooping in disappointment.

I hadn't worried about splitting up items until now because we hadn't really come across any rare ones. The last thing I wanted was for something like this to become a wedge that split up the group. Back in *Reas*, it had been customary for anyone who wanted an item to buy it at a lower price than the item's market value...but I was worried about how exorbitantly high the pendant must be valued in this world. *There can't be too many parties that can hunt Wyverns to the point that one of them drops the pendant,* I thought.

Tithia took in the group and asked, "Its effect seems to match Sharon's description. Does anyone else want this item?" Everyone shook their heads. "Since these are dire times when we must prepare to fight for the Crystalline Cathedral, anything that can bolster our strength is critical. Can Cocoa use the item until we take back the cathedral? After that, we can make arrangements for the item to be given or sold at a nominal price."

"That sounds great. Selling the drop items from the hunt will raise a lot of money, and eliminating Cardinal Hervas would be quite the achievement in the eyes of Erenzi," I said, and the rest of the group agreed. We also decided that we'd do the same with any additional rare items we found in the future.

"Thank you," Cocoa said to the group. "I won't let you down!" She snapped the pendant on. The red jewel suited her perfectly.

After that, we swung back into action and kept at it until all of us had reached level 40.

Operation: Adventure Bracelet

"Hooray, we can all get our new jobs!" I cheered. After putting our noses to the grindstone and hunting down Wyverns, we'd all crossed the threshold: I was at level 41, Tarte at 43, Tithia at 40, Kent and Cocoa at 44, and Leroy still at 47. This also meant that our levels were close enough for all of us to form a party together. *Thanks to Leroy, who served as our human shield the entire time... I should thank him for his troubles somehow.*

"I still can't believe we raised our levels this quickly... No, I'm not gonna dwell on it. I'm just gonna be happy about it," Kent muttered, resignation on his face. "What do we do now?"

"Before switching jobs, you'll each have your own Adventure Bracelet made," I answered. "You'll each need to gather the required ingredients and go see Luminous in Zille. We should probably scope out the city first."

Leroy agreed. "Most likely Rodney's agents are still searching for Her Holiness."

"I thought so..." I considered our options. Adventure Bracelets could only be made in the major cities, like each kingdom's capital. Zille was the closest option. Although Arcadia and Blume were the next best options, the only way into Arcadia was through a dangerous dungeon, and my exile from Farblume would make a trip to its capital a little awkward.

"First, let's have Kent's and Cocoa's bracelets made. While we're there, let's ask if we could bring Tithia and Leroy in the middle of the night. That should be safer than marching up there in broad daylight," I suggested and the group concurred.

***

Leaving Tithia, Leroy, Mimoza, and Blitz in Snowdia, Tarte, Kent,

Cocoa, and I had come to Zille. I was a little nervous, overly aware of our side mission to scope out the city. I planned to head over to Flaudia Cathedral after the Adventure Bracelets were made.

Holding a bag of cookies for Luminous, I knocked on her door. It didn't take long for her to swing it open and greet us with a smile. "Sharon and Tarte. How are you?"

"Hello, Luminous. I was hoping you could make a pair of bracelets for them." I gestured to Kent and Cocoa.

"My name is Kent! Nice to meet you!"

"I'm Cocoa. Nice to meet you."

Kent and Cocoa were radiating with excitement over finally getting their very own bracelets.

"Of course I'll make 'em," Luminous said. "Take a seat. I'll make you some tea first."

"Thank you," I said.

"Thank you so much."

Just as Luminous returned, ready to give her spiel about the Adventure Bracelet, Kent and Cocoa placed the ingredients they'd collected on the table: a total of ten Jiggly Jellies, six Bunny's Flowers, and twenty White Herbs—enough for two Adventure Bracelets.

Luminous sighed. "And you brought everything before I even told you... Kids these days sure know what they're doing." She almost seemed disappointed that she didn't get to actually give us the quest. *Sorry, Luminous. We're always going to show up with the items.*

"Guess I'll get to work," Luminous said, crafting two Adventure Bracelets with expertise while we enjoyed our tea.

She soon returned with them. "Here you go—your Adventure Bracelets."

"Thank you!" Kent and Cocoa said, taking their bracelets as though they were treasures worth their weight in gold.

"I'll show you how it works," Tarte purred, and began assisting Luminous in her tutorial. *My apprentice is so thoughtful!*

"Wow. Everything Sharon told us is true..." Kent said.

"I can't believe it... All of my things fit in here," Cocoa chimed in.

"I understand. It was a while before it stopped ameowzing me."

Luminous listened, satisfied with their excited first impression.

Now for the real challenge. Downing the rest of my tea, I approached Luminous. "I have another favor to ask you."

"What's that?"

"I have more friends who want their Adventure Bracelets made, but it's difficult for them to make it here during the day. I'm sorry to impose on you, but I was wondering if I could bring them during the night..." I said, knowing that I was being too vague. If Luminous agreed without demanding a better explanation, she had to be one of the most understanding people I'd ever met. *I really wish I were more eloquent...*

Luminous watched me intently. "Sounds like you got a good reason for it. Bring me a bottle of decent wine and you got a deal."

"Are you sure?!" I blurted.

"Yeah, yeah. You're like a granddaughter to me, Sharon. I told you to swing by anytime. You're never imposing." She grinned.

At that moment, I vowed to swing by with the full force of my gratitude sometime when I didn't need another bracelet from her. *I know! I'll bring her souvenirs from the places I travel to,* I decided. "Thank you so much." It felt like a weight had lifted from my shoulders.

"Thank you, Miss Luminous," Tarte said.

"Don't sweat it, kid. Let grown-ups take care of you once in a while," Luminous said. "Aren't you a Healer, Sharon?"

"I am. Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Lately, Flaudia Cathedral has been demanding tithes of its visitors."

"Tithes?!" *Preposterous!*

"What? Isn't the cathedral free...and open to the public?" Kent asked. He was absolutely right. The cathedral accepted donations, of course, but they were never forced.

This has to be Hervas's doing. Villains can never have enough money, can they? The only place where I could switch jobs—from Healer to Cleric to Archbishop—was Flaudia Cathedral. I needed to suss out what exactly was going on over there. "I'm going to check

out the cathedral now!" I announced. "Kent and Cocoa, can you stop by the Guild with Tarte and buy the items on our list? And sell any items we don't need?"

"No problem," Kent answered.

"Yes, Meowster."

We needed intel from both the cathedral and the Guild. Tarte was well-versed in buying and selling items at the Guild, so I didn't have to be there—we definitely needed as many Molotovs as we could craft.

"Something's not right about the cathedral these days... Be careful, Sharon."

"I will. Thank you for the heads-up, Luminous," I said.

"Thank you," Kent and Cocoa echoed.

"Thank you so much."

After leaving Luminous's house, we split up as we'd planned.

Alone, I made my way to Flaudia Cathedral, which stood in the central plaza that was usually bustling, but foot traffic in and out of the cathedral had clearly decreased since I'd last been here. That much was expected if they were charging a tithe just to enter.

"Let's try going in," I said to myself. From what I could tell, the cathedral was still beautifully maintained and as majestic as before. One difference I noticed was that the people who worked there—the priests and priestesses—were no longer smiling.

I stepped up to the entrance and greeted the priestess there. "Hello."

"Welcome to Flaudia Cathedral. The tithe is 3,000 liz," she said.

How much?! "Absolutely," I said with a straight face and paid the price. It might bite me in the rear later if I caused a stink and made myself memorable. For the record, 3,000 liz could pay for a night's stay at an inn in the city.

"This way, please," she said.

"Oh, okay..."

Apparently, she was going to show me the way. Last time, it had been more of a self-guided tour. Perhaps their policies had changed too. *It doesn't matter as long as I can get inside,* I decided.

To switch jobs, I needed to pray to the statue of Flaudia—just as

I had when I'd become a Healer—speak to a bishop, and start a quest. This particular one was a fetch quest. I'd have to go heal several NPCs. I would be assigned anywhere from three to five NPCs. At least one of them would be in Zille, and the rest would be somewhere in Erenzi.

While I'm here, I could totally start that quest— We walked past the prayer room that held Flaudia's statue. "Um, didn't we pass the prayer room...?"

"That one is closed to the public. I'll show you to another prayer room," the priestess explained.

"What?" I hadn't anticipated that.

After we'd walked for a while, we came to an open room that held rows of chairs and a Flaudia statue that was smaller than the one I'd prayed to last time. In *Reas*, this room had been reserved for the cathedral's clergy. Sure, it was a room to pray in, but there was nothing special about it—it certainly was not a room where quests were triggered.

"You can offer your prayers here," the priestess said.

"Thank you for showing me here... So, I can't go into the room where we used to pray?" I asked.

"I'm not sure... His Holiness commanded it so. I believe he didn't want to allow the public to access the precious statue of the goddess so freely."

"It was a marvelous statue," I said. The priestess had just confirmed that Hervas was the one making these changes. *Will anything be left sacred in Erenzi once he's done with it?* Praying to that specific statue would also be a requirement for me to become an Archbishop down the road. *Is Hervas monopolizing the statue for his followers? He could also charge an exorbitant fee for anyone else to access it.* Switching my job was going to be a lot more painstaking than I'd thought it'd be.

After a quick prayer, I left the cathedral.

"Hey, guys!" I waved my hand as I approached Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa—we'd agreed to meet up in the central plaza by the Transportation Gate.

"Meow!" Tarte looked happy, apparently having bought all sorts of

things from the item shop. “We picked up a lot of materials!”

“Really? How about Fire Shrooms?” I asked.

“Since we had so many rags and not enough mushrooms... I raised our purrchasing price. There were a lot more than usual!”

What a brilliant move! “That’s wonderful. Molotovs are our lifeline right now,” I said.

“Yes, Meowster.”

I hated to burst their bubble, but I relayed how the cathedral had changed—how Hervas had taken complete control, and how I’d been unable to become a Cleric. I did have a backup plan for that, though.

The other three listened with their mouths agape. Of course they hadn’t expected things to have escalated this far.

“I mean, he sounded like a nasty dude... But he blocked off the room?” Kent asked.

“That’s going to affect a lot of people,” Cocoa said.

“What are you going to do, Meowster?”

“I’ll talk to you about that later. This isn’t the best place anyway,” I said.

They all agreed, so we rode back to Snowdia on horseback.

***

“Phew. I’m really getting the hang of riding horses,” I said. We’d camped out for a night on the road and had returned to Snowdia without a hitch. Our horses were trained to return to their stable on their own, so all we had to do was walk back to the inn from the entrance to the city.

Kent and Cocoa turned to me, their hands on the Gate.

“This really lets us travel from one city to another?” Kent asked.

“I can’t believe it...!” Cocoa said.

I was sure it was hard to believe from their old worldview. Using the Gates, we could have done our Zille-to-Snowdia trek in an instant rather than needing two days.

“Why don’t the three of you pop back over to Zille?” I suggested. “While you’re there, you can register the Farming Village’s Gate to

your bracelets.”

“That sounds like fun, Meowster, but will we have enough time?”

The clock was ticking against us while Hervas held the cathedral under his thumb. That was precisely why I wanted to expand our range of movement—that would give us more options and escape routes. Besides, Farming Village was Kent and Cocoa’s home. Their parents would be happy to see them if they stopped by.

“All right,” Kent agreed once I’d explained my logic. “By the way, I decided to become a Shield Knight! To do that, I’ll have to go to Royal Capital Blume soon, won’t I? I think registering the Gate at the village would make it easier to travel.”

“You’re right!” Cocoa agreed, and they began discussing how they’d like to register Gates in foreign kingdoms. They were on the same wavelength as me, because I wanted to register every Gate in this world one day!

“So we’re going to hightail it back to Zille?” Tarte asked.

“Yeah— Oh! Why don’t we check if the Guild here has any more Molotov ingredients?” Kent suggested.

“That’s right! Let’s stop by the Guild, use the Gate to go back to Zille, then meet up with Meowster’s team.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Just like that, Tarte and Kent had decided their next moves. They were a smart pair, which made things easier for me.

While Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa started on their way, I returned to the inn.

“I’m back,” I announced.

“Welcome back, Sharon. Are you all right?” Leroy asked.

“I’m glad you aren’t hurt,” Tithia said.

Mimoza and Blitz seemed to be out. Once Leroy had brewed us some tea, I relayed to them what had happened in Zille—the good news from Luminous and the bad news from the cathedral.

After I’d finished, Leroy pinched his temples and sighed. “Hervas is acting more quickly than I thought he would. I’m sure he means to keep anyone from the room with the goddess’s statue unless they are loyal or profitable to him.”

“As if Flaudia Cathedral were his private property,” Tithia added,

her brows twisted in a knot. “The cathedral is supposed to be a sanctuary to offer the goddess prayers from the heart...” I wondered how many people in power really put their kingdom first. *The sooner Tithia regains the papal throne, the better Erenzi will be for it.*

Once we finished our tea, Leroy turned to me. “That means you can’t become a Cleric. What are you going to do, Sharon?”

“I’m going to sneak in in the dead of night.”

“Sharon?!” Tithia blurted, eyes wide. She even began to tremble, muttering, “That should be unthinkable...”

I would be breaking and entering, yes. Even as I offered Tithia a guilty smile, I had every intention of following through with it. We all needed to reach our advanced jobs to stand a chance against Hervas, and I planned to become an Archbishop and the Holy Maiden down the road. Leroy would have to go to Flaudia’s statue too if he ever wanted to become an Archbishop.

In contrast to Tithia, Leroy nodded in understanding. “That seems to be the only option.”

“Leroy... I guess I do see that there is no alternative. But can you actually infiltrate the cathedral at night?” Tithia asked, concern in her voice.

Leroy was the one who answered. “I have heard that the sewers that run under Zille are connected to the cathedral. Perhaps she could make her way in from underground.”

“I’ve never heard of that,” Tithia said.

I, of course, had known about the sewers. In *Reas*, one of the quests involved sneaking into the cathedral at night. I had a clear memory of the entrance and path to the cathedral—that was my entry plan.

I wonder how rancid it’s going to smell... I let my thoughts wander to the untold stench that awaited me.

Leroy, meanwhile, had opened a map. “If you go down to the sewers from here, it’ll lead to the cathedral.”

“I never would have expected that,” Tithia said.

Stop worrying about the smell, I told myself. *I’ll cross that sewer when I get to it.* Shifting my attention to the map, I carefully listened to Leroy’s instructions in case there were any changes to the

route compared to the in-game version. As far as what Leroy told me about the entrance, it was the same as it had been in *Reas*.

"When will you go?" Leroy asked.

"I plan to go while you're having your Adventure Bracelets made," I said. All I had to do was pray in front of the statue, so I'd rejoin Tithia and Leroy immediately afterward and help them register Zille's Gate. In the morning, Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa would meet up with us so we could leave the city together.

"I see. But there are monsters in the sewers, so I'd like you to take Mimoza with you. She should help you somewhat on that front," Leroy offered.

"Thank you... Where are they anyway?"

Leroy explained that Mimoza and Blitz had gone out to gather intel. "By that, I mean that they are checking whether any other Paladins have attempted to make contact with us."

"Got it," I said. We had decided that the pair of Paladins would have their bracelets made too. They wanted to get theirs before Tithia and Leroy did so they could confirm the item was safe to use.

As soon as Tithia's devoted bodyguards returned, we would set out for Zille.

Would It Be an RPG Without Breaking and Entering?

Mimoza, Blitz, and I each rode our own horse, while Tithia rode with Leroy from Snowdia to Zille. I had everyone except me wear a thick coat to conceal their conspicuous wardrobes. Tithia and Leroy would remain hooded in the city.

Upon arriving in Zille, we got a room at a different inn than our usual one and began discussing our next moves.

"I'm going to take Mimoza and Blitz to have their bracelets made," I began. "If Your Holiness and Bishop Leroy could stay in the room no matter what—"

"Sharon, if you address me that way, it'll be a dead giveaway. Won't you call me Ti? And speak to me as you would to a friend," Tithia said.

"Just Ti?" I asked.

"Just Ti," she reassured me. She had a point. She wouldn't be in hiding for long if I addressed her as "Your Holiness" out on the streets.

"And please just call me Leroy," the bishop said, even though I'd dropped his title plenty of times when I'd gotten carried away.

"Okay," I agreed. "Ti and Leroy."

Tithia beamed and took a potion bottle from the Magic Bag in her sleeve. Its clear contents shone through the brilliant, falling-star design—a bottle of Sacred Dewdrop, a somewhat rare and valuable item in the game.

"I crafted this using an Empty Potion Bottle you gave me," Tithia explained. "It can negate any single Dark attack. Take this with you, Sharon."

"What?! No, Your Holiness—Ti...you should keep that." As a Healer, I could heal myself of injuries as long as they weren't too

severe. Not to mention, Tithia had a lot more enemies lurking out there than I did. Still, Tithia resolutely held the bottle out, so I looked to Leroy for help. He only smiled and nodded. Apparently, they had already discussed this gift. "I will gladly accept it," I relented.

"Good." Tithia smiled again.

***

That night, before heading to the cathedral, I met up with Tarte's group and borrowed a Protective Mask to save myself from the horrifying stench of the sewers.

Now, Mimoza and I were walking through the underground tunnel on a narrow pathway. The only light down here came from the sporadic magical sconces on the walls. The sewers branched several times, connecting this pathway to others. Water dripped from the ceiling here and there, marking the path with numerous puddles. Once in a while, a Rat scurried past.

"They don't look flattering, but they sure make this walk a little more pleasant," Mimoza said, tapping her mask.

"Yep. Good thing we had these Protective Masks on hand," I said, wondering if I should get my hands on more of them. Once we'd taken care of Hervas, I decided, I'd go and collect more. We kept walking as I asked her, "How do you like the Adventure Bracelet?"

"It's incredible. I don't know...how else to put it. It's just incredible." So incredible that, apparently, it had knocked most of Mimoza's vocabulary out of her mind.

I get it, I thought. *It's hard not to appreciate the bracelet once you have it.* Watching Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa's reactions would show you that they were quite literally life-changing.

"Um... Are you sure you don't mind sharing information about the bracelet with me and Blitz?" Mimoza asked timidly.

"I went back and forth over it quite a bit," I admitted. Even though Mimoza and Blitz served Tithia directly, it might have been difficult for me to trust these people whom I'd just met...if there hadn't been someone else I'd had no trouble putting my trust in.

Paladin was a special job—in order to become one, you had to pledge your loyalty to the Pope from your heart. They were incapable of betraying the Pope. Regardless of how strong they were, they would forever be on Tithia's side. "But I can put my trust in Ti."

"Thank you... Her Holiness must feel more at ease with an ally like you, Sharon."

"You flatter me... Oh, we're almost there," I said. I doubted there was anyone ahead, but we were better off keeping as quiet as possible. I raised my finger to my lips and Mimoza followed my lead, her features sharpening.

Rat squeaks came from the shadows occasionally, but they were passive monsters. That had played a part in my confidence in infiltrating the cathedral alone, but now that Mimoza was here, I felt more reassured.

If we get caught, I can't really fight alone...

I spotted a beam of light cracking through a spot in the ceiling ahead. The ladder on the wall next to it marked the crack as an exit.

"That must lead to the interior of the cathedral," Mimoza said, and I agreed.

The layout was just as it had been in the game. We walked more stealthily, careful not to let anyone hear so much as a footfall. Once we were below the opening, we strained our ears...but I didn't hear anything. *No one's up there...?* I guessed. I reached for the ladder, but Mimoza stopped me with a lift of her hand. She was offering to go first and scope it out. She silently climbed the ladder and placed her ear against the ceiling. She must have decided that there was no sign of danger because she slowly lifted the hatch and peeked out into the light.

"There's no one around," she said.

"Good."

Mimoza lifted the hatch completely, shimmied up, and held out a hand for me as I climbed the ladder—what a gentlewoman!

Once I'd risen to my feet inside, I pulled my Protective Mask off and took in the room. We were standing in the cathedral's pantry, its shelves lined with vegetables and other foods. A hint of an

appetizing scent hung in the air. A glance toward the kitchen showed someone cooking—maybe a midnight snack.

Why isn't everyone asleep? I silently complained. *It's the dead of night.*

Fortunately, the priestess cooking in the kitchen hadn't noticed us. We placed a rug over the hatch that we'd climbed through and left the pantry through another door, in the opposite direction from the kitchen.

It led out to a hallway that was dimly lit but absolutely silent. The midnight air stung my skin with its chill.

"This way," Mimoza breathed, pointing. I nodded and followed her, making sure that no one was around.

Soon, we arrived at the room that held the proper statue of Flaudia.

That was almost too easy! I thought...but the door was locked. I didn't know why I hadn't expected the room to be locked. While I stood there trying to think of a way to get into the room, Mimoza took out a key and turned the lock.

What just happened? "Mimoza, where did you get that?" I asked.

"Bishop Leroy lent me the spare key he took with him when he fled the cathedral. He said they rarely check for the spare, so they won't discover that it's missing for a while."

For once, I decided to be grateful for Leroy's meticulousness—he always seemed to be scheming in some way.

The Prayer Room looked the same as when I'd last seen it. At the front of it, the likeness of the beautiful goddess Flaudia stood quietly. *Finally, I can kick off my quest to become a Cleric.* I slowly walked up to the statue and knelt before it. "Goddess Flaudia, give me a trial." In response to my prayer, a quest window popped up before my eyes.

Job Change: Advanced Job - Cleric

Your dedication to your training shall be recognized. Gather information about those in need from the bishop and prove your prowess.

Got it! Now, I just had to speak to a bishop and progress the quest. Thank you!

"Who's there?!" a male voice sounded.

"We've been found!" Mimoza said.

"Crap!"

We turned to run, but our only exit was the same door we'd come through, now blocked by the man. To at least prevent him from seeing my face, I whipped a coat from my Bag and threw it on, making sure the hood was lowered. Mimoza followed suit.

"I didn't think any rats would wander in..." The man's low voice reverberated through the Prayer Room. His lantern showed that he was wearing a priest's white garb; he looked to be in his forties, and he had quite a gut—he couldn't run fast. If we made an opening, it wouldn't be hard to outrun him.

Maybe Mimoza can handle this, I thought.

The man glared at us. "What do you want?" Then, his eyes shifted to the statue. "Oh... You're here for Flaudia's statue." His tone suggested that many people had asked to access this room. Those who regularly prayed here must have wanted to return, and any Healer looking to become a Cleric had to come here. *Does he just think I'm a zealous follower of Flaudia?* I wondered. That wasn't far from the truth.

"I came to offer my prayer to Flaudia, so that I may become a Cleric," I said. "Can you open this room to the public again?"

The man cracked a nasty grin. "And what good has the goddess done? That statue will soon be demolished."

"What...?! How can you say that?!" I protested. "This statue is beloved by so many—from Zille and around the world!" I wasn't going to let them *demolish* it.

"Calm down!" Mimoza hissed, grabbing my shoulder. I'd nearly let myself get carried away.

"Beloved?" The man scoffed. "Yet another useless sentiment. Soon, L'lyeh will rule this world...once His Holiness welcomes her. Now, detain them!" he called.

"Templars!" I cried.

Three of them, who must have been on night watch, emerged. They inched toward us, swords and shields at the ready.

"Strengthen, Regeneration, Mana Rations, Goddess's Protection... Can you break through, Mimoza?" I asked.

"Of course. I'm going to run straight through them. Stay close," Mimoza said in a confident promise. "Here we go!" She leaped, moving so much faster than I could, flying through the air like she was an acrobatic dancer. Her beautiful voice rang through the Prayer Room. "Divine Retribution!" Mimoza drew her sword—a rapier. The slim blade dealt more than enough damage as she carved a path through the Templars with ease.

The man who'd found us took a step back—an opening Mimoza didn't waste. She swung her sword in an upward motion, cutting through the man. Some blood had splattered, but she hadn't killed him.

"Let's go," she said.

"Right behind you," I agreed.

Mimoza and I ran as fast as we could, leaving Flaudia Cathedral behind.

Mimoza and I had returned to the inn, completely out of breath after sprinting full pelt the whole way. Tarte, Kent, Cocoa, Blitz, Tithia, and Leroy greeted us. Tithia's and Leroy's wrists displayed their new Adventure Bracelets.

With concern in her eyes, Tarte brought over two glasses of ice water. "Are you all right, Meowster? Mimoza?"

"Thank you, Tarte," I said.

"I needed this..." Mimoza added.

