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Illustrator: Yoh Hihara

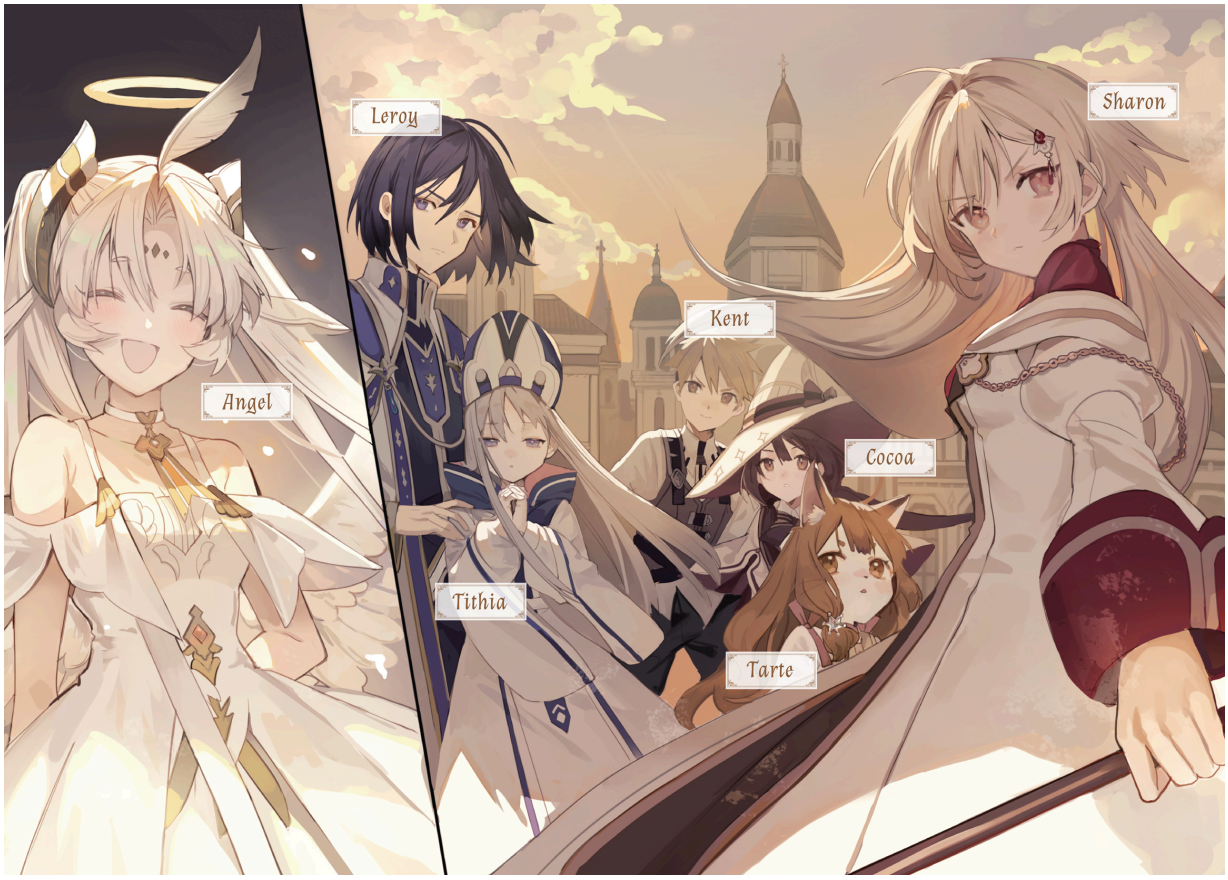


Vol. 4
Ascension of the Holy Maiden, Part Two

From Villainess to Healer


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Illustrator: Yoh Hihara
Vol. 4
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From Villainess to Healer




Leroy
Sharon
Kent
Angel
Cocoa
Tithia
Tarte


As soon as I touched the box,
it glowed and opened on its own.
Flaudia's voice echoed
loud enough for us all to hear.
"Let there be
peace upon the world."