I gulped down the whole glass and let out a breath. The tension I'd felt throughout our heist had finally left my body. *I could just fall back onto my bed and drift away to sleep.*

"Glad you're okay," Kent said. "We registered the Gate in Farming Village. I had Ti and Leroy register the Gate in Zille too."

"Thank you, Kent. You got a lot done today," I said.

"It was Tarte's idea," he said.

If Tithia and Leroy could register other Gates, it would make it much easier for them to make a quick getaway if things went

sideways. So far, I was happy with our progress.

"We are glad to see you safe," Tithia said. "How did it go?"

"Something happened that drove you back in a hurry," Leroy guessed.

Mimoza and I told them what had happened at the cathedral.

Once we were done, Kent was the first to speak, scratching his head. "Good thing you got away." He accompanied his words with a gusty exhale. Tithia was nodding fervently beside him.

Leroy tapped his lips with one finger, apparently contemplating what the man who'd found us had said: *Soon, L'lyeh will rule this world...once His Holiness welcomes her.* "What does he mean by 'welcoming' L'lyeh? It's incomprehensible."

"Just that he'll worship L'lyeh, the Goddess of Darkness...?" Blitz suggested.

"He said the statue of Flaudia was going to be removed. Perhaps he's bringing back a L'lyeh statue to replace it?" Mimoza mused. I hadn't thought about that possibility.

I had taken his claim literally. The home of worship for L'lyeh, the Goddess of Darkness was the Underworld Abbey located in southern Erenzi. From Zille, you'd have to go past Farming Village and brave either Dark Cave or Field of Ashes, both treacherous areas full of powerful monsters. That would be a tough trek while we were still in our introductory jobs, but going to the Abbey would be an option for us once we switched to our advanced ones, even if we'd still be underleveled to the point that we'd have to chug potions throughout the journey. And L'lyeh was the dungeon boss of the Abbey.

Could Hervas really bring the dungeon boss back to Zille? I wondered, then imagined that it'd be possible through some sort of quest. I remembered L'lyeh showing up in the *Reas* main quest in some capacity.

"Sharon looks like she knows something," Kent said.

"What?" I blurted. Everyone's eyes were on me. Apparently, they'd been debating their theories while I was lost in my thoughts. "Long story short, we need to attain our advanced jobs and grind more levels as soon as possible."

Everyone stared back at me like I was talking gibberish. Maybe

they were sick of leveling because we'd just been farming Wyverns. I cleared my throat and explained exactly how dangerous the Abbey was.

"The recommended minimum level is 60?!" Kent repeated. "We won't stand a chance."

"I have the highest level here and I'm only 47," Leroy pointed out.

I'd visibly dampened the spirits of everyone in the room. Even though they weren't in their introductory jobs, Leroy, Mimoza, and Blitz—at levels 47, 42, and 43 respectively—were pretty close in level to the rest of us. That was why we would be able to form one big party.

"By the same token, it won't be easy for Hervas to reach L'lyeh—we still have time," I told the group.

Leroy nodded. "Even among Templars, it is rare to find someone with a level that high. Most don't have optimal Skills, so they should be much weaker than we would be at the same level. And dungeons are meant to be conquered over the course of days, slowly and carefully. Hervas must have planned for a long journey."

"So we need to get our advanced jobs and stop Hervas before he conquers the Abbey," Kent summarized.

"That's right," I confirmed. I would have loved to go with each of them to help start their advanced job quests, but it looked like we'd need to split up to get our new jobs and then regroup. I turned to Kent and Cocoa. "You two should stick together. Kent, the quest to become a Shield Knight starts in the Order of Knights's barracks near the castle in the Royal Capital Blume."

"Barracks near the castle. Got it," Kent said.

Cocoa's quest started in a location that was much harder to access. It would be easier for them to reach it once Kent became a Shield Knight. "You chose Incantor, didn't you?" I asked Cocoa. "I think that's a good choice for you. Your quest starts in Lief, the Wooded Village. You have to go through Snowfall Forest—also known as Labyrinthian Forest—to get there. I'm going to draw you a map that you can use."

"Thank you, Sharon."

I drew a simple map and marked her quest location for Cocoa.

That would help her get there.

"Now we just have to figure out my situation..." I muttered.

"You escaped Rodney's agents from the cathedral. Is there some other obstacle?" Leroy asked. I'd told them that I'd been able to pray to Flaudia's statue but not that I hadn't been able to speak to a quest giver.

"Well, after I prayed to the statue..." I began.

"Don't trail off, Sharon. What happened?"

"Right. I never got a chance to speak to a bishop, so I don't know who I need to help in order to become a Cleric," I explained, feeling defeated as tears welled up in my eyes. "There's no way forward."

"Oh, is that all?" Leroy said, and a quest window popped up.

Job Change: Advanced Job - Cleric

The bishop seeks your aid to save three people. Use all of your skills to help these people.

Pico (Sacred City of Zille)

Molly (Farming Village)

Maryl (Snowy Plains)

That's right. Leroy's a bishop too. "Thank you," I told him, relieved that my door to becoming a Cleric had been opened again. Luckily, the quest itself wasn't too difficult either. *Wait, Molly from the Farming Village?*

"Sharon? Are you seeing something?" Kent asked.

"Oh, sorry. My Cleric quest progressed, so I was reading what I had to do," I said.

"Got it. You were supposed to help people in this kingdom who need to be healed, right?"

"Right." I stared at Kent. Molly from the Farming Village was Kent's mom—we'd talked about him when I'd met her the last time I was there. Normally, this quest only sent me to people with injuries that were neither urgent nor fatal. Still, he might be worried if I told him his mom was on my list... *Should I tell him?*

"Sharon?" Kent urged. "Does the quest look that difficult?"

"Uh, no, not really. It's just...Molly's name is on the list," I said after a fierce internal debate. He might hear about it from her after the fact, so I wanted to tell him up front.

"Oh!" Kent and Cocoa exclaimed.

"Mom said she twisted her ankle working on the farm," Kent said.

"She could still walk, so she didn't seem too worried about it," Cocoa added.

"That must be the injury I'm meant to heal," I concluded. Thankfully, her injuries didn't sound too serious.

Wrapping up our discussion about my new job, I signaled Tarte—I'd asked her to use Formulation to create a certain item for us.

"Here they are, Meowster." Tarte laid out a row of Reset Skill Potions on the table.

"What are those...?" Leroy asked, speaking for the group, who were all eyeing the unfamiliar vials with curiosity.

Tarte handed them out to the rest of the group. She and I had already optimized our Skills, so we didn't need to go through that grueling gustatory torture. "They're Reset Skill Purrtions," Tarte explained. "When you drink one, all of the Skills you've learned will be reset to Skill Points."

Everyone stared at the vials in their hands, wide-eyed. The ability to reallocate the Skill Points that had previously been randomized was an obvious game changer.

"Think through what Skills you want to have before reacquiring them," I warned. "That being said, there's little anyone knows about Ti's Skills... So it may be worth the trouble to reset them a few times until you find the right combination." I added that the Reset Skill Potions were not readily available because the ingredients were less abundant. As long as we could get our hands on more ingredients, Tarte would happily brew them, though.

While everyone stared at their potion with intensity, Blitz was the first to speak. "Can I drink mine?"

"Of course," I said.

He uncorked his vial and took a whiff before knocking it back...only to choke on its contents.

"No, you have to keep it down!" I said. We couldn't afford for him

to spit it out. "Chug it! Chug it all!" I encouraged, crouching next to Blitz, who was bent over in agony.

He finally swallowed. "I've never tasted anything so...violent," Blitz panted, his eyes glazed over.

With a hand covering his mouth and eyes blazing with horror, Leroy was watching the poor Paladin collapsed on the floor. *Sorry, Bishop. You're going to drink it too.* While Mimoza fetched Blitz a glass of water, Tithia, Kent, and Cocoa were visibly daunted by their own potions.

After chugging his glass of water, Blitz thanked Mimoza and activated his Adventure Bracelet. "All my Skills *are* reset!"

"Wow...!" Kent said, his apprehension making way for excitement. Since he was always seeking advice from veteran adventurers, I'd have bet he had a wish list of Skills all ready. "I'm going next!"

I chuckled, gesturing for him to help himself. There wasn't anything preventing all of them from drinking their potions together. Kent promptly drank the potion...and crumpled to the floor. This was almost becoming entertaining.

With a grin, I turned to Leroy. "I believe it's your turn."

"It appears it is," he said and chugged his potion. Immediately, he seemed to begin checking his Skill screen through his Adventure Bracelet. "Sure enough, all of my Skills are reset."

"Wonderful..." I grumbled. Leroy had drunk the potion without so much as flinching... *Maybe he was born without the sense of taste.* I wasn't bitter that the bitter potion hadn't drawn a comical reaction out of him. Not at all.

The ladies drank their potions, much to their disgust, and everyone was ready to reacquire their Skills. Since I remembered all acquirable Skills—except for the Pope's—I gave each of them advice with their preferences for their awakened jobs in mind.

Kent chose tanking Skills that would serve him best when he fought in the front line of a party. Cocoa considered her role when she and Kent worked as a party of two and focused on attacking Skills with some wiggle room to acquire supporting Skills once she switched jobs. Blitz focused on defensive Skills but chose a particular attack Skill that hit slow and hard. Mimoza, on the other hand,

acquired a variety of attacking Skills. In order to serve Tithia best, Leroy chose a core of supporting Skills with a healthy toolbox of attacks he could use to protect his Pope no matter what happened. Overall, I thought they'd made solid choices.

"You're the only one left, Ti. But I can't tell which Skills would best suit you—I don't know what most of them do," I explained.

"I understand," Tithia said. "I'm going to think it over some more. Tarte gave me the extra Reset Skill Potions, so I'd like to try out the different Skills available to me." Her face twisted as if she could taste the bitter potion all over again.

"That's a great idea," I said.

Overview:
Name: Kent
Level: 44
Job: Swordsman (Expert in close-range combat. Draws enemy attacks and protects their friends.)

Skills:
Boost Self-Healing: Hastens the user's natural healing process.
Increase HP (Level 10): Raises the user's HP.
Increase Defense (Level 10): Raises the user's Defense.
Taunt (Level 5): Draws enemy attacks to the user.
Steadfast Leader (Level 3): Negates all attacks on the user for 30 seconds.
Got Your Nose: Stuns the enemy for an instant.
Fatal Blow (Level 10): A powerful attack against a single target.
Whirling Tornado (Level 4): Attacks a wide area.

Equipment:
Head: —
Body: Light Chestplate (A single leather chestplate)

Right Hand: Gladius (A simple but powerful sword)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: —
Feet: Novice Adventurer Boots (Comfortable shoes for all terrains)

Overview:
Name: Cocoa
Level: 44
Job: Sorcerer (Expert in magic of all elements. Their ability to eliminate their enemies with great firepower makes them an asset to any party.)

Skills:
Boost Mana Recovery: Hastens the user's natural mana recovery.
Increase Magic Attack (Level 10): Raises the user's Magic Attack.
Fire Arrow (Level 5): Attacks the target with flaming arrows.
Fireball (Level 10): Attacks the target with a ball of flame.
Fire Wall (Level 5): Creates a wall of fire.
Water Arrow (Level 5): attacks the target with arrows of water.
Witch's Whim (Level 3): Sets a trap that triggers one of the user's attack Skills at random.
Mana Detection (Level 5): Searches for life within a hundred-meter radius.

Equipment:
Head: Chapeau Magique (+3% Magic Attack)

Body: Ribbon Robe (A cute Sorcerer’s robe)
Right Hand: Sorcerer’s Staff (+3% Magic Attack)
Left Hand: –
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Roaring Pendant (+3% Fire)
Feet: Novice Sorcerer Boots (Improves stamina)

Overview:
Name: Blitz
Level: 43
Job: Paladin (Fiercely loyal to the Pope. They wouldn’t hesitate to lay down their life to protect their leader.)

Skills:
Oathsworn to the Pope: Incapable of defying the Pope.
Increase HP (Level 3): Raises the user’s HP.
Increase Attack (Level 3): Raises the user’s Attack.
Increase Defense (Level 3): Raises the user’s Defense.
Pope’s Apostle (Level 5): Raises all stats.
Divine Avenger (Level 5): Triples the next attack after a one-minute charging period.
Divine Retribution (Level 10): A powerful Holy attack.
Divine Shield (Level 8): Protects the user and those around them.
Divine Prayer (Level 5): The user prays to the goddess Flaudia to heal the target.

Equipment:
Head: –
Body: Paladin’s Uniform (+2% Physical Defense)
Right Hand: Dual-Winged Spellsword (+3% Physical Attack)

Left Hand: Paladin’s Shield
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Paladin’s Pendant (+1% Magical Defense)
Feet: Paladin’s Boots (+2% Physical Defense)
Bonus: Paladin Set 3/3 (+3% Healing / +1% Physical Defense / +1% Magical Defense)

Overview:
Name: Mimoza
Level: 42
Job: Paladin (Fiercely loyal to the Pope. They wouldn’t hesitate to lay down their life to protect their leader.)

Skills:
Oathsworn to the Pope: Incapable of defying the Pope.
Increase HP (Level 3): Raises the user’s HP.
Increase Attack (Level 7): Raises the user’s Attack.
Increase Defense (Level 3): Raises the user’s Defense.
Pope’s Apostle (Level 5): Raises all stats.
Divine Retribution (Level 10): A powerful Holy attack.
Divine Prayer (Level 3): The user prays to the goddess Flaudia to heal the target.
Goddess’s Flash (Level 10): Attacks several targets in front of the user.

Equipment:
Head: Pristine Hairpin (A fashionable pin)
Body: Paladin’s Uniform (+2% Physical Defense)
Right Hand: Briar Rose Rapier (+1% Physical Attack)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Paladin’s Pendant (+1% Magical Defense)

Feet: Paladin’s Boots (+2% Physical Defense)
Bonus: Paladin Set 3/3 (+3% Healing / +1% Physical Defense / +1% Magical Defense)

Overview:
Name: Leroy
Level: 47
Job: Cleric (Expert in healing. They will raise their fallen allies over and over again.)

Titles:
Pope’s Devotee: +3% Healing

Skills:
Blessed Light: Turns clean water into Holy Water. / Item Required: Potion Bottle.
Heal (Level 5): Heals the target.
Heal More (Level 5): Greatly heals the target.
Heal Completely (Level 5): Uses 50% of the user’s HP and all remaining mana to completely recover the target’s HP and mana.
Mana Rations (Level 5): Recovers mana every 30 seconds.
Strengthen (Level 10): 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.
Hammerfall (Level 5): A cross strikes the target like a hammer, dealing magical damage.
Goddess’s Hammerfall (Level 4): The Goddess’s wrath strikes the target like a hammer, dealing magical

damage.

Equipment:
Head: –
Body: Prayer Robe (+1% Healing)
Right Hand: Prayer Staff (+2% Healing))
Left Hand: –
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Fashionable Aiguillette (Tithia’s gift)
Feet: Pilgrim’s Shoes (+2% Holy element)

Becoming a Cleric

I waited until morning to visit Farming Village by way of the Transportation Gates. It felt a little strange to be on my own again. Kent and Cocoa had left for my home country of Farblume. Once Kent attained his advanced job, they'd go to Lief for Cocoa's. Tarte, Tithia, Leroy, Blitz, and Mimoza were en route to Snowdia to register its Gate. I'd given Tarte a list of ingredients to scrounge up in Snowdia and asked her to brew as much as she could. We were going to need a lot of potions going forward. Like, *a lot* a lot.

Work in Farming Village started early. When I arrived, I was greeted by the din of early-rising farmers. I began searching the village for Kent's mother, Molly—one of the people I needed to heal to complete my quest. "Kent said that...she's usually taking care of cows in the morning," I recalled.

After wandering about for a while, I found Molly, hard at work milking cows as if she didn't have a twisted ankle at all. As much as I hated to interrupt her work, I knew that healing her would help her feel better and work more efficiently. "Good morning, Molly!"

"Oh? Is that you, Sharon?!" Molly smiled. "It's been a while. Glad to see you're looking well! I heard you formed a party with Kent and Cocoa. They finally showed their faces the other day and told me all about it."

"They're both full-fledged adventurers now. They've been helping me out a lot," I replied.

"Are they really? If that doesn't just bring joy to my heart... Thank you for looking after that reckless boy of mine." Kent's recent homecoming really seemed to have lightened Molly's spirits because she continued excitedly, "I was worried that he wasn't eating enough, but he's been eating better than when he was at home. 'I need to eat good to get stronger!' he says."

"Kent does have a healthy appetite," I agreed. He was always

eating a lot of meat in pursuit of building muscle. A high-protein diet was just what he needed, especially after a day of training or hunting. *Maybe I should start working out...* I mused, then returned my attention to Molly's ankle. "How are you doing, Molly? Kent was worried that you'd hurt your ankle."

"What's he doing talking about me? It's really not a big deal..." Molly rubbed her right ankle and grimaced. "I just twisted it a little. I don't have trouble walking and it'll heal itself."

"But you are in pain, aren't you? I am a Healer... Do you mind if I cast a healing spell on you?" I offered.

"That's right, you are. Are you sure, Sharon? Don't you need to save your mana?" Molly asked, concerned.

"It's no trouble," I smiled. In this world, though there was no visible indication of it, using Skills consumed mana. In exchange, Healers often charged a considerable fee for using their healing magic, so it wasn't uncommon for people to let time heal their injuries if they weren't serious ones. "Here goes... Heal."

"It doesn't hurt anymore. Thank you, Sharon."

"No problem at all."

As soon as Molly thanked me, a quest window popped up, showing the word "complete" stamped across Molly's name. That left two names on the list: Pico in Zille and Maryl in Snowy Plains. "I should get going. I'll come visit with Kent and Cocoa next time!"

"Hold on a minute. It's not much of a thanks but take some of our homemade milk and cheese," Molly said.

"Are you sure?! Because I'd love that!" *Fresh milk and cheese straight from the farm?* My mouth was watering just thinking about it.

Molly blinked a few times before letting out a hearty laugh. "Now that's what I like to hear!"

She gave me heaps of cheese and milk to take with me. I decided I'd share them with Kent.

I returned to Zille by using the Gate and spent a little time shopping. In the afternoon, I headed to the central plaza. The Pico that featured in the Cleric quest only appeared in the afternoon.

I waited a while, and eventually a few children came running into

the plaza—Pico was the pigtailed girl among them. Watching the children laugh and run around with endless energy made me nostalgic for my own childhood. I was snapped out of my reverie when Pico tripped, her forehead colliding with the ground. *That's got to hurt!* I rushed over as Pico began to blubber.

"Are you okay?! Heal!" As soon as I used my Skill, any sign of a bruise disappeared from her forehead and she stopped crying. Unlike the game, where it had been a simple event in the course of the quest, watching a little girl hit her head in real life had been very startling.

Pico gingerly touched her forehead to check that she was no longer hurt. When she saw that she wasn't, a smile bloomed on her face. "Thank you!"

"You're welcome. Be careful when you're running around."

"Okay!" Pico answered.

"Thank you!" her friends called as Pico rejoined the group and they resumed running around the plaza. *Cute kids.*

Now I only had to see Maryl in Snowy Plains, which stretched beyond the borders of Snowdia and to its west, so to the northwest and northeast of here. If I'd had nothing else to go on, Maryl would have been a needle in a haystack, but there were a few specific spawn points for this character.

"I should probably start in Snowdia..." I decided and traveled to Snowdia through the Gate.

Maryl was a researcher who traveled all over the world to study its nature. "That's why he's usually in historical landmarks or areas with an unusual climate," I mused.

My first stop was the section of Snowy Plains to the southeast of Snowdia. Farther east from this area stood Aurora Hills—a spot popular with tourists, even though they needed strong Skills or bodyguards to survive the fearsome monsters before they could enjoy the view. Sometimes Maryl could be found collapsed on the ground a short way from the entrance of Aurora Hills, as if he were on his way to see the aurora borealis.

I might as well try, I thought.

I rented a horse and trotted along the highway until I entered

Snowy Plains. Almost immediately, I came to Pup Place, where they rented out large, rideable dogs called puppers, as well as stabling the horse you'd ridden there on.

"Hello!" a young man working the counter greeted me.

"One pupper, please!"

"You got it. Kotaro, come on out!"

At his command, a dog with an arabesque-printed bandana around its neck came trotting out. He was an adorable pupper that looked like an Akita, with brown-and-white fur and tiny eyes. At two meters long, Kotaro could carry up to two people at once, even with the weight of the saddle and stirrups that made it easier for beginners to ride him.

"Woof," Kotaro said.

"Who's a good boy?" I petted Kotaro's head. "I just want to go close to the hill and come back. It won't take long."

Kotaro sat at attention as if to say, *You can count on me!*

"You're so fast!" I shouted as Kotaro bolted through the shimmering expanse of snow, barking in exhilaration. Even though I had to lean forward to maintain my balance, I didn't forget to take in my surroundings. No official paths marked Snowy Plains, but it was interesting to see the thin slivers of footprints left behind by the occasional foot traffic. My breaths were puffs of white, and I could feel my eyelashes freezing... I was chilled by this snow country in more ways than one.



After thirty minutes or so, I arrived at the spot where Maryl could often be found—though not today. "It couldn't be that easy," I grumbled. I gazed at the empty patch of snow and what lay beyond—a larger boulder with Aurora Hills looming behind it. It was a treacherous place with powerful monsters that I couldn't take out on my own.

But what can be the harm in taking a peek? I thought and cast Strengthen and Goddess's Protection on myself. I could do it—just catch a glimpse of the aurora borealis and hightail it out of there.

"I'll be right back, Kotaro. Stay."

"Woof!" Kotaro responded.

I walked up to the boulder and stepped beyond it. As soon as my foot crunched the snow, the aurora borealis exploded through the sky.

"Wow..." I breathed. Even though it was daytime, layers and layers of the vibrant ribbons of light overlapped each other in the sky like the frills of a magical cosmic ball gown. The sound of an impact—something hitting the barrier around me—snapped me out of my awed state. I lowered my gaze and found a Snowcloaked Hunter aiming another arrow at me.

"If you can't beat 'em... Run!" I turned on my heel and stepped back into Snowy Plains where Kotaro awaited me.

The first spot had been a dud, so I quickly made my way toward the second possible location of Maryl's collapse. I'd have to use a highway to get to the other part of Snowy Plains, which meant I had to say goodbye to Kotaro for now. I returned him to Pup Place in exchange for the horse I'd left there.

"Bye, Kotaro. Let's run through the plains again sometime!" I said.

"Woof!"

"Thank you! Please come again!" the young man called as I rode off.

***

"Meowster!"

"Tarte!"

While I rode along the highway toward the next section of Snowy Plains, I ran into Tarte, Tithia, Leroy, Blitz, and Mimoza, who were en route to Snowdia. When I told them that I'd already healed two of the three people on my quest, Tarte and Tithia gushed over me to no end...which scratched some kind of itch in my brain.

Blitz and Mimoza stared at me intently.

"The monsters in northwestern Snowy Plains are pretty strong..." Blitz said.

"We've been there a few times for training. It's tough terrain," Mimoza added, and they tried to talk me out of going there alone. But we couldn't waste the time it would take for them to return to Snowdia before rejoining me here.

Besides, I had a solid plan in mind. "I'm just going to rent a dog and cast Goddess's Protection nonstop so I can power through!"

"That's so reckless!" all of them protested.

"You can't even call that a plan, Meowster!"

Dear me... That was a unanimous veto. "But with how little time we have...we can't afford to go together," I countered, arguing for my decision to go alone despite the risk.

"Then," Leroy said, "you should take Tarte with you. She's given us extra Delay Potions so we can be apart for a while."

"Yes... And if Tarte needs more materials for when she returns, I can check the Guilds and stores in her stead," Mimoza chimed in.

"Thank you!" Tarte cried. "With my Purrtion Throw, I won't let a monster lay a hand on Meowster!"

"Perfect, Tarte. You'll be my bodyguard!"

So, Tarte and I set our course for northwestern Snowy Plains.

Just as soon as we'd crossed into Snowy Plains, Tarte and I each rented a pupper at Pup Place. Unlike Kotaro, both of our new mounts were athletic huskies covered in just the right amount of fluffy black-and-white fur. Tarte's gentle-looking one was called Hanako and mine—with a face that looked like he'd survived a hundred battles—was called Musashi, like the invincible swordsman of Japanese history. *Any chance he'll fight with us?*

As Snowy Plains whipped by us, Tarte called, “How fur are we going?”

“Well... About a half-day’s run from here. He should be on the foothills of Slumbering Volcano.”

“Yes, Meowster!” Tarte answered with great enthusiasm, which brought a smile to my face.

Four types of monster spawned in this section of Snowy Plains: Horned Snow Wolf, Snowcloaked Hunter, Snowman, and Snow Wolf. The most threatening of these was the Horned Snow Wolf that sometimes had the weaker Snow Wolves in tow. Players had speculated that the two species were parent and offspring, but nothing definitive had been revealed.

Every time we came across a monster on our trek, Tarte was quick to take care of it.

“Purrtion Throw!” With a huff, Tarte lobbed a Molotov that arced over and annihilated the group of three Snow Wolves. Her throwing seemed to have gotten stronger. Her Molotov now flew surer and farther than before. I’d look forward to seeing how much more she’d improve in the future.

After some time progressing through Snowy Plains and racking up drop items, we spotted a trail of dog paw prints that didn’t belong to either of ours.

“There might be someone nearby,” Tarte suggested.

“Maybe another adventurer.” The only thing ahead of us was more of the endless Snowy Plains and then Slumbering Volcano—no towns or settlements. They had to be an adventurer or some kind of hermit or else a researcher like Maryl.

“Purrrhaps. Or a bandit.”

“A bandit...! We wouldn’t want to run into one of those.” A bandit hideout in the mountains was a common trope in fantasy stories. I wasn’t humble enough to think that we wouldn’t be able to put up a decent fight against some bandits, but we were a pair of girls traveling alone. The smarter move was to avoid running into whomever had left these paw prints.

“Musashi, can you keep away from these paw prints?” I asked.

“Woof!”

"Same for us please, Hanako," Tarte chimed in.

"Woof!"

Our dogs were very clever. I gave Musashi a pat on the head and we returned to our journey, keeping a safe distance from the trail of paw prints.

Alas, we and the mysterious strangers had both been headed for the same destination. When we arrived at the bottom of Slumbering Volcano, we saw them in the distance. They hadn't started to climb up the volcano yet but were engaged in some sort of conversation.

"They're talking," Tarte trilled quietly.

"Yep."

If they're bandits, why don't they go into the mountain already? Just as I thought this, I saw them—and they weren't bandits. One wore a bishop's robe in a white that could have blended into the snow, and he was surrounded by a handful of armed guards, some of their faces concealed by their hoods.

"Templars?!" I guessed. "And the young guy in the robe..." He looked to be in his twenties. I'd initially thought he might be Hervas, but the cardinal was over sixty years old, from what Leroy had told me.

We inched closer, careful not to be spotted. We hid behind a boulder and listened carefully.

"While His Holiness welcomes Goddess L'lyeh, we need to dispose of Flaudia," the bishop announced.

"Yes, sir!" The Templars saluted in unison.

Dispose of Flaudia? I thought, trying to work out their plan. As far as I could tell now, Hervas wasn't with this group, and Hervas was working to do something related to L'lyeh while this bishop did something related to Flaudia.

"Oh...!" I suddenly remembered the brand-new update that had been about to drop before I'd come to this world. Rumor'd had it that the update was related to Flaudia in some way. Maybe Hervas had gathered intel on the new update and had his agents looking into it.

Maybe Eden lies beyond the volcano, I speculated. Since I'd been reincarnated here before the release of this particular update, I had

no game knowledge of it. All I could do was seek out information on it. The problem was that monsters in Slumbering Volcano were even more powerful than those in Underworld Abbey. The bishop and his Templars wouldn't stand a chance in the volcano now, especially without any specialized equipment—which I didn't currently see on any of them. At a bare minimum, clearing Slumbering Volcano would take them a few months. As nervous as the prospect of their scheming made me, we still had some time.

"I'll have my awakened job in a few months..." I muttered to myself.

"They're climbing the meowntain!" Tarte whispered, snapping me out of my thoughts. Indeed, as we watched, they began a climb in formation. Judging by the large packs on the Templars' backs, they were in it for the long haul.

After they had completely left our sight, we came out from behind the boulder.

"Are those people Ti's enemies?" Tarte asked.

"No doubt about it," I said. "That has to be one of Hervas's teams."

"I wish I was strong enough to take them down," Tarte hissed.

I put a hand on her head. "It's okay. That volcano is a really tough place to walk through. It won't be easy for them." *Hopefully, they'll get wiped out in the process.* "We'll let Ti know about this, but we're going to follow Hervas like we planned."

"Yes, Meowster!"

Now we returned our attention to the task at hand—completing my Cleric quest. Maryl's spawn point was a little way off, so the bishop's team hadn't found him.

After walking along the foot of the volcano, we soon found Maryl on the ground.

"Are you all right?!"

"Are you okay?! Heal! Regeneration! Mana Rations! Strengthen!" Even though I'd known that he'd be on the ground, coming across someone unmoving on the ground wasn't good for your blood pressure. I'd reflexively cast all the healing Skills I could, but at least that seemed to help Maryl get up.

“What? Why am I...?” he began.

“It looks like you were lost,” I said.

“Oh, that’s right! I wanted to research Slumbering Volcano, but I couldn’t find where to enter it,” Maryl said.

“I see...” I muttered. The bishop and the Templars had been at the entrance, but they should have gotten enough of a head start that Maryl wouldn’t run into them, so I told the researcher where to go.

“Thank you for the rescue!” Maryl said.

“It was no trouble. You’re welcome,” I said.

“Please take care,” Tarte said.

Once we’d seen Maryl off, my body began to glow faintly.

“That’s the Blessed Light! You’re switching jobs, Meowster!”

“That was the last task for my quest,” I said.

A quest window popped up, now showing the “completed” stamp on Maryl’s name. I had officially become a Cleric.

Underworld Abbey

After successfully becoming a Cleric, I gained a few more levels with Tarte in Snowy Plains so I could take advantage of the Skills I'd newly unlocked.

Overview:
Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 47
Job: Cleric (Expert in healing. They will raise their fallen allies over and over again.)

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.
Heal More (Level 5): Greatly heals the target.
Wide Heal (Level 5): Heals all targets within a 7-meter radius of the user.
Regeneration (Level 5): Recovers HP every 10 seconds.
Mana Rations (Level 5): Recovers mana every 30 seconds.
Strengthen (Level 10): Buffs physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).
Increase Attack (Level 3): Raises the user's Attack.

Goddess’s Smite: Doubles the damage of the next attack used.
Goddess’s Protection: Creates a barrier around the target.
Cure (Level 5): Heals status conditions.
Boost Holy Element (Level 1): Strengthens the User’s Holy element.

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)

I was feeling good about my progress. I’d already been at 44 when I became a Cleric, thanks to the monsters I’d fought with Tarte on our way to find Maryl. The plan was to keep grinding levels and stacking up more Skills. Out of the Skills I currently had, Increase Attack was one that had been unlocked when I became a Cleric. Not only were Increase Attack, Increase Defense, and Increase Magic extremely useful, acquiring all three Skills would allow me to gain one of the strongest buff Skills in the game—Goddess’s Apostle—when I became an Archbishop.

“That’s enough leveling for now... Let’s go back to Snowdia and

meet up with our party," I said.

"Yes, Meowster!"

I'd have to report that we'd come across Hervas's Templars, and there was still so much we had to do if we wanted to stand a chance against the mutinous cardinal. Defeat wasn't an option.

"Can you carry me just a little longer, Musashi?"

"Woof!"

I petted and ruffled the pupper before he began dashing through Snowy Plains.

***

When Tarte and I returned to Snowdia, we made for the inn that we'd designated as our rendezvous spot. Tithia, Leroy, and Mimoza were already there and they let us know that Blitz had stepped out to perform some reconnaissance.

Tithia took my hand in hers, smiling up at me. "Congratulations, Sharon! May Flaudia bless this new Cleric."

"Thank you," I said.

"Congratulations!" Leroy and Mimoza chimed in, making me blush a little.

Then, Mimoza laid out a whole slew of items—she'd gathered all sorts of materials from the Guild and the shops throughout Snowdia, in addition to plenty of food and other supplies.

"I'll get right to Furmulation!" Tarte purred. "The sooner we have what we need the better."

"Thanks, Tarte," I said.

My apprentice set up her tools in the corner of the room and started to work, brewing Star Potions and Star Mana Potions with expert fluidity. I doubted there was much more I could teach her about Alchemy.

While I was watching Tarte work, Leroy made some tea for us. "Thank you."

"Of course. It's rather cold outside," Leroy said. "We managed to get in touch with a few Paladins. Blitz is out retrieving their messages now."

"That's wonderful news!" I said. Paladins were oathbound to Tithia and could be implicitly trusted. On the other hand, it was difficult to discern who a Templar sided with, which was why Leroy hadn't reached out to any Templars for the moment. It couldn't have been easy for them when they couldn't trust the majority of the people they'd considered allies before the coup.

In the meantime, we decided to rest until Blitz returned and we could exchange more information...which wasn't until after midnight.

"Welcome back, Blitz," Tithia greeted him.

Blitz saluted his Pope then turned to us. "You must have become a Cleric already."

"Yes. I managed to finish my quest," I confirmed.

"Meowster is amazing," Tarte purred as she poured all of us a fresh cup of tea. The piping brew did wonders to snap us out of the late-night drowsiness.

"Let me start," I said and then told the group what Tarte and I had seen at the foot of Slumbering Volcano—we urgently needed to do something about Hervas's movements. Seeing as the man leading the party into the mountains was also a bishop, I thought Leroy might know of him. A glance at Leroy told me that he must have an inkling as to who the man was.

"Most likely you saw Owen Hervas, Rodney's son," Leroy said.

"Son?!" I couldn't help but raise my voice—I'd encountered a much bigger fish than I'd thought. It made sense, though. Conquering Slumbering Volcano was a task too important for Hervas to have entrusted to anyone but his closest allies.

So bishops are allowed to marry in this world... I mentally noted.

Blitz raised his hand. "According to the intel I received today, a village worshipping the Goddess Flaudia has been discovered deep inside Slumbering Volcano."

The rest of us shared a look of surprise. Blitz had spoken to a Paladin who had escaped Hervas's persecution and still remained hidden in the cathedral to gather information for our cause. Tithia had definitely been blessed with loyal subjects. The village Blitz mentioned had to be Eden, the Furthest Village—introduced in the latest update.

I have to go see it...! But I wouldn't survive the journey there at my current level, or on my own at any level considering that I was a supporter. *I need to train my party members, and fast!* Now that Blitz had confirmed my suspicions, I could feel my heart beating faster and faster. "So while Rodney Hervas is heading to Underworld Abbey, his son Owen is making for Eden, the Furthest Village," I summarized.

"It would seem so," Leroy said. "I doubt we could make it through the volcano in our current state..." He trailed off and gave me a look.

"What?" I asked.

"But I wouldn't be surprised if *you* could."

"No! Why would you ever think that?" I saw that the rest of our party was giving me the same expectant look as Leroy. *What do they see in me? I'm just a feeble supporter.*

"So you're mortal after all," Leroy commented.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Holding myself back from demanding that Leroy "meet me outside," I suggested that we leave a message for Kent and Cocoa at the Guild and head to Underworld Abbey without them.

***

The next day, we rested until past noon before traveling from Snowdia to Zille through the Transportation Gate.

"This is incredible..." Tithia breathed as she stepped through the Gate.

"Ti, we're leaving the city right away," I reminded her.

"O-Of course!"

From Zille, it was a long but straight shot south to Dark Cave, which led to the Abbey. It was also accessible by another route through Field of Ashes, but both the heat and the monsters were scarier that way— *No thanks.*

We rented horses and set off from Zille, stopping at Farming Village to give everyone who hadn't registered its Gate a chance to do so before setting up camp shortly before we came to Dark Cave.

And thanks to our Bags and Storage, we were practically glamping. We had plenty of meat, fish, and vegetables, as well as a variety of spices. Some of us even had freshly baked bread and piping-hot sides stashed away.

"You're really getting the hang of using your Magic Bags," I remarked.

"Lest Her Holiness feel inconvenienced," Leroy explained proudly. He'd packed his Bag full of Tithia's favorite foods, an entire wardrobe, and even a luxurious down sleeping bag.

"I see..." I muttered. *Leave it to Leroy to perfect servitude.*

As a result, camping out under the stars barely felt different from sleeping at the inn.

***

The next day, we safely made it through Dark Cave to find Underworld Abbey towering over us. *It looks the same as it did in the game,* I noted. The abbey was in ruins, exuding a sense of foreboding that would make anyone hesitate to enter it. Encased in moss and rust, shrouded in a faintly glowing violet mist, Underworld Abbey might as well have been shouting at us: *Begone! Begone! Begone!* I wasn't all too comfortable being here at our current level...but I was also glad that we'd made it here. Even seeing a dreadful sight like this ticked another box off of my list of all the wonders this world had to offer. Besides, I'd always liked looking at pictures of ruins and abandoned structures.

"I'd heard stories of this place..." Leroy muttered. "But I wasn't sure it was real until now."

"Something feels very wrong here," Tithia added.

After a lifetime of holy vocation, they must have become sensitive to Dark energy. Blitz and Mimoza stared at the structure silently.

Even Tarte seemed to sense something—her tail was poofed to the max. "Meow! That's right!" she trilled. "Drink these, please. They're Dark Resistance Purrtions."

"Thank you," the group answered.

This was one of the potions Tarte had prepared. As its name

suggested, it buffed your resistance against the Dark element. Tarte passed out ten vials to each of us. Since each vial would only last an hour, I would have liked to have more on hand, but this was as many as she'd been able to brew with the materials we'd had.

I drank my first dose, quietly relieved that it didn't taste revolting. "Let's get going. Our objective is to find and capture Rodney Hervas, who should be somewhere in the abbey," I reiterated.

Although the abbey itself was decrepit, its entrance looked sturdy—it wouldn't have functioned as a dungeon otherwise. As we drew closer, I could see craftsmanship in the details, like the stained glass windows depicting L'lyeh's crest.

There were several monsters we could expect here: Specters, the same ones I'd encountered in Paradise of Erungoa; Lamenting Witches; Unraveled Headless Barons; Abandoned Dogs; Corrupted Nuns; Demonic Monks; and L'lyeh, the final boss of the dungeon. Before we'd arrived, I'd shared with the party all the information I had about these monsters, including their weaknesses, along with the detailed structure of the dungeon.

Blitz and I led our formation, followed by our cannon, Tarte. Tithia and Leroy filed behind her, and Mimoza brought up the rear. I had to navigate us through the dungeon, so I stayed in the front while Leroy remained in the back to keep an eye on our situation and cover anything I'd missed.

The interior of Underworld Abbey wasn't as decrepit as its exterior but still showed significant damage. An air of solemnity still hung in the halls despite their stained walls, torn paintings, smashed vases, and occasional puddles revealing leaks in the roof.

"Here they come! A baron and a dog up ahead!" I announced. "Save your Molotovs, Tarte. Let Blitz and Mimoza attack!"

"Got it!" the Paladins answered and rushed the monsters with their swords drawn—their attacks were doing decent damage, buffed by my Skills. Meanwhile, Leroy contributed with Goddess's Hammerfall. Since I'd gone all in on supporting Skills, it was nice to have another supporter who could chip in with attacks.

"Divine Retribution!" Blitz and Mimoza attacked together, each finding their mark.

The Unraveled Headless Baron looked like a headless mummy. Its attacks were powerful but repetitive. The Abandoned Dog scampered all around you, biting and clawing. The tricky part was the loose chain dangling from its collar that often whipped around to hurt you. What was worse, there had been a quest centered on this monster, allowing the players to experience its lore—the dog had been abandoned when its owner moved away. The poor thing had waited for its owner's return until it died and became a spirit. Then, it had torn off its chains and eventually found its way to the abbey. Some players had had a really hard time battling Abandoned Dogs because of that.

With a few more vanilla attacks, we managed to take care of our first encounter in Underworld Abbey.

"Great job!" I said, high-fiving Mimoza and Blitz.

"Thanks!" Mimoza answered.

"They kept me on my toes," Blitz said.

"Let's keep going!" I encouraged everyone. Because we were several levels short of the recommended threshold, battles wouldn't be easy and we would get nicked and bruised along the way. We made sure to completely heal ourselves before continuing on—a little bit of carelessness could be fatal here.

Slowly and carefully, we progressed through the dungeon. Sometimes monsters appeared alone and other times they appeared as a group. I asked Tarte to use her Potion Throw only when three or more of them appeared at the same time. There was so much uncertainty ahead that I wanted to conserve our Molotovs as much as possible. Thanks to our purchase requests through the Guild, we still had a stock of a few hundred.

Even after walking for a while, we'd seen a lot less action than I'd thought we would. "I was expecting to run into more Templars, but so far..."

"Perhaps Hervas and his guards have made it farther into the dungeon already," Leroy suggested.

"My thoughts exactly—" Just then, I spotted some trash strewn across the path ahead of us. A group had sat and eaten here but hadn't picked up after themselves. *How dare they litter in this*

beautiful world! "There will be swift justice for those— I mean, do you think this was left behind by Hervas and his Templars?" I asked the group.

"Let me check."

"Thank you, Blitz. Goddess's Protection! Regeneration!" With those buffs on him, I let Blitz take the lead. We warily followed him until we'd come up to the scattered trash. Fortunately, there were no signs of monsters around. Upon closer inspection, I could see that some utensils had been left behind along with the food trash. "Do you think...they were attacked during their meal and had to flee in a hurry?"

"It certainly looks like it," Leroy confirmed.

"It's a clear sign that they failed to keep proper watch while they were eating... They should be ashamed to call themselves Templars," Mimoza huffed.

Mimoza's professional outrage aside, that explained why we didn't sense any monsters around—the fleeing Templars had lured them away, just like Blitz and Mimoza had accidentally done in Deep Ravine.

So there could be a whole horde of monsters a corner or two ahead, I mused. "What to do..."

"What's the matter, Meowster? I can clean it all up," Tarte offered. She must have thought my conundrum had to do with whether or not I wanted to clean up this mess. On top of being absolutely adorable, my apprentice apparently had the heart of an angel.

"I'm expecting a cluster of monsters ahead," I said.

"A cluster...?! Oh!" Blitz had caught on.

I brought up what had happened in the ravine to the group, and the rest of the party agreed with my assumption. "I would have liked to reach our hunting ground with minimal risk... But we might as well clear up that mob!"

A muscle in everyone's jaw seemed to tick at my suggestion.

Like Throwing Molotovs at a Baby

After cleaning up the filthy trash littering the dungeon, we progressed through the halls to find a whole horde of monsters. Either Hervas's party had managed to escape them at this point, or a few of the Templars had stayed behind to hold them off... There was no point dwelling on his choices, though.

I took another look at the twenty or so monsters and grinned. "Now that's what I call bountiful!" Specters were the most prevalent among the mob, followed by Abandoned Dogs and Lamenting Witches. A few barons, nuns, and monks were among them too. *Look at all that delicious EXP...!*

"Th-There's so many! How are we going to deal with them all?!" Tarte hissed, her tail puffed.

"Don't worry. We have two supporters, and Blitz will hold the line," I said.

"I will...? I guess I don't have a choice," Blitz answered.

Thanks, Blitz. You're going to do great. Our plan was simple—all of us would chuck Molotovs at the mob, and Blitz would hold off any of the monsters that survived the bombardment.

"Here's your ammewnition," Tarte said, passing out the Molotovs.

"I will throw them as hard as I can...!" Tithia said, hyping herself up.

"I'm throwing them too?" Mimoza asked. She must have been planning to use her own Skills, but starting with Molotovs was going to be a safer option against such a large mob. In fact, I wanted her to use Goddess's Flash to attack the monsters ahead as soon as she threw her Molotov.

"That's how I want you to go about it," I explained.

"Understood. With that many powerful monsters, we can't be too careful," Mimoza said.

"And I'm to hold off any monsters left over," Blitz confirmed. "I'll

use a defensive Skill right away."

The Paladins shared a determined look.

"Don't worry. Leroy and I will make sure your buffs keep coming. Ti, use Goddess's Sanctuary to protect yourself and Tarte," I said.

"I will."

Now that we all knew our parts in the assault, Leroy and I applied all the buffs that we could to the whole party, including Goddess's Smite. Our collective attack should deal considerable damage to the mob.

"Let's do this!" I urged, and the party cheered in response.

Tarte and Tithia—the shortest members of our party—were the first to throw their Molotovs from the front line. As soon as the bottles left their hands, they sprinted to the back of the group so that Tithia could set up her barrier. In the meantime, the rest of us threw our Molotovs into the mob. A total of six Molotovs caused a deafening explosion that seemed to shake the abbey itself.

"Goddess's Smite!" Leroy and I used our Skill on Mimoza and Tarte respectively.

"Here goes! Goddess's Flash!" Mimoza charged ahead.

Blitz followed with a determined roar. "Divine Shield!"

Once Tarte had thrown her second Molotov, I cast another Goddess's Smite on her while Leroy put another Goddess's Protection on Blitz. I immediately followed up with my own protection on Blitz—if too many of the monsters had survived, each layer of Goddess's Protection wouldn't last long.

Just as I was calculating our next move, Blitz called from within the dust cloud that had erupted from the explosion. "That's all of them!" When he emerged, he could not have looked more relieved. "The first round of Molotovs must have whittled them down a lot. Mimoza's Goddess's Flash wiped out most of the rest, and Tarte's second throw took out the last ones standing, the Demonic Monks."

"I had a feeling the monks had survived... We need to raise our levels more and find better equipment," I said to myself. The optimistic side of me had hoped that we'd wiped out the entire mob in one blow, so this felt a little like a reality check.

"You're still not happy...?" Blitz muttered.

I pretended not to hear him while I reapplied buffs to the party as Tarte and Tithia gathered up the dropped items—none of them were rare, much to my chagrin.

We kept taking out monsters as we progressed through the abbey.

"My level went up today. It's been a long time since that last happened," Leroy told us casually.

"Congratulations, Leroy!" Tithia said with a beaming smile that practically melted Leroy.

Par for the course, I thought. "I think mine has gone up since coming to the abbey..."

"Mine too!" mewed Tarte.

"Same."

"Ditto."

"Oh, mine did as well..." Tithia said, bringing it around full circle.

Of course, we could never have too many levels. With how much EXP monsters in Underworld Abbey gave out, our levels would go up a lot more before we left. Currently, Leroy and I were sitting at 50, Tarte and Blitz at 47, Mimoza at 46, and Tithia at 45.

After we'd all shared our current levels, Mimoza said, "At our level, it normally takes a lot longer to level up." For some reason, her smile seemed a little tense.

"I noticed that a lot of people are stuck at a low level..." I said. "Why don't we share tips about dungeons so adventurers can come and grind levels without feeling so daunted? For example, if we asked the Zille Guild branch to spread the word about what to expect in the Underworld Abbey, I'm sure plenty of adventurers would come here!" And if they did, more items would start to enter the market. Other adventurers could make money while they raised their levels and I could get my hands on all sorts of items—a win-win!

"Other adventurers don't think the way you do."

"Why did you say that with pity in your eyes, Blitz?" I demanded, though I noticed that the rest of the party shared the same look.

That's not true, I thought. *Frey, for instance, would be so stoked*

to come here... I'm going to tell her all about this place next time I see her.

"Oh. This is our hunting ground," I noticed, halting our march.

"Here...?" Tithia asked.

"Yes. This is the perfect spot to set up base camp because hardly any monsters spawn *here*, but there are plenty to be found around the *corner*," I explained. In fact, this had been such a popular spot in *Reas* that it had often been at full capacity, with players filling the space to its brim. "Now. In order to capture Rodney Hervas...it's time to raise our levels like our lives depend on it!"

"Our lives... What fresh hell do you have in store for us, Sharon?" Tithia asked, visibly shaking.

"What am I, some kind of torture master? I'm not going to have us do anything reckless," I clarified, only to receive a distrusting look from Leroy. *What atrocities have I committed to warrant this reaction?*

Tarte, though, was brimming with enthusiasm. "I'm going to gain so many levels so I can help you, Ti!"

"Thank you, Tarte...! I can't very well cower from this challenge," Tithia said. "I *will* make it through this trial, through blood, sweat, and tears...!"

"Neither blood nor tears are on the agenda," I pointed out. Despite everyone acting like I was going to put them through the wringer, I just wanted to efficiently grind some levels.