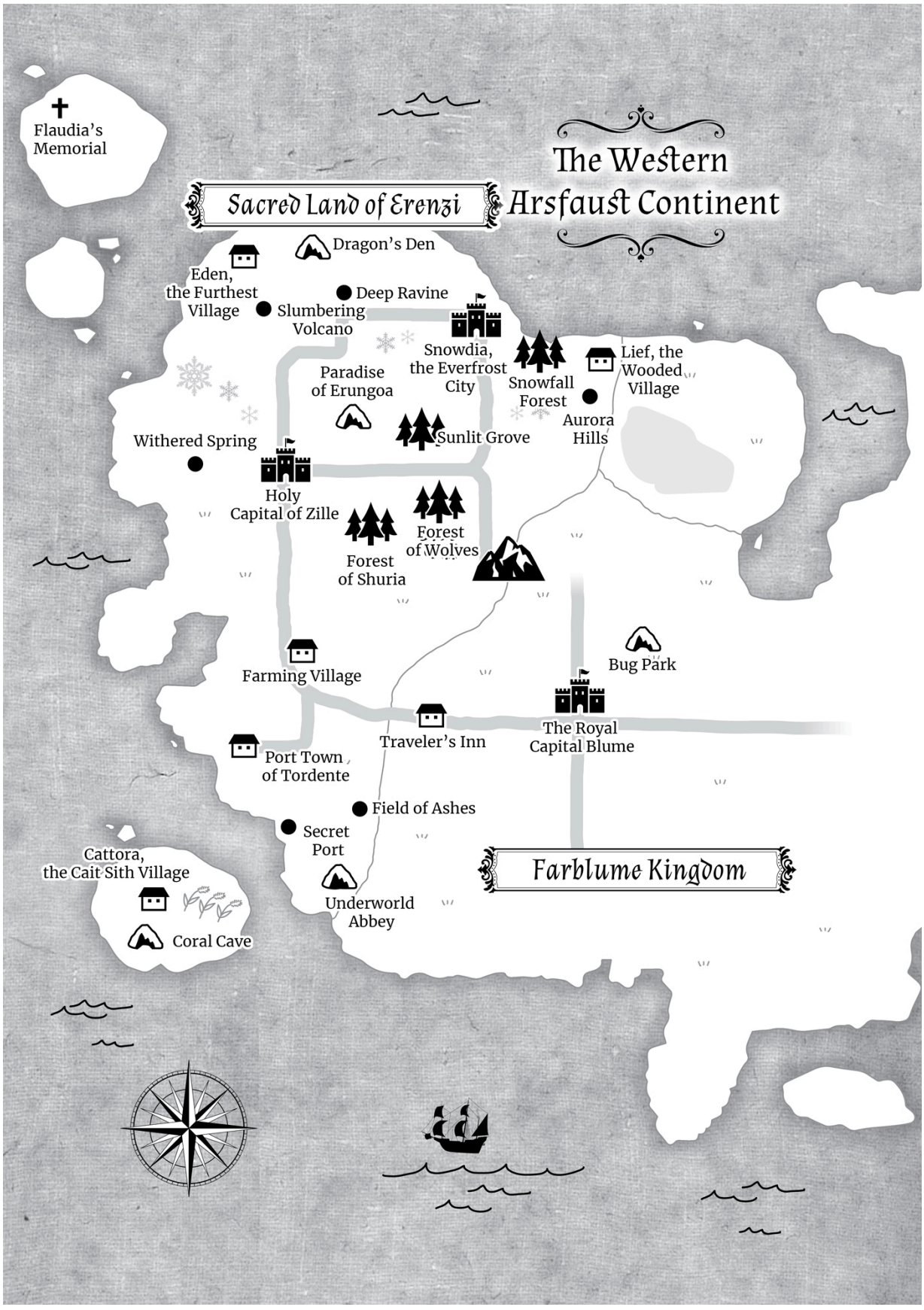

The Western
Arsfaust Continent
Sacred Land of Erenzi
Flaudia's
Memorial
Dragon's Den
Eden,
the Furthest
Village
Deep Ravine
Slumbering
Volcano
Snowdia,
the Everfrost
City
Snowfall
Forest
Lief, the
Wooded
Village
Paradise
of Erungoa
Aurora
Hills
Withered Spring
Sunlit Grove
Holy
Capital of Zille
Forest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

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Prologue

Sticky sweat clung to my face, irritating me with every step. I tugged on the coat of the man walking before me. "I need to rest!"

"Already? We stopped just fifteen minutes ago, not to mention that you should be able to rest during combat," he said.