The spot I'd chosen as our hunting ground was where a corridor formed a T-shaped intersection. The paths to the left and right both curved, leading to the same location. Here, monsters spawned in both directions. All we had to do was have Blitz lure some monsters to us and then gang up on them.

"I see. All the hunting happens here," Blitz said.

"That way, everyone in the back can conserve their energy and it's easier to keep an eye on our surroundings," Mimoza added. The Paladins already seemed to know what I was going to ask them to do, which was very reassuring.

"I'll provide general support and cover Blitz while he acts as bait. Leroy, I need you to stay here and provide additional support. Feel

free to go on the offensive if you can swing it," I said.

"No problem," Leroy said. I could easily cover the support when we hunted like this, so I wanted him to add as much as he could to our damage output. Fortunately, we'd brought plenty of potions so we could keep on hunting.

"So we're going to attack the meownsters from here!" Tarte huffed.

"I acquired some attacking Skills too... I will use them the best I can!" Tithia chimed in.

Blitz went down the corridor on the right, and Mimoza positioned herself close to the corridor on the left so she could act as a tank if any monsters unexpectedly appeared from that side.

Once we get the hang of this, you can start luring in monsters from that side too, I wanted to tell her but decided to hold my tongue for now.

After a few moments, Blitz returned with a Lamenting Witch and a Specter on his tail. Mimoza immediately attacked them with Goddess's Flash, and Tarte lobbed a Molotov at the pair. Leroy and Tithia followed up with their own attacks.

"Goddess's Protection. Strengthen." I used my Skills on Blitz. "Blitz, keep going and lure more monsters from the other side," I commanded.

"O-Okay!" Blitz's job was only to lure the monsters here—not to attack them. While we took care of the monsters he'd lured over, he needed to run down the other corridor and lure the next wave. Rinse and repeat.

Let's go at it for an hour or so. Then I'll give them some feedback, I decided. "Mana Rations! And let's use a potion too." Noting that my mana wasn't recuperating fast enough, I didn't hesitate to drink potions so I could continue to support the party.

Then, Blitz came back with another wave—a witch, a dog, and a monk. He was getting better at baiting them in. When Blitz was still ten meters or so away from us, the monk began attacking him, nearly knocking him to the ground.

Not so fast! I sprinted in his direction as I used my Skill. "Goddess's Protection!"

Blitz held his ground, continuing to run. "Thanks, Sharon!"

"I got you covered," I said, reapplying Blitz's buffs. Once Mimoza had attacked the incoming wave of monsters, I cast another Goddess's Protection on Blitz as he pelted down the opposite corridor.

Even though we were struggling somewhat to take down the Demonic Monks—the strongest monster that could spawn here—I felt like we were getting the rhythm of the hunt.

By the time I'd reached level 57, an hour had passed. *I was going to give them some feedback,* I thought, *but everyone's working together smoothly.* No one had shied away from asking questions and I'd been giving advice as we went. Just an hour of trial and error had drastically improved our efficiency and everyone was continuing to improve in their own way. *Let's keep going!*

After a few more hours, Blitz came down the corridor trailing double the number of monsters of the other waves we'd fought. I wanted to commend him for it, but he looked nervous about it. I could hear the rest of the party tensing up.

"I'm sorry. There're a lot of them this time!" Blitz called.

"No prob! Goddess's Protection! Regeneration!"

"Heal More," Leroy followed up my buffs immediately. He and I were getting very comfortable with covering each other.

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Goddess's Flash!"

Tarte's and Mimoza's attacks alone took out all the Specters. Another Molotov from Tarte would take care of the rest, sans the monk, which would go down after another attack from Mimoza.

"Another one! Purrtion Throw!"

"I can help—Merciless Retribution!"

As soon as Tarte's attack had turned most of the monsters to shimmering explosions, a sword made of light descended upon the Demonic Monk and impaled it, turning it into bursts of light.

Wow. All of us turned to the person who'd whipped that huge attack out of nowhere—Tithia. Even Blitz stood there staring instead of going down the corridor to bait the next wave.

"I saw the light of Flaudia in your Skill, Your Holiness," Leroy said

with perfect serenity.

"Thank you, Leroy," Tithia replied.

"Now I remember that you wanted to try out all sorts of Skills," I said. "So I never really asked which of them you decided on. I didn't expect so many attacking Skills." Of course, a few attacking Skills always came in handy, but I'd always imagined Tithia would lean toward defensive and healing Skills.

"It helped that Tarte gave me extra Reset Skill Potions," Tithia said. "Right now, I need the strength to fight."

"You really thought this through. That takes a lot of strength already," I said.

Tithia cracked a smile that seemed a little forced, which only made me want to wrap up this nasty business as quickly as we could so she could relearn her peaceful Skills.

"Should we take a break, Meowster?"

"Yeah. Why don't we relax for a bit? I'm getting pretty hungry too," I agreed, and the whole party began celebrating. *If you guys wanted a break, you should have told me...*

We moved to the nearby spot with limited spawns and took out prepacked lunches that we'd bought fresh before leaving and kept stored in our Bags. Nothing beat an easy meal when you were tired.

While pouring us all some tea, Tarte turned to Tithia. "What kinds of Skills did you decide on, Ti?"

"They are..." Tithia began, walking us through her set of Skills.

Overview:

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Name: Tithia
Level: 63
Job: Pope (Who prays for world peace.)
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Skills:

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Prayer of the Soul: Creates Heart of the Pope.
Divine Favor (Level 10): Buffs base stats.
Compassion (Level 5): Heals all allies and enemies in
the immediate vicinity.
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Goddess’s Sanctuary (Level 5): Cleanses the user’s surroundings and sets up a barrier.
Judgment Day: 50/50 chance to completely heal or instantly kill the target.
Goddess’s Favor (Level 10): Absorbs attacks to heal the user.
Lightning Smite (Level 5): Strikes the target with a bolt of lightning.
Transient Retribution (Level 10): Strikes multiple targets with bolts of lightning.
Merciless Retribution (Level 10): Flaudia’s sword impales the target.
Miraculous Prayer: Triggers a random miracle.
Pray for Peace (Level 5): All enemies stop targeting the user.

Equipment:
Head: Pope’s Headdress (+5% Holy element)
Body: Pope’s Robe (+5% Resistance to all elements)
Right Hand: Lieudirykal’s Staff (+5% Magical Attack / +5% Holy element)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: —
Bonus: Pope Set 3/3 (+5% Physical Defense / +5% Magical Defense / +3% Resistance to all elements)

Her Skills were much more concentrated on attacks than I’d expected. I could almost feel her outrage against Hervas—her will to fight back—from her choices alone. At the same time, I could tell that she still valued protecting herself. Pray for Peace, which would reset any hate on her, would make it very easy for her to escape most monsters. She had options to heal and set up barriers too.

Looks like I can count on Tithia to hold her own in battle from now on.

Rodney Hervas Appears

Everyone's levels had gone up after hunting at our spot for several hours straight. Tarte, Leroy, and I had all gone up to 68; Mimoza to 64; and Blitz to 65. At this rate, we'd be able to beat L'lyeh soon—not to mention how easily we could help Kent and Cocoa catch up to us once they switched to their advanced jobs.

As for my Skills, I continued to lean fully into support and opted not to learn a single attacking Skill. Maybe I'd want to learn some down the road, but I had no need for them while Tarte was with me. I wanted to keep grinding levels and racking up passive buffs.

"With the levels we're at now, capturing Hervas will be a cinch," Mimoza said excitedly.

I wasn't too sure about that. Although it was hard to imagine a person of this world being all that powerful given how much more advanced the *Reas* players had been by comparison, Hervas had minions and lots of them—the power of numbers couldn't be underestimated.

While I stood weighing our options, Leroy suggested, "I think it's time we venture farther. We need to mark how far Hervas's party has gone. If there are too many of them, we can turn around and...*then* keep raising our levels."

Overview:

Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)

Level: 68

Job: Cleric (Expert in healing. They will raise their fallen allies over and over again.)

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 10): Heals the target.
Heal More (Level 5): Greatly heals the target.
Wide Heal (Level 5): Heals all targets within a 7-meter radius of the user.
Regeneration (Level 5): Recovers HP every 10 seconds.
Mana Rations (Level 5): Recovers mana every 30 seconds.
Strengthen (Level 10): Buffs physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).
Increase Attack (Level 3): Raises the user’s Attack.
Increase Magic (Level 3): Raises the user’s Magic stats.
Increase Defense (Level 3): Raises the user’s Defense.
Goddess’s Smite: Doubles the damage of the next attack used.
Goddess’s Protection: Creates a barrier around the target.
Cure (Level 5): Heals status conditions.
Boost Holy Element (Level 1): Strengthens the user’s Holy element.
Increase Resistance (Level 5): Raises the user’s resistance to all elements.
Unyielding Strength (Level 5): Raises the user’s max HP.

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)

"True. We could use a status update on the enemy," I agreed. There was even a chance that Hervas and his men had been eliminated by the dungeon's monsters already. Of course, that would make the cardinal a very unimpressive villain. "If we keep up our pace as we move forward, it'll make for good training. Let's do it." With our levels high enough, hunting on the move would still net some good EXP—I estimated I'd reach level 70 by the time we caught up with Hervas.

Even though we'd decided to continue through the dungeon, we also made sure to schedule some much-needed rest after our hunt and set our departure for the next day—or simply after getting some rest since there was no telling night from day in the dungeon.

I cleaned us all up with my Pristine Ring and moved to hold a quick strategy meeting...but Tarte and Tithia were already fast asleep. "Wow, I guess I pushed you too far," I said to them. "Sorry, girls..." They weren't like me, who'd been able to hunt monsters in *Reas* all day without a break. With that realization, I promised myself that we'd take a break every hour.

"Today might have been grueling for Her Holiness, but she was glad to take part in the hunt," Leroy said, throwing me a bone. "We

need to capture Hervas as soon as possible. Without you, Sharon, we would not have made it here so easily nor would we have raised our levels this quickly."

"Leroy..." I murmured.

"It's almost obscene how quickly you raise your level. It's as if you found pleasure in the act itself."

"Leroy...?" That didn't seem like the kind of thing a bishop should say about a girl. "Wait, you're half asleep yourself," I realized—he was delirious.

"I'll take him to his tent."

"Thank you, Blitz." Leaving Leroy to him, I told Mimoza, who looked like she was fighting a losing battle against her own drooping eyelids, to go rest in her own tent. I could keep watch alone.

Once everyone else was in bed, I let out a long breath...and grinned. I couldn't help it! How could I, when I'd risen so many levels in a single day. Maybe it wouldn't take me long to become an Archbishop, and then the Holy Maiden. "Of course I have no idea how long the Holy Maiden quest takes," I realized. It'd be so simple if all I had to do was break Tithia and Leroy's curse... Too simple, really, for a unique job quest. "No *Reas* player ever became the Holy Maiden," I remembered. "Does the new patch related to Goddess Flaudia have anything to do with the Holy Maiden quest...? There's no sense in speculating now, I guess." My brain was too preoccupied with Hervas at the moment. First things first—we'd give Hervas what for and restore Tithia to her rightful place as Pope.

"Divine Shield!" After luring in several enemies, Blitz activated a defensive Skill. At the same time, the rest of the party made a coordinated charge at the monsters while I reapplied Blitz's buffs. Even though we were now hunting on the move, we'd really gotten used to hunting together. Chief among our improvements was Blitz's ability to lure monsters over—so much so that I was tempted to invite Blitz to stay in my party even after we took care of Hervas. That wouldn't be an option, though, given how much the Paladins adored Tithia.

"I think we've come a long way, Sharon. Do you know where we

are?" Leroy asked.

"I'd say...we're about nine-tenths of the way through the dungeon. L'lyeh is actually right down—"

"Quiet!" Blitz called from ahead, his tone tense—he'd found something.

Tarte and Tithia each covered their mouth with their hands so as to not let out a sound.

"Hervas is there, with twelve Templars," Blitz said.

Even though that was what I'd expected, hearing it out loud made the hair on my neck stand up. Hervas lurked just down the corridor and around the corner. Whispering our spells, Leroy and I reapplied buffs to the whole party and then peeked our heads around the corner.

There he is! Hervas stood farthest from the monsters the group was engaged with, shielded by his Templars. He held a long staff and wore an ornately decorated robe that strained to cover his portly gut. His long blond hair was brushed back, leaving nothing to cover his wide forehead. He was a portrait of a scheming villain, with his caterpillar mustache the cherry on top.

We watched them battle for a while to gauge how much of a threat they were. Pretty quickly, I grasped that the Templars were the main fighters and Hervas occasionally cast some support Skills on them.

"Protect His Holiness!"

"We have nearly reached Goddess L'lyeh!"

The Templars shouted as they fought with their swords. The thing was, their movements were awkward and they frequently took hits—perhaps because they weren't used to combat or they didn't have the necessary teamwork or...

"Hmm...?" On a hunch, I pulled out a Memory of Stardust—an item that could tell me a person's job and level as long as it was 50 or under. *For their sakes, I hope there isn't anyone under level 50 in their party.* I began scanning each Templar with the Memory of Stardust. Using it on the first Templar revealed nothing. *Good, he's at least 51.* Even though they were our enemies, I couldn't help but feel relieved. The next Templar was 51 too, and the next. I scanned

through the group when I suddenly came to someone whose level and job I *could* see through the Memory of Stardust. "There *is* someone below 50... Let's see who the weakest link is."

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Rodney Hervas
Level: 46
Cleric
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You?! I almost shouted. Those Templars—presumably at a much higher level than the cardinal—had carried him through the whole dungeon.

"Hmm... Wide Heal!" Hervas finally deigned to use his Skill, but none of the Templars healed all the way—the cardinal's Skill level was way too low. "Defend me until my mana recovers!" he barked.

"Yes, Your Holiness!"

"More monsters incoming!"

"Keep them away from me at all costs! Strengthen!" Hervas shrieked, casting the Skill on himself.

"Huh? What is he buffing himself for? Those Templars need it a lot more than he does," I spat. *He calls that support?!* I almost stepped around the corner, ready to give Hervas a piece of mind, but Leroy and Mimoza held me back.

"What are you doing?!" they hissed.

"Didn't you see what Hervas did?! He's giving supporters a bad name!" I protested.

"What did you expect from him, Sharon?" Leroy asked. "We need to assess their strength and decide if we want to capture him now or later...remember?"

"Right." All thoughts had flown out of my mind when I'd realized that Hervas was about a hundred times scummier than I'd imagined. *That could have been a disaster.* "As far as I can tell from the Templars' fighting, they're not of a very high level. We should charge and detain Hervas now," I suggested.

"I concur," Leroy said.

"Oh, they're on the move," I noticed. They'd apparently wiped out

that wave of monsters. While the Templars looked bone-tired, Hervas waddled after them with a pep in his step and a puff in his chest. “Let’s do it,” I announced.

We charged.

Blitz sliced a path through the Specters that materialized in our path so that Tarte’s Potion Throw and Tithia’s Merciless Retribution could finish them off. None of us let Hervas out of our sight.

“Wha— Pope?!” Hervas blurted, immediately recognizing Tithia. He bit his lip—clearly, he hadn’t expected anyone to pursue him to the depths of the abbey.

“Protect His Holiness!”

“But there’s a Corrupt Nun ahead!”

The Templars began shouting.

“Then deal with it! What’s the matter with you?!” Hervas demanded.

Just like that, Hervas and his Templars were stuck between a monster and us, his pursuers. It was pretty pathetic that this was all it took to send him into a tizzy. A glance ahead showed me a set of heavy lavish doors—the boss room where L’lyeh awaited. Perhaps it was commendable that Hervas and his Templars had made it this far, given their apparent lack of skill. The Templars were visibly exhausted, so maybe they’d lost some of their comrades along the way. Somehow, I felt like Hervas would have no problem with good men laying down their lives to protect his sorry self—he might even expect it.

Just as the Templars managed to defeat the nun, Hervas bolted to the end of the hall and threw his back against the wall. “Stay back!” he barked.

Before I could decide on how to approach him, Tithia stepped up and stared the cardinal down. “Why have you done this?” Her voice was crisp and clear, lacking her usual gentle lilt. As her question reverberated through the abbey halls, some of the Templars shrank into themselves.

“Why...? What has Flaudia ever done for us?!” Hervas countered. “Goddess L’lyeh—she is the one who deserves to helm this kingdom, this world!” He shouted at his Templars, “Get rid of her!”

So Hervas wasn't up for talking this out. He could bark at his Templars all he wanted, though. They wouldn't be fulfilling that order.

"Aren't you ashamed to call yourself Templars?! Goddess's Flash!" Mimoza incapacitated the Templars with ease.

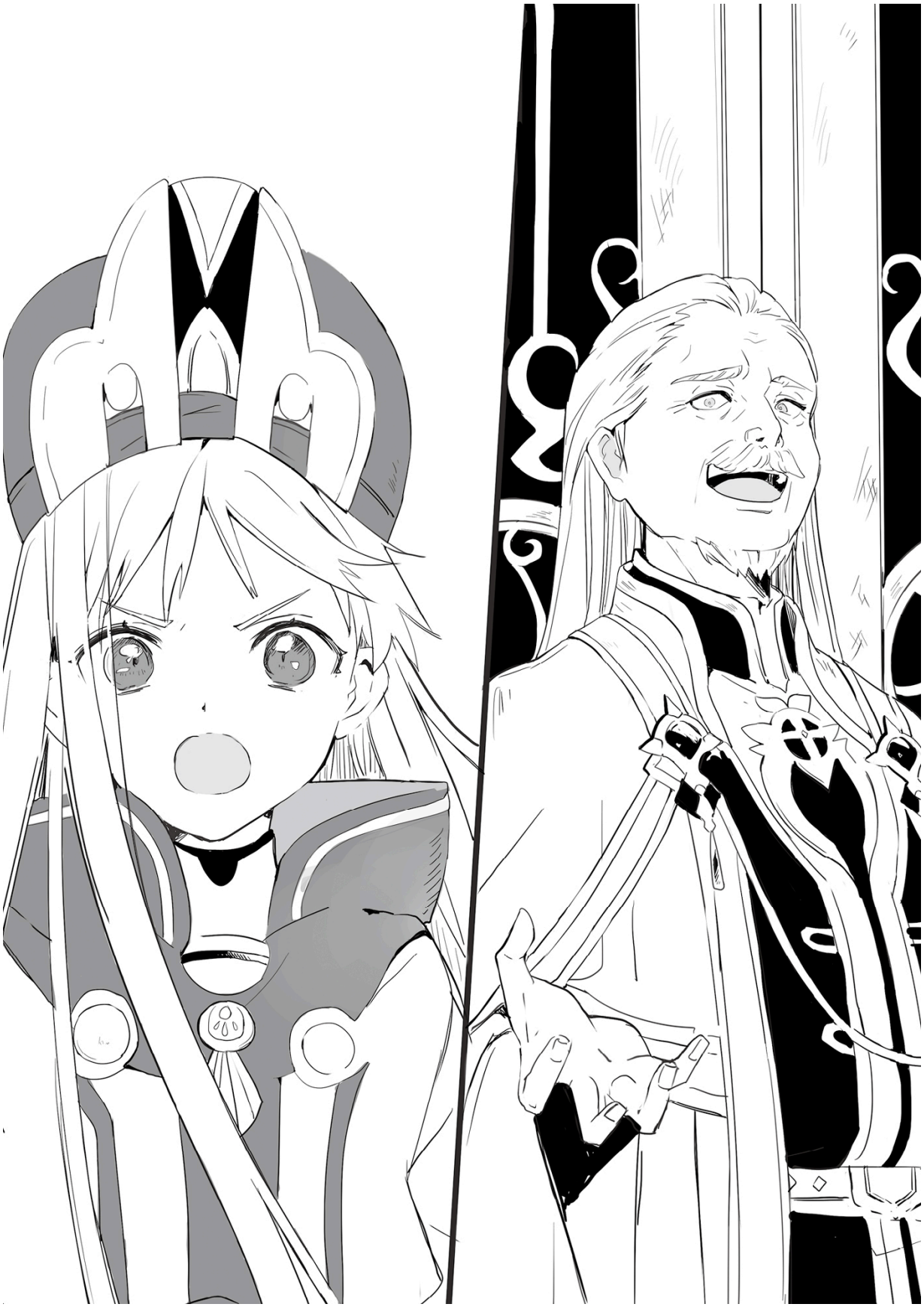
Hervas shuddered and stepped back—only to bump into the door.

Tithia's brows knotted. "There are not many voices that reach me now. Still, I have heard enough: how the Prayer Room has been closed off, how many Paladins and Templars are imprisoned, how the priests and priestesses at the cathedral have started charging outrageous sums to administer healing..." Those were some of the changes around the cathedral we'd gleaned from conversations I'd overheard in Zille or from updates Blitz had finally received from his contact who still remained undercover in the cathedral.

Hervas sighed dramatically, speaking as if he were lecturing a child. "You may not appreciate this truth, but running a kingdom costs money—lots of it. We've gone too easy on the citizens of this country! Why shouldn't they all serve Erenzi to repay their debts to it?!"

"Do you truly believe that?!" Tithia demanded.

"I am the Pope now! There will be no more charity—you were wasteful enough for the both of us! Erenzi has no place for dissenters against the true Pope!" Hervas exclaimed.



Hervas's ambition underscored his every word—he really believed that he was entitled to rule over the rest of the world.

Tithia's hands shook. "I will not let you follow through with this!"

Blitz took his cue and rushed Hervas with his sword—but a Templar blocked him.

No way! After all those levels we gained together, it shouldn't be that easy to stop Blitz.

Leroy squinted at the person. "You're no Templar."

We stared at Leroy wide-eyed.

Meanwhile, the man I'd thought was another Templar began to chuckle. "How did you figure it out?"

"I remember everyone who worked at the cathedral," Leroy said.

"Ridiculously good memory, huh? I didn't expect to be found out like this..." The man leaped, swinging his pitch-black sword at us.

Before the blade could reach us, Blitz used his Skill. "Divine Shield!"

"Bloodstained Sword!" The attacker's black blade clashed against the shield that had materialized in front of Blitz—knocking Blitz to the ground. One-on-one, the attacker had the upper hand.

I didn't think you had an ace like this up your sleeve, Hervas. I'd recognized that Skill—Hervas's last line of defense was a Dark Knight. I'd known a few players who'd played as one, so I remembered most of their Skills and their style of combat. Many of their attacks inflicted some sort of status condition, helping the Dark Knight win a battle of attrition.

Seeing Blitz hit the ground, Mimoza put herself between the Dark Knight and Tithia. Leroy stood close enough to Tithia to jump in at a moment's notice.

"Meowster! A monster's coming from behind us!" Tarte cried.

"It's okay," I reassured her, casting Goddess's Protection on myself and moving to face the newly spawned Demonic Monk. I cast Goddess's Smite on Tarte so she could use Potion Throw. Two more cycles of that and the monk was taken care of.

It's not the best place to chitchat, I thought. In fact, with Rodney standing with his back against the door, monsters would only spawn behind us, which was obviously a big disadvantage. *If we could just*

reposition ourselves— Just then, the Dark Knight swung his sword. A clash, and Blitz went flying. Now this was a real fight. I would have called for us to retreat and grind more levels if Hervas hadn't reached for the door to the boss room. *What is he doing?* At his current level, Hervas stood no chance of defeating L'lyeh. Even that Dark Knight couldn't handle L'lyeh on his own and the Templars didn't have enough damage output.

Before I could think this through, the Dark Knight charged at us, parrying past Mimoza and heading straight for Tithia.

"Not so fast! Goddess's Protection!" Leroy put himself between Tithia and the Dark Knight, but Leroy wasn't a frontline fighter—he couldn't hold his ground against an attack that had knocked Blitz off of his feet. Both Leroy and Tithia were knocked aside—

"What?" Chills ran down my spine. The impact had sent them through the door to the boss room that Hervas now held open. "Ti! Leroy!"

"Are you okay—?"

Just as Tarte and I called after them, the Dark Knight turned his attention on us. I'd managed to block his blade, but his kicks sent my apprentice and me into the room after Tithia and Leroy.

"Your Holiness!" Blitz and Mimoza shouted, rushing after us without hesitation.

"Hmph. What a chore," Hervas snorted. "You shall be my offering to Goddess L'lyeh."

"Hervas!" I screamed as the cardinal slammed the door shut.

Boss Fight: L’lyeh

With a whoosh, purple light illuminated the dark circular room. Stained glass lanterns lined the walls at regular intervals and a swing tangled in black-rose vines dangled in the center. Someone gulped audibly.

“M-Meowster...” Tarte’s tiny hand squeezed mine.

“I wish I could tell you that there’s nothing to worry about,” I managed to say, racking my brain for a solution. Taking on L’lyeh might have been an option...*after* we’d raised our levels some more. *But not now,* I thought. *We can’t take on the boss yet!*

“This is the end of the dungeon, isn’t it, Sharon?” Tithia asked.

I nodded. “L’lyeh is nothing like the monsters we’ve faced out there. Right now...there’s no way for us to beat this boss,” I told them. In horror, Tithia clasped her mouth with both hands. “But I’m not going down without a fight. We need to focus on staying alive so we can figure out a solution.”

“O-Okay...!” Tithia agreed, and no objections came from the rest of the group. That was our objective for now—stay alive.

A crack sounded overhead and someone fell from the ceiling...and landed on the swing, accompanied by a bat on each shoulder. She had ankle-length burgundy hair that complemented her elegant short black dress. Black lace covered her eyes, and a flowy translucent veil fluttered about her. L’lyeh sat on the swing, her wrists shackled together. Our party took a collective step back.

“What is this feeling...? I can’t stop shaking,” Blitz said, keeping his eyes on L’lyeh.

It felt like if we so much as looked away for a moment, she would end us. Taking slow deep breaths, I tried to recall how L’lyeh had fought in *Reas*. For the most part, she’d used her staff to attack with magic, and the mere swing of the staff had generated powerful gusts that would push you back. Once she’d fallen below half of her

HP, her pair of bat familiars would join the fight, making her even more difficult to deal with. All of her powerful attacks had tells. As long as we could spot those and dodge the most devastating blows, we could stay alive... I hoped. That would have to buy us enough time to figure out a path to victory.

"When L'lyeh swings her staff, get down as low as you can—there'll be a wind gust. The first big attack will come after the floor around her lights up purple. That, we'll shield with defensive Skills," I instructed.

"Got it!" the party replied as I buffed them all. Thankfully, we had a few moments until L'lyeh started attacking.

Blitz went to attack L'lyeh—who effortlessly blocked Blitz's sword with her staff.

She's too strong, isn't she? In order for us to take out L'lyeh at our current level, the least we'd have to do was scrounge up the optimal gear, on top of studying every aspect of the battle.

"Purrtion Throw!" Tarte threw a Molotov with all of her might and the bottle struck L'lyeh. At the moment of the explosion, L'lyeh swung her staff. Tarte must not have expected such a quick counterattack—the wind sent her tumbling across the floor.

"Goddess's Protection!"

"Heal!"

My Skill and Leroy's helped Tarte get back on her feet, albeit unsteadily. "Thank you..." Tarte's legs trembled.

Of course you're scared, I realized, but L'lyeh showed no mercy, of course. The floor lit up purple around her feet, indicating a powerful incoming attack.

"I can help! Goddess's Sanctuary!" Tithia shouted.

"Me too! Divine Shield!" Blitz joined in.

Almost as soon as their defenses went up, random bursts of lasers shot out of L'lyeh's staff, leaving new cracks in the pillars and the walls. None of us would have survived that unprotected.

"That was good!" I told the group. "Do the same thing when L'lyeh levitates and when she starts incantations. But when she stabs the ground with her staff...there'll be a shock wave first—jump to dodge it, then use a defensive Skill as soon as you land!"

"G-Got it!" the others answered.

L'lyeh had several attacks in her arsenal, but none of them were too difficult to dodge. This battle was difficult because her attacks were frequent and devastating—and, as demonstrated by Tarte's Potion Throw earlier, she also had high Defense. If a party couldn't produce enough damage, it would take a long time to take her down. Parties that had neither high levels nor powerful weapons—like us—barely stood a chance of bringing her down at all.

"L'lyeh stabbed the ground!" Mimoza called out.

"Shock wave incoming! Jump!" I ordered. A moment later, cracks of light spidered across the ground, shaking the whole floor beneath our feet. *No way we're surviving that either!* I'd never given them a second thought when I'd been playing a game, but these attacks seemed to promise death in reality. *Well, we wouldn't technically die,* I thought, *but it's going to break our spirits before our bodies.*

Then, the area around L'lyeh's feet glowed purple again, which we successfully blocked. The few blasts of wind that followed were mitigated by us ducking in time.

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Merciless Retribution!"

"Goddess's Hammerfall!"

"Divine Retribution!"

After a series of blocking and attacking, we were all picking up on the best times to attack...but we hadn't dealt any significant damage to L'lyeh. Watching Blitz drink a potion to recover his mana, I couldn't help but feel like we were fighting a losing battle.

"Strengthen... Mana Rations..." I panted. After the relentless barrage of L'lyeh's attacks, we were worn out both physically and mentally. This was really bad.

Tarte's eyes were starting to look glossy. "We're running out of Purrtions..."

Are we going to die? Dread blossomed in my chest for the first time. Until now, no matter what happened in my journey, I'd always kept an optimistic outlook. But now... "No. I'm never going to give up," I promised myself.

Just as I did so, Leroy got blown away by a gust, sending him to

the opposite side of the room from the entrance, where a statue of L'lyeh stood.

I never realized it in the game... This has to be L'lyeh's Prayer Room. Decrepit as the room was, I could still see some chairs scattered along the walls. "Heal More! Are you okay, Leroy!"

"Yes, I'll manage... I'll get right back to— What?" Leroy had grabbed L'lyeh's statue to pull himself up and the statue had glowed. Something in his possession must have triggered it.

"What's going on...?" Blitz muttered.

"Another attack!" Mimoza warned.

L'lyeh wasn't going to wait around for us while we tried to figure out the mystery of the glowing statue, but we managed to block the incoming attack. Leroy produced an item from his pocket.

I recognized it. "The Jewel of Lament?!" That was the item that Ghost of Erungoa had dropped—the same item that Leroy had posted a ridiculously high-paying quest for.

I never knew where to use that item...! Despite our desperate situation, I couldn't help but feel excited about this new discovery. While I was internally geeking out, the L'lyeh statue moved aside with a rumble, revealing a path out of the room.

"It's an escape route," Leroy said.

"Wait, so we can get away from L'lyeh?!" I weighed our options. I'd never even heard about an escape route out of this room, and there was no telling what waited at the end of that path, but we had no choice but to try—we weren't going to defeat L'lyeh today.

"Increase Resistance, Unyielding Strength, Increase Defense, Goddess's Protection, Regeneration, Mana Rations..." Leroy and I cast every buff we could on the party.

"Get ready to run!" I called.

Field of Ashes

Once we were inside the passageway that had opened up behind the L'lyeh statue, L'lyeh herself did not pursue us.

I never knew about this place... I wondered if other factors had come into play—like my Holy Maiden quest, the presence of the Pope, or maybe the new update—that had helped trigger the opening of this path. In contrast to the decrepit corridors we'd seen in the rest of the abbey, the hidden passage was pristine and well maintained, pillars with sconces at regular intervals providing plenty of light.

"Where does this lead to?" Leroy muttered as he scanned the walls and peered ahead.

I conjured a map in my mind. "This dungeon is on the border between Erenzi and Farblume. On the Erenzi side, we could end up in Dark Cave or Field of Ashes. On the Farblume side, we could end up in Desolate Lighthouse to the south or Fallen Petals to the east. Neither option in Farblume is dangerous, but Field of Ashes is home to some formidable monsters." *I can't help it if I* accidentally *go back to Farblume, right? It's not my fault this was our only option!* If we did end up in Farblume, though, I was going to sneakily register the Transportation Gate there.

"I see..." Leroy said. "Where do you think it leads to, Sharon?"

"Hmm... Maybe Field of Ashes. It wouldn't be the best outcome for us, but it does already connect to the abbey proper." That was just a guess, though. It was possible the passage led somewhere unexpected—or even somewhere distant, if there were some sort of Gate built into this passage.

"There's the exit!" Blitz pointed ahead.

We all looked toward the exit, where there wasn't so much as a door to block the hot air that swept past my face. *It's Field of Ashes!* Unfortunately for us, I'd guessed correctly. Secretly, I had been

excited by the possibility that we'd arrive at a place I hadn't even heard of before.

We came to the exit and stared at what awaited us. "This looks...worse than I thought," Leroy said, sweat trickling down his face.

Field of Ashes was a smoldering wasteland. Most vegetation had been burned away, and every patch of sand scorched underfoot. Just walking through this field would be a massive drain on our energy and hydration. While the others had never seen this place before, apparently they'd at least been aware of its existence.

Tarte's ears drooped low. "I can't believe how hot it is..."

"Can we really walk through that...?" Tithia asked nervously.

Blitz timidly put one foot over the threshold and touched the smoldering ground. "It's hot!"

"Would we make it through...?" Mimoza asked, looking toward the distance.

Leroy turned to me, for some reason. In his defense, so did Tarte. They watched me, waiting for me to provide a solution.

I mean, I do have a solution. "There are a few options," I said.

The entire party cheered.

"The first is to prepare gear that would let us walk on the ground without getting hurt, or produce the same effect with one-use items. Unfortunately, we don't have the right equipment or items for that." So option A was a bust. "The second is to cool or freeze the ground with Water or Ice magic. It gets trickier when you need to balance fighting monsters and keeping the ground cool, but it's doable... The problem is that none of us have the right Skills." Everyone became visibly dejected. If Cocoa had been with us, she could have used her Water magic somehow. "The third is to power through while Leroy and I use our support Skills on everyone."

"Do you mean Goddess's Protection? Does it protect against things other than attacks?" Leroy asked. It didn't.

"No. We use buffs like Strengthen to raise our physical strength, and up our resistance to fire with Increase Resistance... We push through and always heal before we get hurt," I explained.

"That's..." Leroy seemed at a loss for words at my brute-force

solution.

Given the cards we'd been dealt, that was our only option—to power through Field of Ashes and make it to the ordinary field on the other side. We'd face a lot of powerful monsters along the way, but we'd have to think of it as another round of leveling. All of that was still a hundred—a thousand—times better than facing L'lyeh right now.

"Let's get going," I said. "Strengthen. Increase Attack. Increase Defense. Increase Resistance. Unyielding Strength. Goddess's Protection. Regeneration. Mana Rations... There we go."

Leroy followed my lead. Once everyone was as protected as they could be, Leroy crouched down with his back to Tithia.

What is he doing? I wondered.

"Allow me to carry you on my back, Your Holiness. You may be hurt by the scorching ground," Leroy offered.

"No, thank you, Leroy. I'm going to walk too."

A piggyback! I realized. The heat would be harsher on Tithia and Tarte, especially when their heads were closer to the ground. "Should I give you a ride, Tarte?" I genuinely offered.

"I can walk by myself!" Tarte's rejection was immediate. Seeing how she was puffing her cheeks in indignation, she might have felt that I was talking down to her.

"Well... Just tell me if the ground gets too hot. The monsters here are really strong, so I need you in your best condition," I said.

"Yes, Meowster."

We began our trek across Field of Ashes with Blitz in the lead.

"Goddess's Sanctuary!" Tithia shouted, protecting us with her Skill as we encountered another wave of monsters.

"Purrtion Throw!" Tarte used her Skill to explode the Fire Lizards—crocodile-like monsters that breathed fire. They were pretty annoying to deal with because there were so many of them in Field of Ashes and each of them had high HP. Even though Tarte's Potion Throw wasn't as devastating against the Fire monsters of this field, it was still enough for us to eventually take the lizards out.

Blitz blew out a breath. "It's nice and cool within the bounds of

Her Holiness's Skill."

"Yes. We'd be struggling a lot more without it," Mimoza said. They were our frontline fighters and were spending the most energy out of everyone as they ran around fighting monsters.

There were several monsters that spawned in Field of Ashes other than the Fire Lizard: Lava Fairy, Blazing Ape, Emberpot Snake, and Scorchwind Dragon. As anyone could guess from their names, they were all oppressively hot monsters. Truth be told, I could have used a dip in a river or something right about now.

"There's a pot ahead!" Mimoza announced. "That's an Emberpot Snake... Be careful of its venom." One hand on her sword, Mimoza rushed toward the pot. There was no way to defeat the snake while it remained hidden in its pot—annoyingly, the snake could attack us from the safety of its pot just fine. As soon as Mimoza smashed the pot, we all swooped in to finish the job. Once it was out of its pot, the snake had low HP and was relatively easy to take down.

Sweat drenching me from head to toe, I reapplied another buff. "Regeneration! Do you think we've come halfway through the field by now? I can't wait to see green grass again—"

A bloodcurdling roar shook the air. I recognized it.

"What's going on?!" Blitz shouted as he stepped out in front of us, raising his sword.

Mimoza scanned our surroundings. "Something is breaking through the ground over there!"

"Goddess's Protection! Stay behind me, Your Holiness!" Leroy shouted as he and I reapplied buffs to everyone. Tarte and Tithia positioned themselves where they could attack at any time.

What appeared out of the ground...was Hydra, the boss of Field of Ashes.

Tarte's tail poofed all the way out as she hissed at the giant monster. "What in the world is that, Meowster?!"

Everyone else was staring at it wide-eyed.

"What *is* that thing...?" Blitz echoed Tarte's question.

"Hydra. It's the boss of the area," I answered and gazed up at it. It towered above us, each of its five heads stretching about five meters tall, with hard scales the color of roaring flames covering its

body. Neither physical nor magical attacks were all that effective against the Hydra's scales, but its scale-free underside was the perfect spot to strike—if we could flip it over somehow.

We fell short on defeating L'lyeh, but could we take out Hydra? It'd be close. Still, we could use the equipment that Hydra had a good chance of dropping.

"How are we getting away, Meowster?! That Hydra is going to attack us any minute!"

"We're not—we're taking it down!"

Tarte sprang into the air in shock but soon regained her composure. "Yes, Meowster." She gripped a Molotov tight.

How courageous of my little apprentice...!

Leroy looked at me with calculation in his eyes. "*Can* we take that thing down?!"

"I think we can!" I said.

"You *think*..." Leroy muttered with resignation, then glowered at the Hydra—if we weren't running from it, we had to strike first.

"In order to defeat Hydra, we need to flip it onto its back and strike its underbelly where there are no scales. Wind magic or the like would make it easier...but we're going to rush the monster together and flip it over," I explained. There was a special feature of this Hydra—it rolled over once it took a certain amount of damage. Some of the *Reas* players had claimed that you were a noob until you could flip over a Hydra alone. This wasn't a test, though, so this was going to be a team effort!

Blitz took the front of our formation as usual while Leroy and I cast our buffs again—especially Goddess's Smite. Tarte and Tithia were our main cannons, so we'd reapply Goddess's Smite on them as soon as the Hydra went belly-up.

"Here we go!" Blitz conjured a Divine Shield and charged Hydra. The boss spewed fire from its mouths, which didn't reach Blitz through his Divine Shield and the coating of Goddess's Protection on him.

I think we can do this, I judged. "Now!" I commanded the others and they charged, knocking the Hydra onto its back as it roared in pain. *Good!*

"Goddess's Smite!" Leroy and I shouted.

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Merciless Retribution!"

Tarte's and Tithia's attacks found their marks on Hydra, but it quickly rose to its feet and roared again.

"That wasn't enough?!" Mimoza watched Hydra with horror on her face.

Two hits were never going to be enough to take that boss down, though. "I think ten more rounds of that will do the job," I guessed.

"Let's do it, Meowster!" Tarte said with determination burning in her eyes, while Tithia's face clouded with dread.

"Once Hydra loses nine-tenths of its health, it'll start to make tornadoes by spinning its head. Be careful!" I told the party.

"Got it!"

"Yes, Meowster!"

Getting caught in one of those tornadoes would send you sky-high, which wasn't a fun experience. The fall damage had to be considerable too—I needed to be extra careful to keep up everyone's buffs.

Suddenly, Hydra roared and veered its heads toward Tithia—she'd gained some hate by attacking it just now.

"Your Holiness!" Leroy shouted.

Just as the five Hydra mouths ballooned out fire, Tithia used another Skill. "Pray for Peace!"

Shimmering light rained down from the sky and Hydra began wandering aimlessly as if it could no longer see Tithia.

So that's what happens when you reset hate! Cool. But now that Hydra's attention had been drawn away from Tithia, it shifted to Tarte.

"Meow?!"

Before Hydra could attack her, Blitz leaped into the air and slashed at the monster to draw its hate to himself. "Divine Retribution!" It worked as intended—now we'd gotten back into our usual formation of our frontline fighters holding off the enemy while Tarte and Tithia attacked from the rear.

"Don't stop now!" I urged them. "Goddess's Smite!"

“Goddess’s Smite! And—Goddess’s Hammerfall!” Leroy began the attack.

Blitz, Mimoza, Tarte, and Tithia followed suit. I wasted no time in reapplying rounds of Goddess’s Smite and began a stream of healing and buffing.

Hydra flopped on its back again, so we piled on our attacks—although it quickly got back up. As we dealt more damage to Hydra, it would start to stay down longer—we just had to keep at it. I chugged a potion to recover some mana. “Keep pushing a little longer!” I encouraged the party.

After we flipped Hydra over and struck it several more times, it roared far more viciously than it had before.

“That roar...!” I said.

“It hurts my head!” Tarte yowled.

The roar was also sending sharp waves of sand against us, but we couldn’t spare our attention to worry about that—tornadoes were incoming. The whirling wind around Hydra’s feet was a clear indication that it had lost ninety percent of its HP. That also raised its Attack, so we needed to be extra careful to maintain our own HP.

“Careful! Those tornadoes are coming! Make sure to heal up now while you can!” I commanded.

“Meowster, we’re all out of purrtions...!”

“What?!” My heart sank. “My inventory... It’s almost empty too!” It had slipped my mind. Back in the game, NPC-run shops had had infinite stock, so I’d always carried as many healing items as my Bag and Storage could hold. I’d played the game for so long without ever having to worry about my healing items running out. *I should have, though. After all the hunting we did in the abbey and fending off L’lyeh... Of course our healing items have run out! I really went and did it this time.*

Hydra had roared again while I’d been frozen. “Tornado!” I shouted, a moment too late. The whirlwind swept up Tarte, sending her up and up as she yowled. “Tarte!” I quickly cast Goddess’s Protection on her while Leroy cast Regeneration...but Tarte was still in for a world of hurt.

“I’ll catch her!”

"Blitz!"

"I'll set up a barrier—Goddess's Sanctuary!" Tithia shouted.

As we scrambled to help Tarte in every way we could, her scream was interrupted by a surprised "Meow?!" Then, a shadow appeared on the ground. It grew and grew and—

"A dragon...?" Leroy muttered, gazing up at the sky to identify the source of the shadow.

Tithia was watching the sky too, her mouth agape. "It's huge..."

"Wait, that's a Dragonrider's dragon!" I cried.

"How fortunate that they flew by and helped Tarte," Tithia said with relief.

Leroy's expression, though, was still clouded with concern. "Most Dragonriders serve Farblume, an enemy to Erenzi."

"Oh...!" I blurted out. It was even possible that the Dragonrider was working with Hervas. Even though they'd saved Tarte mid-fall, there was no telling whether they were friend or foe. *What should we do?*

While tense nervousness crackled among the members of our party, Hydra's roar rumbled through us. I'd almost forgotten about Hydra. "Ti! Goddess's Smite!"

"I got this! Merciless Retribution!"

Leroy followed my lead. "Mimoza! Goddess's Smite!"

"On it! Divine Retribution!"

Just as Leroy and I finished using our Skills, the Dragonrider shouted, "Dragon Lance!" The powerful attack landed on Hydra, turning it into a burst of light and leaving items behind. It was awesome that the Hydra had been defeated—and that I'd gained another level—but I couldn't catch my breath until we knew who the Dragonrider was.

Leroy and I glowered at the dragon as it swooped lower...until Kent and Cocoa leaped off of the winged beast, Kent carrying Tarte in his arms.

"What?" everyone on the ground blurted in surprise. Kent and Cocoa might have been the last people I'd expected to see at this moment. They waved their hands at the dragon, and it flew off. *What's going on...?*

“Hey, everyone. I’m glad we made it back!” Kent said.

“Sorry we took so long!” Cocoa chimed in.

“Thank you for saving my fur,” Tarte said.

Whoever the Dragonrider who’d flown off was, they were no enemy—much to my relief. I ran over to Kent and Cocoa and wrapped my arms around them. “Welcome back, you two! And I’m so glad you’re okay, Tarte.”

“Thanks! Why is this place so hot?!” Kent whined.

“Here... Water Ball!” Cocoa blasted a ball of water at the ground. With a sizzle, the air around us immediately cooled. It wouldn’t be as effective as Ice magic, but her Water magic would go a long way toward mitigating the heat.

“There’s a lot we need to tell you... But let’s get out of Field of Ashes first!” I said.

“Okay!” Cocoa answered and led the way, forging a cooling path until the grass beneath our feet turned from ashen to green.

Epilogue

"I didn't expect to see a Hydra..." I looked down from where I flew, high above the ground. I watched as the Hydra disappeared into particles of light. "Wow... I thought that party was too young to take down a Hydra." I was amazed, really. I'd chipped in at the end, but they'd clearly done most of the work already—otherwise, it wouldn't have gone down. "Kent and Cocoa made it down okay, so...guess I'll be going."

I rode Mach, my loyal dragon, away from Field of Ashes toward the Holy Capital of Zille. I didn't know if I'd find who I was looking for, but the large city was a great place to start looking for clues. "Hopefully, Lottie will be there..." I grumbled and told Mach to fly fast.

After landing Mach outside of Zille, I threw on an overcoat and approached the city on foot—flying into a city on a dragon would only cause a ruckus, with all those guards flooding out to greet me. Right now, I didn't want attention. As a Farblume Dragonrider, I wouldn't have come to Erenzi without a good reason—but I had two of them. One was to find my sister, Lottie. The last time I'd seen her was before the crown prince had decided that exiling my little sister without so much as consulting the king was a good idea. That led me to the second reason—to punch the crown prince in the face. I'd received intel that he was in Erenzi too.

"Mother did say to let Lottie be if that's what she wants... How could poor frail Lottie go on adventures?" She could be hurt and crying as I spoke. "She could have invented what she wrote in that letter to ease our concerns. Lottie is a good kind girl. That's why I have to protect her, as her big brother...!" Every time I closed my eyes, I could hear Lottie calling me. *Rudy,* she'd call out. If I hadn't been away from the capital on a mission at the time, I could have been there for her when she was exiled...

"Well, what I have to do now is gather some more information." I'd asked Kent and Cocoa, but neither of them had known an adventurer by the name of Charlotte. I'd first met the pair when Kent was taking his test to gain his advanced job. He had good manners for his age and took in my advice and training like a sponge. It seemed like he had some guts too—I'd like to see him again someday. They'd also said that they'd worked in Zille and Snowdia, so if there were no more leads in Zille, I might have been better off going to a different town entirely. The next best option would be Port Town of Tordente. *How adorable would Lottie be, walking down the beach...?*

"I better start with the Adventurer's Guild," I decided. That was where information gathered and it was entirely possible that Kent and Cocoa just hadn't run into Lottie.

"What's going on with this city anyway?" I muttered, taking in the energy of the city as I walked its streets. It was hard to explain, but it seemed like the residents were dispirited somehow...yet there was no problem with their supply chain or economy, based on what I'd seen in the shops.

After a rather foreboding walk, I made it to the Guild, located between Zille's eastern gates and its central plaza. The Guild building itself was of a decent size, given its urban location.

"Hello!" an elf with hair the color of spring green greeted me from her counter. This seemed like a fun Guild branch to be a part of.

"I'm in need of some information..." I started.

"How can I help you?" the receptionist asked.

"I'm looking for someone. Does anyone named Charlotte use this branch?"

"Charlotte..." the receptionist repeated. "Just a moment."

She retreated, apparently going to consult the Guild records or other employees in the back. If she'd met Lottie, my sister hadn't made an impression. That wasn't surprising, given how frail Lottie was. How could she have been expected to leave an impression like that when she was so weak? "You'd have to be really strong to have the Guild workers know you by name."

Soon, the receptionist returned to the counter with a pinched

brow—Lottie must have never used this branch. “Thank you for your patience. There is no record of a Charlotte in our books. Are you sure she’s an adventurer?”