Why couldn't this man simply obey? I didn't care how frequently I rested—I was too tired to go on. "I am to be the Holy Maiden. You should treat me with the reverence I deserve." Perhaps I should have stayed with Prince Ignacia. I huffed out another sigh.

The man—Owen—relented. "Very well." He ordered the guards to halt our march and rest.

I'd been told that this sweltering place was called Slumbering Volcano. Beyond here lay a clue connected to Goddess Flaudia, which would lead me to Holy Maidenhood. I'd only found this out moments before we needed to depart, leaving me no time to tell Prince Ignacia where I was going. *He must be worried sick about me.* I'd tried to tell Owen, the man who led this expedition, that I would generously escort him, but he'd barely given me enough time to get myself out of the door, let alone tell anyone where I was going. *How inconsiderate.*

I settled onto a flat rock, and one of the guards brought over some water. After draining it, I felt a pinch of my fatigue fade away. "What is happening in the Sacred City of Zille anyway?" I asked.

Owen tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"Even I could see something was amiss at the cathedral!" I glared at Owen—was he mocking me?

"Oh." He cracked a smile. "My father usurped the Pope's throne from Tithia."

Something needled my heart as it dawned on me that Owen was with the mutinous zealots. "What if they think I support your cause?!"

"They may already believe that, seeing how you followed me out here."

I was outraged. All because Owen had neglected to mention this before, I could be considered a traitor.

"Not to worry," Owen added. "It won't be long before my father's reign is officially recognized."

"You don't know that!"

"Sure I do. Here." Owen handed me something.

"What is this?"

"A Spellbound Spyglass. Stand on that rock and point it in Zille's direction," Owen said.

I knew a Spellbound Spyglass was used to peer at distant locations, but I couldn't see how that would help. *He's wasting my time.* "What am I supposed to— What?! What is that?!" I saw something I never would have expected...something so sinister it made me tremble. "What am I looking at...?"

"Father must have welcomed L'lyeh."

"L'lyeh? Isn't that...the Goddess of Darkness?" That was something that I—the future Holy Maiden—should have never come in contact with. *What is Owen's father doing?*

While I felt a chill run down my spine, Owen went on as if we were discussing the weather. "Father venerates L'lyeh. Going forward, the cathedral will be a temple to L'lyeh rather than to Flaudia. Using L'lyeh's influence, he will enthrall the populace and rule over them. Not that I pretend to understand my father's motives..."

"Do you believe that the world would let that stand?!" I demanded. Tales of L'lyeh were told more like fairy tales than facts. Parents often scared their children with threats that the powerful Goddess of Darkness would take them away if they misbehaved. *I must become the Holy Maiden and put an end to this.* I'd only begun this journey to become the Holy Maiden to help my sweet Prince Ignacia, but now I was going to save a foreign nation as well. Lucky for them, nothing was impossible for me.

Paladins in Chains

With the satisfying *kaplunk* of a bamboo water feature for ambience, I was enjoying a soak in the hot-spring-fed bath. Tarte, Tithia, Cocoa, Mimoza, and I were crammed into the large tub included with our room. None of us were bothered by the tight quarters, though, as we enjoyed the warmth of the water.

We were staying in our go-to inn in Snowdia, famous for their in-room baths and good dinners. If the hot spring baths weren't enough of a giveaway, parts of the inn's architecture were Japanese inspired, although its overall theme remained medieval fantasy. Now that our party had grown to eight, we'd decided to get a boys' room and a girls' room, rather than share a room like we'd done in the past.

We had gone into Underworld Abbey in pursuit of Rodney Hervas—the usurper of Crystalline Cathedral—only to be thrown into L'lyeh's boss room. After fleeing for our lives and surviving an encounter with a Hydra after that, we'd finally made it back to our inn, utterly exhausted. We wouldn't have defeated the Hydra so easily if not for the Dragonrider who'd helped Kent and Cocoa on their journey and brought them back to us. The pair hadn't told me much about the mysterious Dragonrider, but I was completely grateful to him, whoever he was.

"Let's take the day and rest up," I said, nestled in the tub. "And we should do something to celebrate Kent and Cocoa getting their new jobs."