“She wrote so in her letter, but she might have been trying to keep us from worrying. She’s my little sister,” I explained.

“Your sister... And when there are other jobs that— I’m sorry I couldn’t help.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said. It wasn’t the Guild’s fault and it certainly wasn’t her fault. I started to plan to hit up the port town after exploring Zille for a bit when I remembered my other reason for being here. The Guild would be familiar with this one, at least. “I have another question. I heard the crown prince of Farblume is in town. What have you heard about that?”

The receptionist’s shoulders tensed, so she definitely knew something. Whether she’d tell me or not... “Uh, we have received rumors of that sort. But the Adventurer’s Guild is a neutral organization, so we can’t aid one country or another,” she said apologetically.

“I understand that, so I’m not going to put you in an awkward position. Don’t worry.”

“Thank you,” said the receptionist, giving a gentle smile. “Is there anything else I can help you with?”

“Not really— Well, now that you mention it...” Even if it was more difficult to gain intel on people from the Guild, she shouldn’t have any reservations about giving me information about the city. I explained to the receptionist how dispirited the city seemed.

“Flaudia Cathedral stands in the central plaza. Recently, they began charging visitors to offer prayers and blocking off the room with Flaudia’s statue. People here must be taken aback by the sudden changes in policy,” she explained.

I was beginning to feel outraged. “The cathedral? Aren’t there also priests and priestesses there who heal those who come to see them?”

“Yes. The fee for healing has gone through the roof as well. It’s not so easy to apply for healing nowadays.”

How corrupt is Erenzi’s leader? I wondered. *I thought the Pope*

valued peace above all... I guess that was just a front.

"Please be careful if you plan to visit the cathedral," the receptionist continued. "They require a donation just to step inside."

"Thanks for the advice," I said and left the Guild.

Without any leads on Lottie's whereabouts, I decided to visit Flaudia Cathedral, just in case she'd come to the cathedral for a little sightseeing. She wasn't in the central plaza, so I decided to check inside.

I spent most of my time with the Order of Knights, so I felt out of my element in the solemn cathedral. Any place where I had to stay quiet for long wasn't for me. As I walked through the halls, I heard some whispering from around the corner. Unfortunately for them, I had excellent hearing.

"They still haven't been found?" a voice asked.

I peeked around the corner to see a priest and a cathedral guard.

"Tithia has not been found," the guard answered, "nor has Leroy's body, so he's most likely still alive. Several Paladins are missing too."

"If they're not found by the time His Holiness returns from the abbey, we'll face his wrath again," said the priest.

"I know..." the guard answered.

This conversation sounded pretty sinister for a chitchat between servants of Flaudia—I decided to eavesdrop a little longer.

"A proper announcement of Pope Hervas's ascension is overdue, but there are too many uncertainties right now."

"Pope Tithia is very compassionate. She may turn herself in if we offer to free the imprisoned Paladins in exchange."

"Watch it, idiot! She's not the Pope anymore. If someone hears you, you'll lose your head for it!"

The guard clamped a hand over his mouth and hurried off.

"All right, there's some sort of mutiny going on," I muttered. Tithia was the original Pope and someone named Hervas had overthrown her and currently held control of the church. It wasn't a good idea for me to linger in Erenzi, but I was concerned that Lottie would get wrapped up in this kind of unrest...

As her big brother, I'd have to rescue and protect her. I left the cathedral to gather more information.

Side Story: We're Finally Getting Our Advanced Jobs! (Kent)

Cocoa and I set out to obtain our advanced jobs. First, we used the Transportation Gate to return to our hometown—Farming Village—where we rented horses for the next leg of the journey. If we rode all day, we'd reach the Royal Capital Blume in Farblume by night.

"Are you sure you didn't want to stop by your home?" Cocoa asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure. We can't waste any time getting our advanced jobs and meeting back up with Sharon." I'd mostly been concerned that my mom wouldn't have let us leave for a while if I'd seen her. She could really talk your ear off sometimes.

Cocoa cracked a little smile. "I think you're right."

After riding for some time, we came to Traveler's Inn.

"Once we pass here, we're in Farblume, right?" I asked.

"Right. We've never been outside of Erenzi before..." Cocoa pointed out.

Traveler's Inn stood in a sweeping field of grass and wildflowers. The main inn was pretty sizable and there was also a shack that rented out camping gear as well as several food stalls, all catering to traveling adventurers. A few groups of adventurers were packing up their tents when we arrived. After a short break, we'd be on our way too and would hopefully reach Blume without having to camp anywhere.

Cocoa sniffed the air. "That smells good."

"I know. I've been thinking the same thing." The smell of meat coming from the food stalls was aggressively appetizing. What adventurer could resist that smell? "All right! Let's fill up before we head on to Blume!"

"Yay! Let's eat!"

Cocoa and I were ready to pack away some meat, especially since our pockets were lined from hunting with Sharon for a while. There were a lot of options to choose from, but we managed to try all of them, splitting items here and there.

After all of that, I chugged a glass of fruit water and groaned. "I ate too much."

"Kent..." Cocoa said, not really reprimanding me.

"It all looked so good." *And it* was *good.*

"We'll rest for a little longer before getting back on the road," Cocoa suggested.

"Agreed."

We ended up taking a half-hour nap, then did some training exercises before riding off again.

"Crap. We're not nearly as far along as we planned," I said.

"We might not make it to Blume until late at night," Cocoa said. "What do you think? Should we camp out here?"

We were just about halfway between Traveler's Inn and Blume, if not a little closer to Blume. After eating too much and napping too long, we were falling behind schedule. It didn't help that we'd never rushed a long-distance trek like this before and weren't used to the pacing. Like Cocoa had said, we wouldn't reach Blume until late that night. *What would Sharon do?* I found myself thinking. Would she have found a safe spot to camp out or would she have deemed that too risky and powered through to the city? As I was contemplating my options, a shadow marked the ground and the flapping of wings reached my ears.

"Kent, look! A dragon!" Cocoa shouted, pointing to the sky.

"What?!" I followed her finger and saw a dragon bigger than a Wyvern—my knees wobbled. "Wh-What's going on?! There's no way a dragon would pop up in a field by the highway!" There'd been no mention of dragons in any of the research I'd done about monsters along our route.

Do we run? Can we outrun a dragon?! I didn't know, but there was one thing I did know. *I gotta protect Cocoa, no matter what...!*

Just as I reached for my sword, the dragon spoke. "It's not safe for a couple of kids to be out this late. You can't really make it to the

next city or back to the inn before nightfall." The winged beast soon landed on the ground, showing that a person rode on its back—the one who'd actually spoken.

It didn't take me long to make a guess about him. "Are you...a Dragonrider?"

"Yeah. My name is Rudith Cocoriara. You're lucky I spotted you on my way back to Blume." Rudith's eyes were the same color as Sharon's. He wore his rose-red hair in a ponytail. He had a good-looking face and a toned body and was probably in his early twenties. A black knight's uniform with ruby red accents completed his look. The way he kept the uniform unbuttoned and loose made him look even cooler.

"I'm Kent. I'm a Swordsman."

"I'm Cocoa. My job is Sorcerer."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were coming down to check on us," I said.

Rudith nodded. "You were going to have to camp out somewhere. You're headed to Blume, aren't you, judging by the way you were going? I'll give you a ride."

Cocoa and I were speechless. I'd never thought I'd get an offer like that from a Dragonrider—my dream awakened job!

Could we really take him up on it...? I glanced at Cocoa, whose eyes were wide with surprise and trepidation—just like mine were, I'd have bet. The Cocoriaras were a famous noble family and I hesitated to waste Rudith's time... *I should probably address him as Lord Rudith, even in my mind.*

Lord Rudith ruffled my hair. "You're way too young to worry about being polite. Come on, if you still want to get there while we have light."

Cocoa and I stared at each other, weighing our decision.

"Hurry up!" Rudith urged and we instinctively said yes before we could second-guess it.

Lord Rudith, Cocoa, and I were mounted on the back of the dragon in that order. Cocoa was too nervous to talk, so Lord Rudith and I kept up the conversation for most of the flight.

"So you're headed to Blume to get your advanced job," he repeated.

"Y-Yes!" I said, aware that my heart was beating hard too. From up there, the woods down below looked minuscule... It wasn't every day you got to see a forest from above.

"If you're ready to take the test, I'll take you there. The Order of Knights is hosting it," Lord Rudith offered.

"Are you sure?! Because that would be great!" I said.

"No problem. You wanna spar too?" Lord Rudith grinned.

"Yes, please!" I said without missing a beat.

Lord Rudith looked shocked for a moment before laughing. "You're on!" He seemed like a very friendly person, despite his rank. "Which one are you going for?"

"Shield Knight. Cocoa has powerful attacks, so I want to stand on the front line and protect my friends from monsters," I said.

"Sounds like you've thought it through. If you're in a permanent party, it's important to think about how you fit into it. I'm impressed," Lord Rudith said. "But once you choose your path, there's no changing it. You should weigh your options before you go in, but you gotta trust your gut at the end of the day—so you don't regret it."

This would be the second and last time I had the option to change my job, by choosing which branch to take in my career path. Outside of these branches, there was no changing jobs beyond simply ranking up. As a Swordsman, Knight and Shield Knight were the two advanced jobs available to me. Knight would eventually lead to the awakened Dragonrider job and Shield Knight to the awakened Heavy Knight job. Both paths would require blood, sweat, and tears if I wanted to make it that far.

"I will!" I promised, tightening my hand into a fist.

After flying for not too much longer, we made it to Blume before the sun set. It was really impressive how fast a dragon could fly.

Blume was the city of flowers—flower beds and planters lined every street, and we passed several estates with picturesque gardens. *I've never seen gardens so vibrant and well maintained.* Back home, we had little more than a few vegetables sprouting here

and there. I wondered if anyone but a noble would fill an entire garden with roses and other inedible flowers.

As Cocoa and I were enjoying a bird's-eye view of the capital, I realized that Lord Rudith was flying straight for the castle. Then, it dawned on me. Lord Rudith, a noble who worked for the Order of Knights, *worked* at the castle! *I should have asked to get off just outside the city!*

"I wish I could have taken you straight to the Order, but I have an errand to run at the castle," Lord Rudith said.

"O-Okay..." I said stiffly.

Lord Rudith landed in a clearing behind the castle. Immediately, a group of knights ran over to greet him. "Welcome back, Lord Rudith!"

"Thanks," he answered.

He's a super important person...! Of course he was. He'd made it to Dragonrider at such a young age. I'd just been too naive to connect the dots. Beside me, Cocoa somehow maintained her smile...even if it looked strained.

"Who are your companions, Lord Rudith?" one of the knights asked.

"Kent, who's here to become a Shield Knight, and his party mate Cocoa. I ran into them and gave them a ride," Lord Rudith said. "The night watch is training now, aren't they? You wanna join them, Kent?"

"Wh-What? Are you sure I could...?" I stammered, stunned by his offer.

"Of course," he answered.

"That could be a great way to prep for your new job!" another of the knights chimed in, making me feel welcome.

"Thank you. I'd love that!" I said.

"Let me show you the way," the same knight said, leading us away. Lord Rudith mentioned his errand again and headed off in a different direction.

As we followed the knight down the castle corridor, I whispered to Cocoa, "I'm sorry we didn't talk this over..."

"It's okay. We didn't really have a chance. Besides, I know you

couldn’t turn down an offer like that. Have those knights teach you a thing or two,” Cocoa said. She knew me too well. And she wasn’t as nervous anymore, taking in her surroundings as she walked.

“Y-You got it...!”

After walking down the hall for a few minutes, we came to the castle’s training ground.

As soon as our guide opened its doors, I was overwhelmed by the sound of wooden swords slicing through the air. *Wow...!* The training ground was a massive facility, measuring about two hundred meters across. A row of dummies lined one side, and what looked like a storage room occupied the back. Throughout the room, so many knights were hard at work.

In the very back, I saw someone wielding a gigantic shield—unmovable as a mountain, fending off attack after attack like it was nothing. It didn’t take long for me to realize that he was a Heavy Knight—my ultimate goal. “That’s incredible. I can’t block attacks like that...” I breathed. That was a frontline fighter anyone would feel safe trusting their life with. *I’m gonna be just like him one day,* I promised myself. *So everyone can trust me to hold the front line!*

“Kent, wasn’t it? My name is Velklet Deke. I’m a Knight, working under Lord Rudith’s command.”

“Yes! I’m a Swordsman. I came to Blume for an advanced job,” I said.

Sir Velklet had another knight fetch him two wooden swords and handed one to me. “Why don’t we try a sparring match?” he asked. I definitely hadn’t been expecting hands-on training like this. While I stood there stunned by the offer, he went on to explain the ground rules. “The only weapons we can use are these wooden swords. I see you have a sword of your own, which works out. Swords only for the first five minutes, then let’s say you can start using your Skills after that. It wouldn’t be too fair if I could use my Skills too.” He raised his wooden sword.

“Got it,” I said, raising my own weapon. I took a deep breath and started forward to see Sir Velklet just staring back at me—waiting for my first move.

Then all I can do is hit as hard as I can! I kicked off the floor,

building speed. I'd ground all those levels with Sharon and our party, working my way from Orcs to Wyverns. More than that, I could feel how much stronger my body had become.

"You're fast...!" Sir Velklet said in surprise, even though he parried my first attack without breaking a sweat. I'd been happy with my explosive first move, but a Knight was on another level. Sir Velklet blocked my next three swings just as effortlessly. "You use a sword even better than I thought. You've trained well."

"Thank you!" I gritted out, unable to swallow the compliment when none of my attacks were landing. *Just one hit...!* I just kept swinging my sword.

Too soon, I was out of breath. Unlike when I fought against monsters, there was so much to think about when fighting a human...and I didn't have any support from Sharon or Leroy. *I didn't know fighting solo would be so tough after getting used to buffs!*

After trading parries for a while, a knight on the sideline called out, "Five minutes!" Now, I could start using Skills.

"Bring it on, Kent!" Sir Velklet urged.

"All right! Whirling Tornado!"

"Cool Skill!" Sir Velklet jumped back three times, out of the way of my tornado, even though it was supposed to be a wide-range attack.

Dammit. How big is the wall between Swordsman and Knight? I didn't have too many offensive Skills. Most of my Skills were geared toward drawing hate and buffing my Defense so I could tank attacks on the front line...but I had some tricks up my sleeve.

I returned my focus to my sword, waiting for Sir Velklet to make a move.

"What's the matter? All out of Skills?!" he taunted, swinging his sword at me faster than before. If I were being honest, I was barely holding him off—facing an intelligent opponent was so much trickier.

But there has to be an opening...!

"Well, it's all up to luck what Skills you get... Your swordsmanship is good enough to— Whoa!"

"Got Your Nose!" I shouted, using my Skill against Sir Velklet as he started to get chatty, thinking I had no Skills left in my arsenal. Got Your Nose was a Skill that stunned the opponent for just a

moment. It was effective against monsters, but Sharon had taught me that it was also useful against humans. Not wasting this opportunity, I used my next Skill. "This one's my best move! Fatal Blow!"

"Whoa!" Sir Velklet hit the ground after my attack.

Just as he did, the Knight watching called, "That's a match!"

"Yes!" I was panting now, trying to steady my breath. Even though I'd used my Skills, I was genuinely proud that I'd landed a hit on a Knight.

"That was impressive!" someone called, followed by applause that echoed across the training grounds. I looked toward the entrance to see Lord Rudith. "I didn't think you'd best Velklet. Well, Kent? You wanna spar with me next?"

"Yes, please!"

"That's the spirit. It's good to see kids with guts," said Lord Rudith.

Despite his offer earlier, my heart still started pounding—I was really going to test my skills against a Dragonrider. Something about meeting a Dragonrider for the first time and sparring against him made my heart beat even faster.

"I'll ref," Sir Velklet offered. "Wooden swords for both parties, and we allowed Kent to use his Skills after the five-minute mark."

"No, use your Skills from the get-go. Don't hold back," Lord Rudith said.

"Okay...!"

Lord Rudith held his sword loosely, grinning at me as if to say, *Anytime you're ready.* I curbed my urge to charge at him right away and weighed my options.

There's no opening! I realized. Sir Velklet was formidable, but just standing off against Lord Rudith showed me the Dragonrider was on another level altogether. One thoughtless swing of my sword and the match would be over. With sweaty palms, I tightened my grip.

"What's the matter?" Lord Rudith taunted.

"Nothing!" I made my move. *He just watched me use Got Your Nose, so I don't think that's gonna work. Then...* "Whirling Tornado!"

"You don't think I can block— What?!" Lord Rudith blurted out.

I'd aimed the tornado not at him directly but at the space between us. Jumping into the air as I used the Skill, I let the wind carry me up and over Lord Rudith, landing behind him. *This is it!* "Fatal Blow!" I was sure my attack would land—until the clack of wood on wood told me otherwise. Without turning, Lord Rudith had reached behind with his arm to block my attack. He was really strong!

"You've got potential!" Lord Rudith turned and swung his sword at me. Even though I blocked it, the impact sent me flying.

"Ow..." I grumbled. Since most of my Skills leaned toward defense, I'd expected to stand more of a chance... Lord Rudith was too strong.

"That's the match!" Sir Velklet announced with a clap.

Cocoa ran right to me. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just a few scrapes."

"Oh, good. That was incredible, Kent. Back when we left the village, did you ever imagine you'd spar against someone with an awakened job?" Cocoa asked.

"Yeah... You're right," I said slowly as Cocoa's words sank in. "I've only just started adventuring. I hate losing, but that also means I can be stronger."

"We'll do it together!" Cocoa and I shared a smile.

"You two make a good party," Lord Rudith said, Sir Velklet nodding beside him. "Why don't you stay and watch the training? You should take something away from it."

"Yes! Thank you!" I'd been planning to beg Lord Rudith for the chance anyway.

"I'd better make sure they weren't slacking off while I was out," he said. "Listen up, everyone! Come fight me, one at a time! Let's see what you can do."

He's going to fight all *of them?!* I couldn't believe it. There were easily two dozen knights in the training grounds. There was no way he could spar with all of them, back-to-back.

That's what I'd thought anyway.

"You guys got weaker while I was away," Lord Rudith said, standing before the knights. Most of them had been sunk after one

hit from Lord Rudith and even the best of them had only managed to trade a few parries before going down.

"You've gotten stronger!" many of them protested.

I let out a breath. "How cool is the Dragonrider?"

"Very cool," Cocoa agreed.

Both of our gazes were glued to Lord Rudith.

***

After observing the night watch's training session, Cocoa and I went to an inn with an orange roof that the Order of Knights had recommended. Our rooms were each furnished with simple well-made pieces: a round desk, a chair, a wardrobe, and a bed. Flowers decorated the room and the halls, giving the inn a cozy feel.

Cocoa and I had a quick dinner in the inn's dining room and wasted no time heading back to our own rooms. After the day we'd had, I was exhausted.

Even as I lay in bed, though, my mind raced, keeping me awake. The sight of Lord Rudith sparring kept playing in my mind. "I've never felt like this before," I muttered. I'd been nervous plenty of times since becoming an adventurer. I'd always felt a thrill when I met new people and fought new enemies and explored new areas. But right now, I felt a rush like never before. The more I thought about it, the more stuck I felt.

Then, someone knocked on the door. "Are you up, Kent? It's Cocoa."

"Uh— Yeah." I opened the door, remembering how Cocoa had looked like she could barely stay awake after dinner. Now, she looked somewhat concerned. "What's up?"

"I came to help you ease your mind," she said.

"What?" I blinked several times, trying to figure out what she meant. "By giving me a relaxing back rub?"

"As if."

"Right..." The certainty in Cocoa's rejection was what hurt the most.

"You can't sleep," Cocoa said, more of a statement than a

question. My heart skipped a beat. It was a little embarrassing to admit the thoughts that were keeping me up, but there was no way I could keep them hidden from Cocoa. "I knew it." She chuckled and sat in the chair. I followed her lead and sat at the edge of my bed. "You want to be a Dragonrider."

"What?" My heart pumped faster. "No, I wanna be a...Heavy Knight." I'd even told the rest of our party that I'd be a Shield Knight when I saw them again. It'd be totally uncool to change my mind now—but I couldn't deny that I thought Lord Rudith was supercool. Seeing and riding his dragon had definitely been a shock, but I'd quickly begun imagining what it would be like to have my own dragon as a partner, soaring through the sky together. Besides, no one else in the training grounds could land a hit on Lord Rudith either—not even the Heavy Knight.

My mind was whirling and I felt completely lost. I glanced up at Cocoa, who held my stare and nodded. "You really think I can just...flip-flop like that?"

"How you fit into our party is important, but it's much more important to follow your heart!"

"Cocoa..." Tears threatened to spill over the corners of my eyes. I took a deep breath and slapped myself on my cheeks. "I'm gonna be a Dragonrider!" I declared.

"That's more like you! Even if someone doesn't like your choice, I'll support you, Kent. Always."

"Thanks," I said. Cocoa, who'd been my friend all my life, had helped me make this important leap.

"I'm going back to my room," Cocoa said.

"Right. I know you're tired too. Thanks for helping me make up my mind." She was too good of an ally for me.

"I'm glad I confirmed how you feel. Good night," she said.

"Good night." I saw Cocoa off to her room next door and then closed my own door. After a matter of seconds, I collapsed into my bed and slept like a log.

***

The next day, Cocoa and I stocked up on items at the shop and ordered a few hot lunches at the inn's dining room so we could keep them fresh in our Bags... I didn't think I could go back to living without an Adventure Bracelet and having a hot meal any time I wanted. After that, I set out to start my advanced job quest.

Like Sharon had advised, we were walking up the main street, headed to the Order of Knights's guardhouse in the castle. Even though I was no longer pursuing the Shield Knight path, I was hoping that the Knight quest could be started from the guardhouse too. If not, I'd have to use the Transportation Gates and ask Sharon where to go.

"I hope you can switch to Knight there too," Cocoa said.

"At the Order of Knights... I'm getting nervous," I admitted.

"We were at the castle yesterday."

"That was a different story." And if I were being honest, I doubted I'd ever get used to setting foot inside a castle no matter how many times I did it. Somehow, I imagined that Sharon would have no problem keeping her composure in a castle like that. "Oh. There it is."

"Wow. You can really see how big it is in person," Cocoa said.

"It's huge." I first spotted the guardhouse by its flag—a sword and shield adorned with flowers, modeled after the abundance of flowers in this kingdom. It had never really clicked until I'd made it here that there were more natural and potted flowers here than anywhere in Erenzi. The building was made of sturdy stonework, and two guard knights stood out front, their meticulous uniforms putting my own gear to shame. *As soon as I'm a Knight, I'm gonna go shopping,* I vowed.

"Excuse me," I called to one of the guards, feeling my heart in my throat. "I'm looking to switch jobs from Swordsman to Knight."

"Oh, I see... You're pretty young for that. Impressive," the knight said.

"Thank you!"

"This way." The knight showed me through the door and to another knight who looked busy with paperwork. I was relieved—apparently, I was in the right place. "One future Knight. Can I leave

him with you?”

“Oh, thanks,” the other knight answered.

As soon as he did, a quest window popped up right in front of my face. I deserved full praise for not yelling...or having a heart attack on the spot.

Switch to Advanced Job: Knight

You have trained well.

Prove your strength by hunting monsters.

Hunt 30 Beetlers in Bug Park.

A dungeon?!

“There’s an infestation of Beetlers going on. You need to go hunt them down to become a Knight,” the man explained.

“Got it!” I answered with more confidence than I felt, my heart beating like crazy. I’d never been to a dungeon before. They might have been lucrative, but I’d heard so many stories of adventurers who’d ventured into dungeons with powerful enemies and never made it out.

“Don’t be too nervous. You won’t face the really strong monsters unless you go deep into the dungeon,” the knight said.

“O-Okay...!”

“Do you know how to get there?” The knight smiled. “Plenty of rookies go there too.”

That helped me relax a bit. “No, I’ve never been. Could I ask you for directions?”

“No problem. Leave through the east gate and head north up the highway. It’ll take you a while on foot—it’s about a half-hour ride on horseback.”

“Thank you!”

The knight added that I could read the files on the shelf next to him to get more information on the monsters in that dungeon. Any information on the place would be more than I had now. I let out another breath of relief.

Cocoa, who’d kept a step behind me, said, “I’m a bit nervous

going into a dungeon."

"Yeah... But I think it's a good opportunity to challenge ourselves. Let's do this!"

"Okay!"

I thanked both of the knights who'd helped me and read up on Beetlers before leaving the guardhouse. We rented a horse in the city and rode up the highway. Before we knew it, we were at Bug Park.

"The dungeon is right up there..." Cocoa said, sounding as nervous as I felt. My palms were starting to sweat.

The entrance to Bug Park was a natural tunnel shaped by several thin trees twined together and speckled with pretty pink flowers. If it weren't for the sign next to it that read "Bug Park Entrance," I might not have believed this unassuming tunnel led to a dungeon.

"All right... Let's do this," I said.

"Yeah!" Cocoa chimed in.

As soon as we stepped through the entrance, we found ourselves standing in a deep forest thick with trees and wild underbrush of weeds and flowers.

"What is this...? It's like we're in another world!" I said.

"You're right... Is this what all dungeons will be like?"

Canopies of huge leaves covered more than half of the sky above, leaving room only for the sun's rays to shine through and light the ground where beetle-like monsters walked.

"Whoa, they're huge!" I blurted.

"Ugh..." Cocoa added.

We'd just realized how big the Beetlers were. They looked like normal horned beetles, but instead of them being small enough to fit in my palm, each Beetler was about a meter long. *At least they aren't centipede monsters or anything...* With a hand on my sword, I approached a Beetler—the first of the required thirty.

In addition to its obscenely large size, the Beetler's horn was proportionally large and sharp. It also walked on two legs...and held a lance, for some reason. Even though I'd read its file at the guardhouse, I approached the new monster with caution.

As soon as the Beetler saw me and started to walk over, I glanced

back at Cocoa. She nodded. We were ready.

"Here we go! Taunt!" I used my Skill that drew the attention of all monsters to me. As long as they were targeting me, they would leave Cocoa alone in the back. This really was a must-have Skill for a tank.

The Beetler charged, lance pointed at me. I swiped the lance aside with my sword, which was easier than I'd expected. *I can do this.*

"Fatal Blow!"

"Fireball!"

With a coordinated attack from both of us, the Beetler burst into light and left behind a Beetle Horn. *It still drops a normal-sized beetle horn...?*

"That was pretty easy," Cocoa said as she picked up the dropped item. "It's a regular horn..."

"Maybe this is the norm. The places Sharon took us to are the crazy ones," I suggested.

"Yeah... I think you're right." Cocoa laughed, stowing the item. "Look! A Beetler and a M'Lady Bug ahead."

A M'Lady Bug was a giant ladybug monster about a meter tall that wore a top hat and held a magician's cane in his hand. This one used magic to attack from a distance.

"All right, let's take care of them!" I said.

"Okay!"

I bolted toward the pair of monsters. Just as they noticed me, I used my Skill to launch an attack. "Whirling Tornado!" With a swing of my sword, a tornado swept the monsters into the air, where Cocoa's Fire Arrows found their mark—and the bugs hit the ground.

"Taunt!" I shouted.

While the bugs were distracted by me, Cocoa finished them off. "Fireball!" They turned to light particles, leaving more items behind.

All right! Even two at a time wasn't a problem at all! Our victory was boosting my confidence even more.

"It's not going to take us too long to finish hunting thirty," Cocoa said.

"Not at all," I agreed.

Two more hours of hunting and we'd met that quota already. I'd been intimidated because it was the Knight quest, but it was surprisingly easy.

"It's still early, but I guess we should go back. Can you check our surroundings, Cocoa?"

"Yep! Mana Detection." Cocoa used her Skill and seemed to sink into quiet concentration. This allowed her to detect monsters within a one-hundred-meter radius. "What is that...? There's one big ping."

"What?" I tilted my head. She'd used the Skill a few times today and there hadn't been a ping like that. "A powerful monster?" I asked.

"I think so. Do you want to check it out?"

I weighed our options, already leaning toward giving in to my curiosity. Even though we hadn't gone too deep into Bug Park, we'd had no problem taking out its monsters. Was it so bad to want to see what lay farther ahead? I swallowed hard and decided we should plunge forward.

We walked for about ten minutes, taking out monsters along the way, until we reached the spot Cocoa had sensed something from.

"That's a nest, right?" I asked.

"There's a Queen Ant of the Forest in there. The one from the files...!" Cocoa breathed.

The several Army Ants standing guard around the nest seemed to confirm the queen's presence. A report I'd read at the guardhouse had said that the expedition had made it partway through the nest. Did that mean even the Order of Knights had never taken out a Queen Ant of the Forest? We needed more information.

Before we could even consider our options, the ants charged us.

"Maybe the queen is close to the nest's entrance. I sensed it the last time I used Mana Detection a minute ago," Cocoa said.

Giving her a nod, I used Taunt—then Whirling Tornado. That was all it took to take out the Army Ants. "For real?"

"Wow! You took them all out in one attack, Kent!"

"Maybe each of them doesn't have too much HP, since there are so many of them." *Could we farm EXP with a whole bunch of them?* I wondered...then realized Sharon had been rubbing off on me. "Do

you mind if we go in, just a little bit?" I asked Cocoa.

"Well... Let's take a step inside and see. The Army Ant file said they were weak to Fire, so we could take out a bunch of them at once if we play our cards right..." Cocoa pondered. She'd never been this daring before. Usually, she was the one keeping me from being reckless. "Kent, will you stay close to me?"

What was her plan? "Huh? Of course."

"Thank you." Cocoa carefully stepped into the nest.

I quickly followed her in and found that the nest was easily tall enough for us to stand upright. On the other hand, it was barely wide enough to fit Cocoa and me side by side. Luckily, it didn't look like we could be surrounded by ants out of nowhere.

"Let's get started," Cocoa said. "I don't think they'll break through this, but if they do... I'm counting on you, Kent. Fire Wall!" At her command, a wall of flames roared before us, reaching two meters tall and wide enough to cover the entire passage. It left some space near the roof of the tunnel, but that wouldn't be a problem against ants.

"Any ants that pass through it will go down...!" I realized.

"Exactly. Oh, but the ants aren't going to come charging if they sense an attack... I didn't think about that." Cocoa smiled.

I shook my head. "That's what my Skill is for! Taunt!" Soon, I heard the rustling of ant feet from beyond the flames—several ants were charging our way. I stood with my sword ready, a little creeped out that I could only hear them approaching. Soon, I heard some sizzling—the ants had run into the fire and died. I could barely see the bursts of light that indicated their demise.

"Wow, Kent. Your Skill is impressive..."

"Yeah. I'm surprised myself."

After a while, the fire died out and revealed a few dropped items—this was even easier than before. "Maybe the Queen Ant of the Forest isn't that strong either," I suggested.

"What? But it wasn't in the files at the guardhouse... I'm sure it wouldn't be easy to take it down...unless you were Sharon," Cocoa said.

"Yeah. I can't imagine her struggling one bit," I said. "Let's try

going a little farther."

"Okay."

Making sure to note our turns so we could make it back out, we delved farther into the nest.

"Fire Wall!"

"Taunt!"

We were farming ants like it was harvest season. Before we knew it, we'd been frying them for nearly an hour and our Bags were overflowing with their dropped items.

When we turned the next corner, I felt a sensation like something crawling down my spine.

"It's the queen!" Cocoa said.

Instinctively, I put myself between Cocoa and the queen, sword at the ready. For the first time since entering the nest, I sensed real danger. Queen Ant of the Forest wore a tiara on her head and a ruby cape on her back. Several Army Ants surrounded her. She stood at two meters tall, nearly touching the ceiling—the entire nest had been constructed to accommodate her size.

"Fire Wall! Witch's Whim! She's in a clearing, Kent! Let's back up a little."

"Got it...!" We began reversing course without turning our backs to the queen, but she didn't give us a chance to go far. She charged at us and into the Fire Wall.

With a deep inhale and exhale, I reminded myself we could do this. The Beetlers and Army Ants hadn't been much of a threat—we could take down the queen too...hopefully.

Once she broke through the Fire Wall, the queen ant triggered Cocoa's Witch's Whim—a trap that deployed one of Cocoa's offensive Skills at random. Water Arrows struck the Queen Ant of the Forest.

"It's working!" I shouted.

"Yeah! We can do this!"

With renewed hope, we made sure to only fight in the tight corridor and to keep the Fire Wall burning. Even if Army Ants spawned while we were fighting the queen, a Fire Wall would trivialize them and deal continuous damage to the queen.

"Got Your Nose! And...Fatal Blow!"

"Fireball!"

Seeing that all of our attacks were effective, I used Taunt to draw the queen's attention to me. It attacked me with its forelegs—which I managed to block with my sword. Even better, I parried its legs and landed a cut on the queen, all while Cocoa kept launching fireballs at her. We also had enough potions that we wouldn't run out of fuel before the queen did. Now that I knew what it was like to fight without worrying about conserving mana and resources, there was no going back. I was grateful to Sharon for opening this door for us, but we'd definitely gone down a path of no return.

Suddenly, the Queen Ant of the Forest let out an earsplitting shriek. Her eyes changed from black to red and there was a violent glint in their expression. She grew faster and stronger too.

I think we're in trouble! I tightened my grip on my sword.

"She's on her last legs!" Cocoa shouted. "Sharon told us that some of the more powerful monsters can make themselves stronger on the verge of death."

"That's right!" I remembered how Sharon had mentioned that while we were eating or something. Fear flashed in my mind—could I keep withstanding those faster and stronger attacks? *If we're almost done, I can do it.* "Fatal Blow! Taunt! And Steadfast Leader!" I used a new Skill after attacking the queen. While Steadfast Leader rendered me immobile, it was still an amazing Skill that negated all incoming attacks. Its duration depended on the Skill's level. Mine was at 3, so the Skill would last 30 seconds. *Good thing I leveled up from those Beetlers.*

"Fireball! Fireball! Fireball!" Cocoa bellowed while I stood my ground against the queen. She kept burning the ant, conjuring a new Fire Wall as needed. Still, Cocoa wasn't using her magic too rapidly. The trouble with magic was that, while it did a lot of damage, it was difficult to use quickly and consecutively. "Fireball!" She used it again, panting now.

The queen shrieked, looking like she barely had any strength left. My thirty seconds had just run out, but we were so close.

"Fatal Blow!"

"Fire Ball!"

Our attacks collided with the queen and she burst into light with one last dying shriek.

"Did we...win?" I asked.

"Yeah! We did it! We really did it!" Her voice shaking, Cocoa wrapped her arms around me.

At last, my shoulders slumped and I crumpled to the ground. "Good. We did it," I repeated.

"With just the two of us...we took out a scary monster like that," Cocoa said.

"Yeah." Before we could relish our victory for too long, I snapped to my feet. "That was such a tough battle—maybe she dropped a rare item!"

"That's right! I was so happy we won, I almost forgot!" Cocoa said.

We rushed over to where the queen had last been standing to find a few items. One of them was some sort of equipment.

"Wow..." I breathed.

"That's a really nice piece of armor." Cocoa pointed at the dropped armor. It was the type that covered the entire upper body and the back of the lower body. Several belts wrapped around the waist, one of them serving as a sheath. The armor looked well-made but light so that the wearer wouldn't be encumbered. "You should wear it, Kent!"

"What?" My heart beat faster. "But it...looks like a really nice piece?"

"It's obviously for a frontline fighter. Do you feel bad because it looks pretty expensive?" Cocoa asked.

I didn't have an immediate response because she was kind of right. The Queen Ant of the Forest wasn't a monster we could go and take down anytime we pleased. It didn't feel right for me, somehow, to make a claim on the armor.

"It'd be more of a waste to sell it!" Cocoa protested. "Besides, this is the first rare item we got together. You have to use it! In exchange, I won't feel bad about taking something that matches my style if we ever find one." Cocoa giggled.

"Of course!" I promised. I'd have to keep a sharp eye out for

Cocoa's new gear. "Thanks, Cocoa! Let's use it to farm some more!"

"Yeah!"

I tried putting on the armor. Unlike my old breastplate, just putting it on gave me a boost—it readied my mentality for battle, somehow. "Let's go back to town," I suggested.

"Perfect! Wait...more ants! Fire Wall."

"All right. Taunt!" *Right. We're still in a dungeon.* We couldn't let our guard down until we were out in the open. This wave of ants dropped a different item—a gauntlet. "Another new item."

"I think it matches your armor, Kent."

I picked up the gauntlet and sure enough, it was made with the same material as the armor. It looked sturdy too. Although it was fingerless, it was long enough to reach my elbow. Once I put it on, I realized it was part of a set. "Bug Armor, Bug Gauntlet...and an item called Bug Boots make a set," I said.

"One of those sets that get better when you have all three? I wonder what monster will drop the boots. Judging by its name, I'm sure we can get it somewhere in this dungeon," Cocoa said.

"I bet so..." We thought about it for a while, but there was no way of knowing. There was no guessing if an ant or some other monster would drop the third piece. It wasn't called the Ant Set, after all.

"Well... We still have some time. Why don't we take a break and hunt for a while longer?" Cocoa suggested.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. We only have another hour or two, though."

I gladly took Cocoa up on her offer, so we sat down for a meal before hunting for those boots.

An hour and a half later, Cocoa and I were jumping with joy.

"We found them!"

"The boots!"

We'd hunted more ants until another gauntlet had dropped. After that, we'd moved on to hunting Beetlers. We'd hunted dozens—hundreds of them, until one of them had finally dropped a pair of boots!

"Hurry up and put them on, Kent!"

"Yeah!"

I stepped into the Bug Boots and a window popped up before me, showing that the set bonus was a 3% buff each to Physical and Magical Defense, and a 10% resistance against bug monsters—I could tear through bug monsters even faster.

"The armor itself has another 3% to Physical Defense and the boots and gloves have another 1% each. That's good, right?" I asked.

"I think that's amazing! I wonder how much those would be in a shop," Cocoa said.

Way beyond what we could have afforded when we'd first set out as adventurers, I guessed. Most shops didn't even sell equipment this good.

"Thanks, Cocoa. I'm decked out now!"

"You're the one always holding off the monsters. Come on, let's get back to town and make you a Knight."

"Yeah!"

Cocoa gave me a bright smile.

By the time we made it out of the dungeon and back to Blume, it was well into the night. We'd been gone the entire day. We rushed to the guardhouse before they closed for the day...and found Lord Rudith there.

"Hey, Kent and Cocoa," he said.

"Good evening, Lord Rudith," we said together.

Lord Rudith looked me over, head to toe.

Overview:

Name: Kent

Level: 49

Job: Swordsman (Expert in close-range combat. Draws enemy attacks and protects their friends.)

Skills:

Boost Self-Healing: Hastens the user's natural healing process.

Increase Attack (Level 4): Raises the user's Attack.
Increase HP (Level 10): Raises the user's HP.
Increase Defense (Level 10): Raises the user's Defense.
Taunt (Level 5): Draws enemy attacks to the user.
Steadfast Leader (Level 3): Negates all attacks on the user for 30 seconds.
Got Your Nose: Stuns the enemy for an instant.
Fatal Blow (Level 10): A powerful attack against a single target.
Whirling Tornado (Level 5): Attacks a wide area.

Equipment:
Head: –
Body: Bug Armor (+3% Physical Defense / +7% Resistance to bug monsters)
Right Hand: Gladius (A simple but powerful sword)
Left Hand: Bug Gauntlet (+1% Physical Defense / +5% Resistance to bug monsters)
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: –
Feet: Bug Boots (+1% Physical Defense / +5% Resistance to bug monsters)
Bonus: Bug Set 3/3 (+3% Physical Defense / +3% Magical Defense / +5% Resistance to bug monsters)

"You got some good gear in just one evening. That's the bug series, isn't it?" Lord Rudith asked.

"Yes. We went out for my Knight quest and we happened to find the whole set," I explained.

"Knight? I thought you were trying out for Shield Knight?"

"Oh…" I didn't know what else to say. How could I tell Lord Rudith that I'd chosen this path because I wanted to be like him? *How embarrassing is that?!*

"Kent decided he wants to be a Dragonrider so he can be more

like you."

"Cocoa?!" Every part of me wanted to run out of there.

Lord Rudith laughed heartily and clapped me on the back. "You've got good taste, Kent! You'd better become a Dragonrider soon and catch up to me!"

"I will!" I promised as I felt my mouth curve up. There was nothing else to say.

Lord Rudith laughed again. "Pretty lucky that you picked up all that during your trial. You're gonna be a good Knight, but not for long, I bet." With that encouragement, he nudged my back. "You finished the hunt, right? Go report it."

"I will! Thank you!"

Cocoa and I went and found the knight who'd assigned us the quest.

With a document in hand, he glanced up at us. "You finished already?" A look of surprise crossed his face. "Looks like you have. Here's your reward. Congratulations on becoming a Knight."

"What? Uh— Thank you!" I stammered. As soon as he'd said it, my body had faintly glowed, signifying my change in jobs. *It's that quick?!*

Cocoa was staring at me with her mouth agape. *Same, Cocoa... Same.* In any case, I'd become a Knight, so I went back to tell Lord Rudith as much.

"Congratulations, Kent," he said.

"Thank you! I will be a strong Dragonrider like you one day!"

"I'm looking forward to it!" Lord Rudith grinned like a boy my own age. "Here's a little something for your accomplishment." He pulled out three bottles of Moon Potion.

"What? I can't accept something that valuable!" I said, putting my hands up in protest. Moon Potion was a very potent item that greatly healed your injuries and HP. Naturally, it was a very expensive potion that many mid-tier adventurers carried just one of in case of an emergency. I'd only ever used regular potions or Star Potions, which were a rank below the Moon Potion—and here Lord Rudith was, trying to give me *three* of them.

"Just take it!" he insisted, shoving the potions into my hands. "I

can see it in your eyes, how much you want to be stronger. Even if you don't need these now, there will come a day when you will. Hold on to them. And when you're stronger, come see me again."

"Lord Rudith..." He really was the coolest man I knew. I nodded over and over again. "I promise, I'll come see you again!"

And that would be when I was ready to become a Dragonrider.

***

With the help of the Transportation Gates, Cocoa and I were back in Snowdia in the blink of an eye, saving about five days of riding on horseback. This really was a lifesaver.

"Phew... It's cold over here," Cocoa said.

"You're right... It was much warmer in Blume." We quickly took out our overcoats and slung them over our shoulders, getting on the move right away.

For Cocoa to become an Incantor, we had to go through Snowfall Forest to Lief, the Wooded Village. We'd had no idea that elves lived there until Sharon had told us.

"There's a lot we don't know about our own country," Cocoa said.

"For real. Or Sharon just knows way too much..." I'd always wondered where all her knowledge came from, including her tricks in combat and her awareness of the Adventure Bracelet. After a while, though, I'd just accepted Sharon for who she was, absurd knowledge and all.

Not too far into the forest, we came across something called Pup Place.

"What is that...?" I asked. Come to think of it, we hadn't been out in the snow surrounding the city before. Maybe this was some establishment unique to snow country.

"I know. They rent out animals to ride through snow. You know how we ride horses through grassy plains? There are better animals for the snowy plains here," Cocoa explained.

"That makes sense!" While I was glad that we didn't have to subject horses to trudging through snow, I couldn't help but wonder if these "pups" could really do the job. There was one way to find

out, though. Cocoa and I stepped into the heated interior of Pup Place...which almost made me want to stay there indefinitely.

"Hello," we said to the attendant at the counter.

"Welcome! Are you two looking to rent?"

"Yes, please!" I answered as I took in Pup Place. Paintings of dogs decorated the walls, a poster explaining the rental process hanging among them. Just like with horses, they knew to come back here whenever you dismissed them. Of course, we could also return them here or to another Pup Place location. Each rental pup cost 20,000 liz, which was more costly than renting a horse.

"We can only take them where it's snowing," Cocoa noted.

"That's right. These dogs are bred to live in snow country. Where are you headed?" the attendant asked.

"Lief, the Wooded Village," Cocoa answered.

"Lief?" The attendant stared at Cocoa. Just as I was starting to wonder what his reaction was about, he continued. "I remember those rumors. Some say a village lies deep in the Snowfall Forest...but most people who go into the forest find that they've circled back to where they went in without realizing it. Are you sure someone isn't pulling a prank on you?"

That reminded me—Sharon had said that Snowfall Forest was also called Labyrinthian Forest. Very few knew about the village because so many people never made it, losing their way in the forest.

Cocoa and I shared a look. "Okay," she said. "I'll consider it lucky if we find anything."

"I would recommend that attitude," the attendant said.

"Here's for our rental." Cocoa handed him 40,000 liz.

"This way, please." The attendant stepped out of the shop and two dogs immediately came running over—a pair of pure-white fluff balls.

"They're huge!" I blurted.

"They're so cute!" Cocoa squealed.

Cute as they might have been, with their fluffy fur and adorable eyes, they were simply huge. They were even taller than me.

"They're Samoyeds," the attendant said. "They're brothers. Don't

they look it?"

"Yes! And they're so precious!" Cocoa said, apparently smitten with them.

"We can ride on their backs and go through the forest, right?" I confirmed.

"That's right. They're well trained, so they'll obey your commands," the attendant explained.

"Got it," I said.

After the attendant showed us some tricks—like how to climb onto their backs and hold on—we set off on our Samoyeds: Cocoa on Hail and I on Slushy.

Apparently, it was always snowing in Snowfall Forest.

"My face is so cold!" I shouted as our pups darted through the snow.

"Same!" Cocoa called, following close behind me.

Soon, two Snow Wolves appeared ahead of us. "Cocoa, two Snow Wolves!" I warned.

Cocoa readied herself for combat...but Slushy just sank his paws into the snow and accelerated too fast for even the wolves to catch up.

What? I must have looked dumbfounded.

"You're amazing," Cocoa said to her fluffy mount and I could only agree.

"We're short on time, so I'm glad we're not fighting any enemies we don't have to. Let's keep going!" I urged.

"Yeah!" Cocoa responded.

Feeling a rush, we kept on darting through the snowy forest, following the directions Sharon had written down for us. After riding for several hours, we made it out of the forest.

"Hey... There's a village," I said.

"Is that Lief?" Cocoa asked.

Once we'd traveled deeper into the forest, there had been some battles that we couldn't escape, but with the help of my new job and equipment, we'd had no trouble taking out those monsters. Like Sharon had said, it had been the right choice for me to get my advanced job first.

"Yay! Now I can switch to my advanced job!" Cocoa said.

"Let's go in!" I said.

"Okay."

We said our goodbyes to Hail and Slushy at the entrance to the village and went inside. Lief, the Wooded Village was a small village inhabited by elves. All sorts of flowers bloomed around the settlement, and hollowed-out enormous trees dressed with flowering vines served as houses. This was definitely a sight we couldn't have seen anywhere else. The village also had some normal houses built of lumber. All the people we saw on the streets were elves with pointed ears. We'd been told that elves were good at magic, and many elves here carried staves. While I turned this way and that way to try and take in the details of the village, I was thinking that we might be able to find good gear for Cocoa while we were here—thanks to all the farming we'd done with Sharon, we had a decent amount of cash lining our pockets.

"It's a little unsettling..." Cocoa said.

"Yeah..." I'd been distracted by the strangeness of the village's design, but now I saw that the elves were throwing curious glances at us—at least they weren't straight up kicking us out. "Let's get the ball rolling. Sharon told you where to go to start the quest, right?"

"Yeah, when she gave me the directions to get through the forest. We need to go to the elder's house in the deepest part of the village."

As we tried to go farther into the village, an elf who'd come down from a watchtower by the village's entrance stopped us. "Are you travelers? We need to verify the identity of anyone who enters the village."

"My name is Kent. I'm an adventurer."

"So am I. My name is Cocoa."

We both showed our Adventurer's Cards.

"You are both welcome. If you need anything, come back to the watchtower," the elf said.

"Thank you," we said in unison.

When we turned our attention back to the village proper, I spotted something. "Cocoa, isn't that a Transportation Gate?!"

"It is! Let's register it now!"

A wooden three-meter-tall gate stood by the village's entrance, vines wrapping around the ancient pillars carved with depictions of the creator god.

"I'm glad we found it right away," I said as we touched the stone in the pillar to register the Gate. Now, we could go back to Zille or Snowdia any time we wanted. *This way we can get back to our party quickly.*

Then, we made our way through the village to the elder's house, which was built into a tree much larger than any of the other houses. I could barely believe that a tree this size was real.

"Let me go up there," Cocoa said.

"Right," I agreed. Cocoa would be the one switching jobs, so I'd planned to let her do the talking. Of course, I'd be ready to help with any part of the quest if I could.