Cocoa smiled. "That would be wonderful. It feels great to be an Incantor." Now, all we had to do was grind more levels until we attained our awakened jobs. "As for Kent... He wanted to be a Shield Knight at first but now he's a Knight...all so he could become a Dragonrider like the one we met." She grinned.

"The Dragonrider who saved me!" Tarte trilled. "He was supurr

cool!” She trilled some more as she pressed Cocoa with question after question. “Why were you together? Will we see him again? What does he like? I’d love to thank him!”

“We were on our way to Blume when we ran into the Dragonrider—Lord Rudith,” Cocoa said.

I choked on my own breath.

“Sharon?!” All the girls turned to me.

There was no way I could tell them that Rudith was my brother...without divulging my identity, anyway. It wasn’t like I *had* to keep it secret. None of my friends would treat me any differently if they knew. But right now, Ignacia—the crown prince of Farblume and my ex-fiancé—was in this country. That spelled trouble—the kind of trouble I didn’t want to rope my friends into.

It’s not right to keep lying to them, though. Maybe I’d tell them everything once the dust settled around this cathedral business. I brought my breathing back under control and lifted my head. “Sorry... What happened then?” I encouraged Cocoa to continue.

“Um, since we weren’t going to get to Farblume until late at night, he offered to give us a ride. Plus, he gave Kent some training once we made it there. Then, we ran into him by coincidence in Farming Village after I got my advanced job. He gave us another ride on his Dragon because we were in such a hurry. Isn’t he so generous?”

“Wow. He sounds like a wonderfur gentleman,” Tarte supplied.

“What a fortunate encounter,” Tithia said.

“I’d love to spar with him too, one day,” Mimoza added.

Tarte was getting dreamy eyes, but she could do so much better than my brother, who was kind of a gym bro with a short fuse. Unfortunately, too many ladies fell for his good looks.

Wait, is he in Erenzi to look for me?! That’d be just another headache I didn’t need when we were scrambling to deal with Hervas. Knowing Rudith, though, he was genuinely worried about me. I sank a little farther into the bath, pondering my options. Rudith was the kind of person you could always spot a mile away, so I was pretty sure I could avoid him. I could send a letter to my family, but that would tip off Rudith to my current location.

I'll have to put a pin in it, I decided. The issue with Hervas demanded my full attention. Currently, I was sitting at level 72—not too bad, but still a little ways off from being able to achieve my awakened job of Archbishop. "Should we deal with Hervas now or decide on our next destination for grinding levels? Ooh, we could hunt for Dragons...or go to that dungeon near Snowdia. Yeah, the dungeon would be cool." We could stretch our legs a little farther afield or knock out a few levels around here and conquer some dungeons while we were at it.

Overview:
Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 72
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 (Level 5): Creates a barrier around the target.
Cure: Heals status conditions.
Boost Holy Element (Level 1): Strengthens the user's Holy element.
Increase Resistance (Level 5): Raises the user's resistance against 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)

"Wh-What's wrong?" I asked, noticing the girls staring at me like field mice in the face of a cobra.

"I-It's just that...your leveling is truly amazing!" Tithia said. "I will do it! This is a trial I must conquer in order to become stronger...!"

"I'm going to become stronger too," Tarte growled with determination.

Though I didn't see how my simple method of leveling could seem like a grand ordeal, if Tithia was pumped about getting stronger, I'd meet her enthusiasm.

Mimoza interrupted with, "Hervas may still be in the abbey. What do you think?"

"Oh, right. He shouldn't get out of Underworld Abbey so quickly, especially when he can't use the Gates like we can...and when he's so weak," I answered. Hervas had been level 46. I almost wanted to commend him for making it to the depths of the abbey, except that I knew it was all thanks to his poor Templar human shields.

Mimoza considered my assessment. "If Hervas is away from Zille...could we take back the cathedral? Even if we can't, we may be able to save our fellow Paladins imprisoned there."

"Yes... You're right." If we wanted to save Tithia's followers, now was our best chance. "Once we dry off, let's bring it up to the boys."

"We can finally save them...!" Tithia cracked a smile of relief. "Let's go discuss it," she said, practically jumping out of the tub.

Once we got dressed, we convened in the girls' room proper for a strategy meeting, which felt more casual than it was because we all wore the inn's yukata—a traditionally Japanese loungewear, though accented with lace and other western aspects. Back in the game, plenty of players had stayed at the inn just to have their characters wear the yukata, even though the inn offered no other buffs for staying here. There was no time to go down memory lane, though.