"Hello!" Cocoa called as she knocked on the door.

The door opened and a ridiculously good-looking elf poked his head out. "Who is it...?"

After Bishop Leroy and Lord Rudith, I felt like everyone I'd met lately was super good-looking. Not that I didn't like how I looked, but...

Cocoa, who couldn't have known what I was thinking, introduced herself. "My name is Cocoa and this is my party mate Kent." I gave a little nod as she introduced me. "I'm hoping to become an Incantor. Is the village elder here?"

"I see. I am Feyle, the village elder."

"You are! I'm sorry. You look so young..." Cocoa apologized.

"That's all right," Feyle said, unbothered. "Elves do not show age as humans do. I already celebrated my two hundredth birthday many years ago."

"You did...?" I blurted. We'd known that about elves, but it was still a shock to see it in person.

Feyle's house was very tidy on the inside. There were many pieces of wooden furniture and wooden decorations, and a colorful rug added warm colors to the space.

"Then, here is your trial, Cocoa," Feyle said right away.

Cocoa's eyes widened as she stared into space—her quest window must have appeared. "Hunt Snow Flutters in the Snowfall Forest..." she read aloud.

"That's right. They are formidable, but I believe you two can handle it," the elder said.

"If I'm allowed to help, I'm ready to go now!" I said.

"Me too!" Cocoa chimed in.

"Very well. Oh, if you gain the favor of a Snow Flutter, it will give you a useful gift."

Cocoa and I shared a look, wondering what the useful gift could be and how we could possibly garner the favor of a Snow Flutter.

"Um, is there something in particular I should do?" Cocoa asked.

"That is the only hint I can give you. I'll be looking forward to your return."

Feyle saw us off without sharing any details about the quest, so we walked through the village discussing potential strategies for garnering a Snow Flutter's favor. "It's probably some kind of bird... What about feeding it, like an acorn or something?"

"Okay, but I don't think there are acorns in that forest," Cocoa agreed. "Do you want to check there?" She pointed at a pair of hollowed trees—a food shop and an equipment shop standing next to each other.

"They could have something birds would like. Let's see," I said.

"Okay."

They might also have some rare items for sale that we couldn't find anywhere else. With anticipation, we walked into the food shop first, accompanied by the ringing of the bell over the door. The circular walls of the shop were lined with shelves stocked with products that didn't need to be kept cold, like dried meats, spices, and local fruits and vegetables...which all looked delicious.

"Hello... Oh, you're travelers," the shopkeeper said.

"Hello. Do you have any acorns, or something birds may enjoy?" Cocoa asked.

"Well... I have some fruit over here." He pointed out a shelf that contained some fruit but nothing small enough to feed a bird. We decided to buy one apple and a little bit of food for ourselves. I liked

apples myself, but I wasn't sure it would charm a bird.

"Are there any more shops in the village?" Cocoa asked after we'd paid.

"Just mine and the one next door."

"Thank you," Cocoa said. It looked like we'd have to try the apple and look for something else ourselves if that didn't work.

So, we walked into the equipment shop next door. It had the same layout as the food shop, but the sight of all the swords, staves, and armor lining the walls was much more exciting than the shelves of food had been. Even Cocoa was eyeing the staves and robes with a glimmer in her eye.

"Welcome," a shopkeeper called as she walked out onto the floor, rubbing her eyes like she'd been falling asleep. She was holding a coat in her hand, possibly one of her wares. "Oh. It's not every day I get human customers."

"Hello. I'm here for the Incantor trial," Cocoa explained.

The shopkeeper yawned. "I'd forgotten that Feyle does that..." She placed the coat on a hook on the wall.

Cocoa stared at it intently. "That's a cute coat."

"Thanks! It even has a Defense boost—it's one of my best works!"

"Wait, you made that? That's amazing!" Cocoa said.

It was amazing that she could craft equipment that included buffs on top of its basic defensive abilities. The shopkeeper wasn't just napping on the job...

Cocoa was checking the other pieces of clothing around the shop. Soon, she spotted a robe hung behind the counter—it was stark-white and was paired with a deep red scarf. She'd fallen in love with that robe. Cocoa and I had grown up together, so I could tell that much before she even said anything. I'd just gotten a new set of gear, so we should buy the robe if Cocoa liked it. It looked like this shopkeeper's clothes had good effects too.

I noticed, though, that the robe didn't have a price tag like all the other items in the shop. "Hey, what effects does this robe have and how much are you charging?" I asked.

"Oh, you like that one?" the shopkeeper asked. "Sorry. That one's

not for sale. It's just for display."

"It's not...?" I repeated with disappointment. Cocoa would have looked great in it.

"That's too bad... I think it's gorgeous," Cocoa said, sounding downright miserable.

The shopkeeper lowered her brows and smiled. "I made this robe a long time ago when I saw a certain staff... So I told myself I'd only ever give it to the person who has that staff."

"I understand..." Cocoa said. Of course, we didn't have a staff like that.

"You wanna see the other robes?" I asked.

"No, not right now. We should get going," Cocoa said. Getting her new gear could wait until we'd finished her Incantor quest. With a quick thanks to the shopkeeper, we left for Snowfall Forest.

"Where are those Snow Flutters anyway? We didn't see any on the way in," I said, anticipating a long and hard search for them.

"Wow!" Cocoa shouted. "A map popped up when we stepped into the forest!"

"Really?"

"Yeah. I see a mark on it... Maybe that's where the Snow Flutters are. This way!" Cocoa began walking, apparently seeing a map in a quest window that marked where we were as well as our destination. I followed her through the falling snow, winding our way through the woods.

"Two Snow Wolves!" I announced as I spotted them. "Taunt! And...Shimmering Chase!" That was a new Skill I'd acquired since becoming a Knight. A pair of consecutive explosions took care of one of the wolves, the second impact buffed by fifty percent.

"Fire Arrow!" Cocoa's spell hit the second wolf but didn't quite take it down, so I finished it off with Fatal Blow.

Stowing their dropped items in my Bag, I realized that I had gotten stronger. I couldn't wait to grind more levels and see how far I could go.

"Thanks, Kent."

"Now that I'm a Knight, a couple of wolves are a piece of cake!" I flexed my arm in a show of confidence. "Let's keep going!" I urged.

We faced more Snow Wolves, as well as Icespheres and Squirrelers, which we were able to work together to take down. None of them were too threatening, but I was glad my Defense had been boosted by my new job and gear to handle how many of them we'd faced.

"So this is where the Snow Flutters—"

"Shh!" Cocoa shushed me, quickly covering my mouth with her hand, afraid that I was going to scare them off by being loud.

I mimed that I'd gotten her message and she lowered her hand. "Sorry," I whispered.

Cocoa nodded, then something caught her eye. I followed her gaze...and saw it. A big white adorable thing perched on a branch. Somehow, extra-large things were becoming a theme for us today.

"Is it...a bird?" Cocoa asked.

"I think so..." I said. I hadn't noticed it before since its white feathers kept it camouflaged.

The Snow Flutter looked like a two-meter-wide ball, fluffy enough for me to bury my hand in its down. It was white all around, with just a speckle of black feathers on its back—like a giant version of a snow fairy bird.

"Your quest is to hunt them, right?" I asked.

Cocoa frowned. "Yeah... I didn't think they'd be this cute."

"Why don't we try to get it to like us first?" I suggested. "I was going to cut the apple, but I think it's big enough to eat the whole thing."

"I think it'll eat it in one bite," Cocoa said. She took the apple I handed her and slowly approached the Snow Flutter, careful to step quietly. "Would you like an apple...? It's good."

I kept my guard up as I watched Cocoa, ready to use Taunt to draw attention away from her if something went down.

The Snow Flutter took notice of Cocoa and chirped a high clear note—it was such a beautiful sound that I almost forgot who I was. Would it eat the apple? *Please let it like Cocoa,* I prayed. I watched the Snow Flutter show a flicker of interest in the apple, then turn its beak up at it—no dice.

"It doesn't like it," Cocoa said.

“Yeah...” I stepped up next to Cocoa and stared at the Snow Flutter. Even though we were barely a meter apart, it showed no sign of attacking us. “I don’t think it’ll attack until we do.”

The Snow Flutter sang again, this time with a low, reverberating note.

“That’s a weird birdsong...” I said and the Snow Flutter switched to a trill, which drew a laugh from me. “You’re your own chorus, aren’t you?”

“I think it’s adorable that it’s singing to us in a snowy forest. It makes me want to sing with it.” Cocoa took another step toward the bird and started singing an old song of our country that we’d heard countless times as a lullaby. *“On a quiet night, like the goddess, the gentle moon watches over you...”*

Cocoa’s singing was beautiful. Somehow, her voice was completely different from all the times she’d nagged me about stuff. I could have listened to her sing for the rest of my life. As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I shook it out of my head, ignoring the heat in my ears.

Then, the Snow Flutter began harmonizing with Cocoa, almost leaning into her. “You’re singing together...?” I was entranced by their singing, forgetting that we were in a forest full of monsters.

“Thank you.” Cocoa bowed once the song ended, and I gave my sincerest applause.

“It’s been so long since I’ve heard that lullaby. You’re a great singer, Cocoa.”

“Really?” Cocoa flashed a smile. “Thanks for— What?!”

The Snow Flutter beside her began glowing, far brighter than the attack I’d used on the wolves earlier. “Taunt! What’s going on?!” Sword at the ready, I put myself between the bird and Cocoa. A moment later, she gripped her staff and readied for combat...which never started.

When the light faded, the Snow Flutter had been replaced with a staff and Cocoa began to glow faintly. “What...?” she breathed.

“That’s the same kind of light as mine when I got my new job!”

Cocoa blinked over and over, staring into space, or more likely, a quest window. I waited for her to finish reading. “I’m an Incantor

now," she said. "I thought 'hunt' meant I had to take down the Snow Flutter... I didn't realize this was an option." She let out a relieved breath and took the staff in her hand, holding it close to her chest.

I smiled. "Congratulations, Cocoa! I think that staff is the reward Feyle mentioned."

"Wait, really...? All I did was sing." Cocoa's impulsive singing had paid off.

"Yeah, you were awesome!" I said, drawing another shy smile from her. "Let's get back to the village before we run into any other monsters. We'll thank Feyle and take another look at the equipment shop before going back to Zille."

"Okay," she said.

"Th-Th-Th-Th-That staff!" As we passed the shops on our way to Feyle's, the equipment shopkeeper from earlier stopped us with her shout. Every elf around was staring at us.

"What...?" Cocoa and I froze on the spot.

At this point, it dawned on me what the shopkeeper was saying. "Staff? Is that the staff that you mentioned earlier?" I asked timidly. "The one that inspired you?"

The shopkeeper beamed and nodded. "Come with me!" She kidnapped Cocoa and took her into the shop.

I quickly followed, but by the time I made it into the shop, neither of them was there. "What...?"

The shopkeeper poked her head out from the back. "She's trying it on now! Hang on!"

After a few minutes, Cocoa came out. "Um, what do you think?"

"Y-Yeah. It looks great," I managed to say, hiding how my heart had skipped a beat.

Cocoa held the Staff of the Forest Spirit, courtesy of the Snow Flutter. The handle was a dark wood with red jewels embedded in it. At the tip of the staff, a large white crystal, a hoop, and a bird's feather ornament dangled. The bright-white robe came with matching boots and hat—a wide-brimmed hat with a wide ribbon and a design around its brim and a star tassel dangling from its deep-red underside. As for the robe, a ribbon was tied at both sides

of her waist. Its hem hung low in the back and the robe had very loose sleeves. The top half was that brilliant white with accents of red and the bottom half was a deep-red skirt with a black line marking the hem. Above her matching boots, I could see that the left sock covered her knee while the right came just short of it.

"Are you sure I can wear it?" Cocoa asked the shopkeeper.

"You have the staff," she said, eyes locked on the object. "The same one that inspired me... I'm so impressed you found it." Tears rolled down her cheeks—a testament to how much she'd dreamed of that staff. "How does it fit?" she asked Cocoa.

"It fits perfectly." Apparently, the robe had a function that automatically adjusted it, reshaping it to fit Cocoa perfectly.

The shopkeeper nodded happily. "Then it's all yours, as thanks for showing me that staff. I never thought I'd see it again."

"What...?" I muttered. "No, we can't... We have some money saved up."

"Yes, we're going to pay for it!" Cocoa chimed in.

The shopkeeper shook her head. "I never had plans to sell it, even when I first made it. It was always meant to be a gift. So, I don't want to put any price on it."

"All right... I will gladly accept it, then. But if you ever need our help, please send for us. We will come right away," Cocoa said.

"Thank you. We have a deal."

That was that. Cocoa and the shopkeeper shared a laugh.

With Cocoa wearing her new robe, we rushed over to Feyle's. We'd lingered to shop for a few more things and we were running later than we'd planned.

"Oh, welcome back," Feyle greeted us. "You already finished the hunt... Oh, did you find favor with the Snow Flutter?"

"I think so. It gave me this staff." Cocoa joyfully retold the events in the forest, thanking Feyle for giving her the quest.

"That's impressive, really." Feyle retrieved two books from a shelf. "Here's a small token of congratulations—a book you can use in your left hand. Since you have the staff, would you prefer the Shield Book?"

"Shield Book?" Cocoa and I repeated in unison. Normal shields

and gauntlets like the one I'd found were popular items to equip in the nondominant hand—but I'd never heard of a Shield Book.

"You haven't heard of it? It's a thick and solid book that can be used for defense," Feyle explained.

"I never knew... What other books can be used as equipment?" I asked.

"All sorts," Feyle began. "A popular one is a Tome that can be substituted for the staff. Most of them buff values related to magic. Then there are books with high Defense like this one, books that boost healing..."

Since Cocoa had just obtained her new staff, it made sense for her to use the Shield Book. That would ease my mind too, knowing that she'd be better protected.

But Cocoa refused the Shield Book. "I'd like a book that boosts my magic."

"Are you sure? I don't think you'll need it when you have that staff, which is a very good piece," Feyle said.

"I agree with Feyle. You like the robe, so I don't think—"

"No!" Cocoa stopped me. "I'm a member of Sharon's party. Holding a shield and raising my defense a little bit won't help me keep up with everyone else. I want to use the staff in my right hand and the book in my left to maximize my firepower."

I'd never even considered Cocoa's idea—neither had Feyle, by the look on his face.

After considering it, he said, "If that's what you'd like to do, I will be happy to give it to you." Feyle grabbed another book off the shelf and handed it to her.

"Really?! Oh, thank you!" Cocoa held the book to her chest. "I can't wait to try it out."

I was proud that Cocoa had made this decision out of her respect for Sharon. I felt the same way as she did—that I didn't want to be left behind by Sharon or anyone in our party. That being said, I couldn't help but think that Sharon had *really* rubbed off on Cocoa...

Overview:

Name: Cocoa
Level: 44
Job: Incantor (Wordsmith / Laces their words with mana to attack or support in various ways.)

Titles:
Blessing of the Snow Flutter: Hastens mana recovery.

Skills:
Boost Mana Recovery: Hastens the user’s natural mana recovery.
Increase Magic Attack (Level 10): Raises the user’s Magic Attack.
Fire Arrow (Level 5): Attacks the target with flaming arrows.
Fireball (Level 10): Attacks the target with a ball of flame.
Fire Wall (Level 5): Creates a wall of fire.
Water Arrow (Level 5): Attacks the target with arrows of water.
Waterball (Level 5): Attacks the target with a ball of water.
Witch’s Whim (Level 3): Sets a trap that triggers one of the user’s attack Skills at random.
Mana Detection (Level 5): Searches for life within a hundred-meter radius.

Equipment:
Head: Mystical Snowwoods Cap (+3% Magical Attack / +1% Defense)
Body: Mystical Snowwoods Robe (+3% Defense / Hastens HP recovery)
Right Hand: Staff of the Forest Spirit (+5% Magical

Attack)
Left Hand: Elf's Handbook (+2% Magical Attack)
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Roaring Pendant (+3% Fire attacks)
Feet: Mystical Snowwoods Boots (+1% Defense / All-terrain)

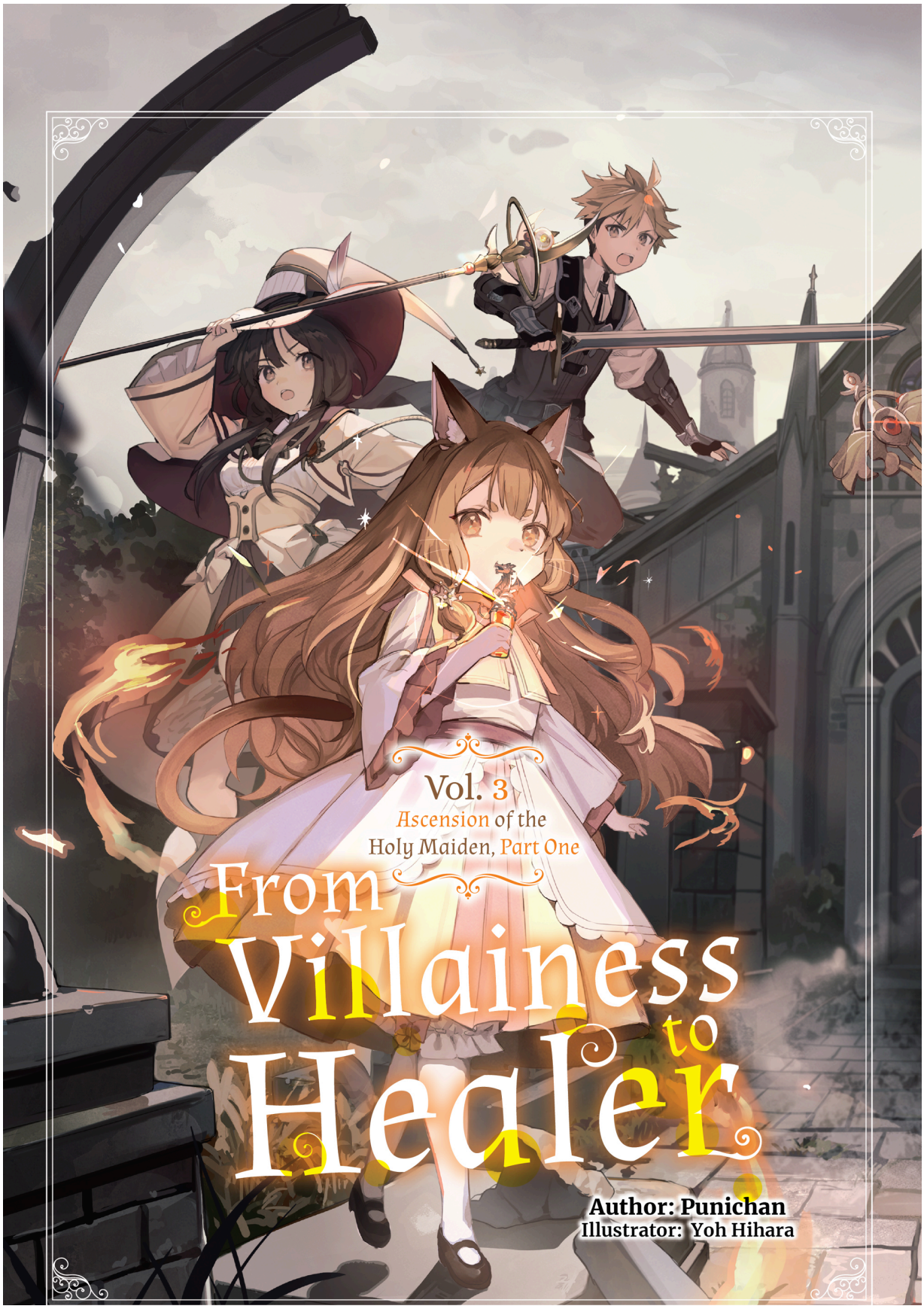
When we checked for messages at the Adventurer's Guild in Zille, what we read was quite the shock.

"They went to Underworld Abbey?!" Cocoa repeated.

"It sounds like..." *What are we going to do?* "Do you think we can catch up with just the two of us? It has to be filled with monsters a lot more powerful than the ones in Bug Park."

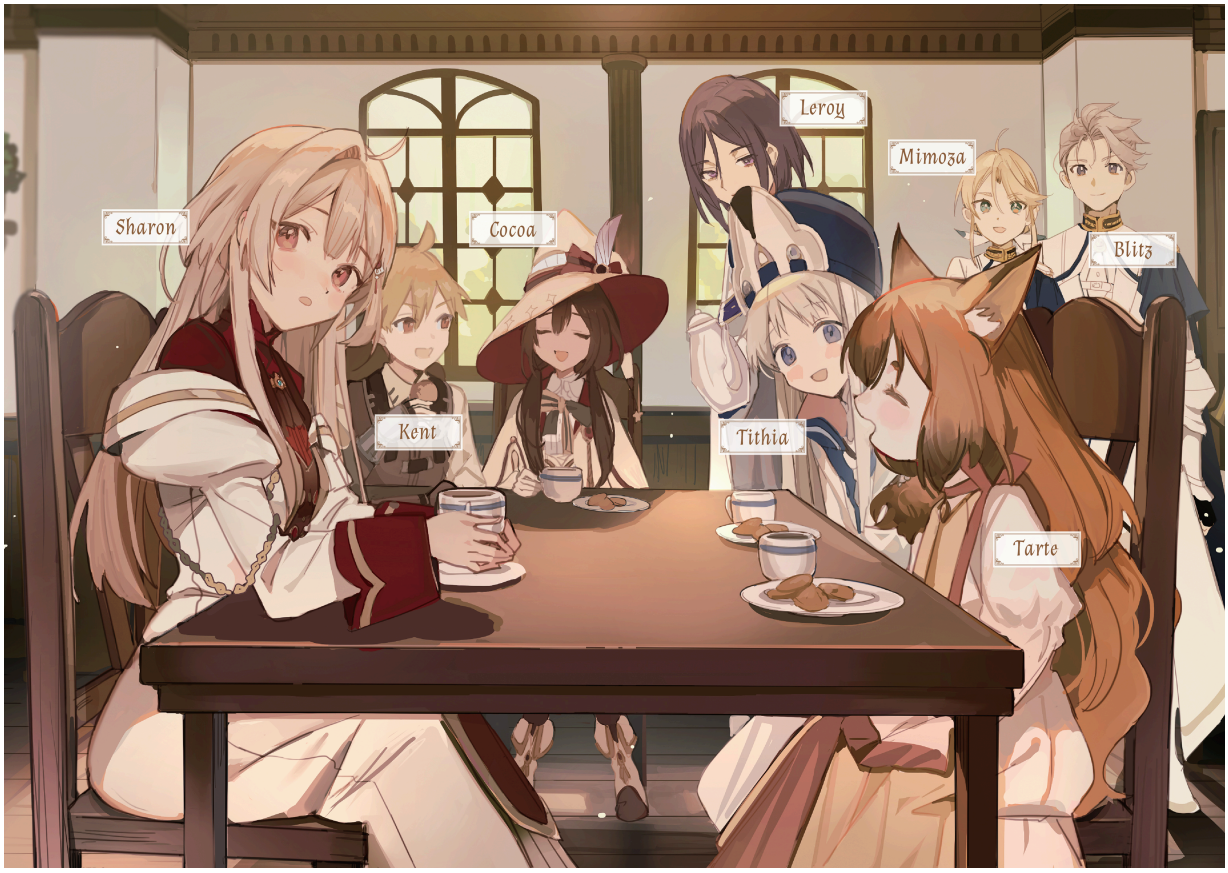
Cocoa nodded. "Let's go as far as we can."

"Agreed." The fastest way to the abbey would be to use the Gates to go to Farming Village and walk from there. The last thing we'd expected to find after hurrying through the Gate to our hometown...was Lord Rudith.

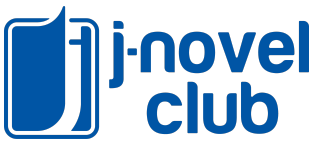

Vol. 3
Ascension of the Holy Maiden, Part One
From Villainess to Healer
Author: Punichan
Illustrator: Yoh Hihara






Leroy
Mimoza
Sharon
Cocoa
Blitz
Kent
Tithia
Tarte


“M-Meowster...”
“I wish I could tell you
that there’s nothing
to worry about...”
Our party took
a collective step back.



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Translated by Adam Seacord
Edited by Rhys Martinez

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