"Well, that's what we're thinking," I said, concluding my review of the conversation with Mimoza about at least rescuing the Paladins from the cathedral while Hervas was away. "How do we feel about that?"

"We're storming into the cathedral?!" Kent reacted first.

"This would be the best time for it, when Hervas is away. Even if we can't retake the cathedral immediately, it is critical to diminish his forces," Leroy said, as though he couldn't wait a day longer to place

Tithia back on the papal throne.

"Yes... I am concerned that we still don't know Hervas's end goal," Tithia said. "But we need to save those Paladins as soon as possible."

"Then we should go now," I suggested. And so, we decided to set out once more for the cathedral in Zille.

"Wait. *Now*, now?!" practically the entire group said in unison, their eyes flying wide. I got it—they were tired, especially after the day we'd had. I was on the verge of falling asleep myself, which meant...we'd go the following night. It wouldn't be so easy that we could barge in through the front gates in broad daylight.

"I thought today may be better than tomorrow," I admitted. "We don't know when Hervas will return. But we must all be exhausted—I know I am." As a supporter, I had it easier than Kent, Mimoza, and Blitz, who fought on the front lines. Besides, Tarte and Tithia were only seven years old.

Let's call it a night... I thought, wanting to take back the reckless suggestion I'd made to storm the place tonight. "We'll go tomorrow night," I said. "It'd be tough, physically and mentally, to take on the challenge tonight—"

"No. We should go tonight," Tithia said, much to my surprise.

"Ti?"

She locked her determined gaze on all of us, fists held tight above her knees. "I understand that everyone is tired...but I know my Paladins are suffering in prison cells. If there is any way to save them...I want to get them out as soon as possible."

There was nothing I could say to that, least of all a suggestion that we postpone the mission because we were a little tired. Solemnity hung in the air in a sobering reminder that Tithia, no matter how young, was still the Pope. I nodded quietly and looked to the others. Despite their busy day—granted, not as busy as ours—Kent and Cocoa looked ready. Leroy's willingness went without saying, while Mimoza and Blitz were Paladins themselves and wouldn't go against Tithia's wishes.

That left Tarte. A glance her way showed her placing a hand on her Adventure Bracelet. "I wouldn't want to be caged a minute

longer than I had to be. Let's go help them now! I am your Alchemeowst, Your Holiness! You can count on me!" she promised, even though she had to be more tired than any of us. I watched with admiration as she began laying out vials of potion on the table—a stockpile she'd been growing in her spare time. "These are all Energizer Purrtions I crafted. With these, we can pounce on the enemy tonight!"

"Wow!" I breathed, drawing the group's attention. It was incredible to see that a potion that had been useless in the game was coming in clutch right now.

"As Meowster could tell you, these Energizer Purrtions will let us power through for three hours with no need for sleep or rest—and they boost our stats a little," Tarte explained.

"That's one crazy potion...!" Kent stared at the vials, each of which held a translucent red liquid.

In the game, that minuscule buff was all we'd received from it. The effects Tarte had explained were listed in the item's description in the game, but that wasn't really something that could be reflected in a game character. Besides, its ingredients were time-consuming enough to collect that the players had deemed the minor buff not worth the time. Of course, I'd never hesitated to reach for one if I'd needed to!

Tears sparkling in her eyes, Tithia wrapped her arms around Tarte. "Tarte...! Thank you, thank you, thank you..."

"Of course!" Tarte purred.

Seeing them embrace like that, I told myself that failure wasn't an option.

***

We all went to Zille through the Gates and decided to split up. Tithia, Cocoa, Blitz, and I would save the imprisoned Paladins while Leroy, Tarte, Kent, and Mimoza would scope out the cathedrals and serve as a distraction should we need it. Leroy, adamant that Tithia not suffer a scratch, was the first to volunteer to serve as a distraction, adding that his status would draw even more attention.

"Let's do this." Pulling low the hoods of our coats, we infiltrated the Crystalline Cathedral through a hidden passage that even I hadn't known about—it had been a shock when Leroy had told me about it. The same passage apparently also led to other locations around the city.

"If anything seems amiss, Your Holiness, you must run."

"Don't risk your safety for me, Leroy. Our goal is to recover our allies," Tithia said. It wouldn't do us any good for the rescuers to become the captives.

Leroy knelt before his Pope. "Of course." Then, he turned to me. "Sharon, I am trusting you to protect her."

"I'm not going to let anything happen to our captain!" I promised. "We got this. Right, everyone?"

"Yeah!"

Pumping our fists into the air, we each drank an Energizer Potion.

"It's a cola!" I realized. It was delicious, but thanks to the carbonation I'd only barely managed to chug it. I hadn't expected that, but I supposed most energy drinks were carbonated.

"Whoa, I felt my tongue tingle...but I'm not tired anymore. Let's do this!" Kent shouted, inspiring confidence in the rest of us.

Tarte huffed and trilled, "For Ti! For Ti! For Ti!"

"Don't get carried away!" I quickly warned her.

The four of us had entered the cathedral and were making our way toward its underground cells. This late at night, there weren't many people down here, but the occasional Templar standing watch forced us to move carefully.

"The interior is as gorgeous as the exterior," Cocoa sighed. "I know we're not here to enjoy the view, but..."

I shared her sentiment entirely. Crystalline Cathedral was an icon of Zille. Plenty of crystals shimmered on the inside to match its exterior. Together, they shone like the aurora borealis, mesmerizing me. The way they refracted the moonlight under the vaulted ceiling was truly breathtaking. *I wish we could have walked through the front door for a tour,* I thought. *We* will *come through the front door—once we take it back from Hervas.*

"Night watch," Blitz announced from the front of our formation.

We halted, each holding our breath as we watched the pair of patrolling Templars from behind a pillar.

One of the Templars yawned. "I wouldn't have minded His Holiness's orders to increase patrol if there were at least some action."

"And he still hasn't returned. What's going to become of Zille?" the other responded.

I cracked a grin. Sneaking in tonight had been a great call.

After waiting for the Templars to move out of earshot, I said, "It doesn't sound like they idolize Hervas or anything."

"Their salary hasn't changed, I imagine." Blitz pointed to a door. "This way." He opened it to reveal a staircase descending underground.

If I hadn't been accompanied by people who knew the structure of the cathedral, I would have walked right past that door.

"Mana Detection! Sharon, there are more people coming around the corner behind us!" Cocoa warned.

"Let's go down," I said. We all rushed into the shadow of the stairwell just before we heard footsteps pass the top of the stairs. I blew out a breath. "That almost gave me a heart attack...but we're almost there. Are you okay, Ti?"

Tithia looked more nervous than I was. "Yes," she answered stiffly and took a few deep breaths.

Of course, there had to be Templars guarding the cells too. We couldn't expect to avoid combat from here on out. Hopefully, we'd be able to deal with them as planned—knock them out and lock them up in the Paladins' place.

An entrance to the row of cells stood close to the bottom of the stairs, guarded by a single Templar.

Blitz reached for his sword. "Allow me—"

"Wait," Cocoa said, gripping her staff. Before she'd even explained it, I knew her plan. "I have a Skill that puts a target to sleep. It would be quiet and less likely to alert any other guards. Spindle Sleep." She whispered the spell like a lullaby.

The Templar blinked a few times, rubbed his eyes, then collapsed

to the floor, fast asleep.

"Wow... This way we can rescue the Paladins without hurting anyone," Tithia said with quiet excitement.

Cocoa beamed. "You can leave it to me, Ti!"

"Let's keep moving," Blitz said and cracked open the door that had been guarded by the now-snoozing Templar. "Another Templar is standing guard."

"I'll put him to sleep," Cocoa said.

"Yes, please," Tithia urged her.

Cocoa used her Skill through the crack in the door, and we soon heard a quiet thud.

Blitz opened the door the rest of the way. "All clear." He deftly tied up the unconscious Templar, lest he wake up and attack us.

As soon as the Templar was bound, Tithia bolted into the cell block proper—before we could even clear the room! I ran after her as she called out, "Is everyone all right?!"

"Your Holiness?!" A mixture of Paladins and Templars had responded. From what I could see, there were about two hundred of them, all looking like they'd barely been fed.

Based on Leroy's estimate, half of the Templars—about five hundred of them—had stayed loyal to Tithia, and there were thirty-two Paladins, including those in training. That made thirty Paladins in the cells once we accounted for Mimoza and Blitz already being with us. I wondered if those who weren't accounted for here were in hiding, still eluding Hervas's clutches.

"The rest could be in Flaudia Cathedral," Blitz said from behind me. It seemed likely, if they had an underground prison over there too. By putting his captives in two baskets, Hervas could have even set the prisoners up as mutual hostages. Fortunately, there had been no booby traps or anything else that could have harmed Tithia as she ran in.

Now, she knelt before the bars of their cells. "I'm sorry it took me so long. I don't deserve your loyalty..."

"No!" the Paladins and Templars protested.

"We are the ones who have failed to protect you."

"Thank Flaudia you're safe..."

Despite their grueling conditions, they all looked more concerned with Tithia's well-being than their own.

Quickly, Blitz came over with the key he'd taken from the guard's belt and unlocked the cell door. Just as he did, a rumbling explosion shook the ceiling.

Tithia's eyes widened. "Tarte...?!" By the look on her face, she felt no doubt that the explosion had come from Tarte's Molotov. *Is she some sort of explosion sommelier?* "What do we do, Sharon? They may be in danger...!"

"They may be, but we can't leave now," I said. If there had only been a handful of prisoners, we might have taken them with us, but there was no way we could go join our other party with two hundred of them in tow.

As I stood contemplating our next move, Blitz inhaled deeply. "Fall in!" he bellowed.

I jolted at the sudden boom of his voice but the Paladins and Templars quickly fell into formation, their bodies fueled by nothing but grit. I watched their sharp, coordinated movements with amazement.

Once movement ceased, Blitz continued. "These are your orders. Templars will form teams of five or six and make their escape. All sixteen Paladins will assist any Templars that need it and report to me once you make it out. Go."

"Yes, sir!" All of them saluted Blitz and jumped into action with stunning efficiency.

I better keep up, I thought. "Wide Heal! Strengthen!" I cast buff after buff as they poured out of the cells—the best I could do right now. Tithia followed my lead and began healing them with her Compassion Skill.

Then, Cocoa shouted, "Guards are running in! Maybe because of the explosion!"

"We need to get out of here now!" I said.

"I'll lead!" Blitz sprinted up the stairs, sword drawn. In just one hit, he took out the first guard. Actually, he'd done little more than flourish his sword and the guard had gone down.

"H-He's so strong...! I knew Blitz would be!"

"Wow!"

Paladins and Templars alike showered Blitz with compliments. It wasn't even surprising to me, knowing how massive of a level advantage Blitz must have had on the guards. *It's lonely at the top, isn't it?* Shaking off those thoughts, we raced up to the top floor of Crystalline Cathedral, where the explosion had come from.

The room there—originally Tithia's—had also been taken over by Hervas. Now, the room had been blown to smithereens. In the center of the room stood Leroy with a Molotov in his hand, an enemy Templar fallen beside him. *Did he snap,* I wondered, *knowing that oily Hervas had used the room of his beloved Tithia?*

"No," Leroy said to me, even though I'd kept those thoughts to myself.

"Kent, what's going on?" Cocoa asked, scanning the room.

Leroy shifted his gaze to the wall—where the black lines of L'lyeh's magic circle had been marked.

"We were about to destroy that magic circle when we were spotted...so Tarte and Leroy tried their Molotovs," Kent explained.

"I see." I walked up to the magic circle. It gave off some kind of energy that made my skin crawl. I didn't know how, exactly, but that thing was bad news—I felt it in my bones. A glance behind me showed that Tithia, Tarte, Cocoa, and Blitz all sensed the same thing. *If even a Molotov can't destroy it, it's a powerful spell.* Maybe it was related to Hervas trying to bring L'lyeh back. Hopefully, progressing my quest would deactivate it at some point. "There's no time to think about it now. We need to get out!"

Leroy nodded his agreement. "We don't have a choice."

Just as we all turned to make a run for it, footsteps came drumming from outside, and a whole team of Templars flooded into the room. *I smell a rumble brewing...*

But then, the Templar at the front of the group took a knee. "Your Holiness, you must leave now!"

"Frustratingly, many Templars have sided with Hervas."

"I wish I could do more than pray for your safe return."

"I promise...I will come back," Tithia said.

Apparently, not all Templars had truly switched loyalties. Clearly,

they were still devoted to Tithia.

"Let's go now!" I announced.

Thanks in part to the Templars who'd come to our aid, we safely escaped the Crystalline Cathedral.

***

Once we were out, we used the Gates to return to Snowdia. By the time we made it back to the inn, we were starting to crash from our Energizer Potions—our three hours were up.

I took a look around the room. "Great job, everyone. I'm glad we all made it back unhurt." They each gave me the kind of delirious smile that showed they were moments away from conking out.

Tithia, though, remained standing, her hands clasped before her chest and her face bright with relief. "Finally, we were able to free them. I can't thank you enough for it, especially when we were already exhausted."

"Don't mention it. It's what friends do," Kent said.

"But they're all on the run now, on their own..." Cocoa said. "There's no telling if they've really made it out unscathed."

True, we didn't yet know what had become of the prisoners we'd rescued. But with Hervas still away and the discovery that we had allies biding their time under Hervas's rule...there was hope, for sure.

Blitz took a step forward. "I will follow up with them. There's a network we all use to communicate with each other."

"We shall leave that to you and Mimoza, seeing as you're the Paladins," Leroy said. "The rest of us need to decide what to do about Hervas. Somehow, I feel that we need to deal with that magic circle in his room sooner rather than later. The question is how."

We had no weapon in our current arsenal that could do anything to that magic circle. "I agree with letting Blitz and Mimoza handle the other Paladins and Templars. I'm concerned about both Rodney and his son, who we saw in Slumbering Volcano," I said, and everyone seemed to agree. "And we need to raise our levels so we can attain our awakened jobs as soon as possible."

“What?” they all answered in unison.
I stared right back at them. *What do you mean “what?”*



Into Dragon's Den

I was woken by snow-refracted light coming through the window. With a huge yawn, I muttered, "I think I'm hungry..." *And I slept like a log.* When I sat up in bed, I could see that Tithia and Tarte were still asleep but Cocoa and Mimoza were out of bed. Judging by the light, it was early afternoon. "I should get up too...and get ready for the hunt." Holding back another yawn, I climbed out of bed and got dressed.

Down in the dining room, Cocoa, Kent, and Leroy were eating at one of the tables.

"Good morning, Sharon!" Cocoa and Kent called first.

"Good morning," Leroy added a moment later.

"You beat me to it... Good morning," I said, taking my seat and joining them for brunch. They explained that Blitz and Mimoza were already out attempting to make contact with the freed Paladins.

While we ate, I tried to plan out how to grind more levels—ideally, I wanted a method that would efficiently net us EXP and some good items. The camp-and-farm method seemed to fit the bill, and we'd be even more efficient with Tarte's and Cocoa's Skills. *Yeah, that will work nicely...*

"You have that look you get when you're scheming something," Leroy said.

"What? Me?!" *Is that what I get for brainstorming an optimal grinding strategy for us?!* Cocoa and Kent were grinning across the table, showing no sign of defending me.

"It's a compliment. I trust you wholeheartedly," Leroy said coolly, his eyes closed.

I sighed. "You think that's going to make up for it...?" Nonetheless, I shrugged. "Well, I guess I'm honored."

***

“No, no, no... This place was never meant for humans.” Kent frantically scanned the area, his knees shaking. Cocoa and Tarte stood beside him, also quaking in their boots. Tithia was wide-eyed and frozen, and even Blitz and Mimoza hadn’t said a word.

“We’re fine!” I said, smiling at them. “We’re stronger than them, so there’s no problem!” I gave them a confidence-boosting thumbs-up.

“No, no, no, no, no...” Kent shook his head furiously. “Look at how many Dragons there are! And how many different types *are* there?! When you said we were going to hunt Dragons to level up, I thought you meant Wyverns... Who wouldn’t?”

“Wyverns won’t net us enough EXP anymore,” I said.

Kent only blew out a shaky breath.

We had entered Dragon’s Den—the dungeon nestled between Deep Ravine and Slumbering Volcano. This was the perfect hunting ground for racking up EXP and looting good items. *Leveling and item farming at the same time really gets your dopamine pumping.*

A large cave marked the entrance of the dungeon, leading to a valley. A steep cliff at the end of the valley held the Dragons’ nests, where you could find their eggs and hatchlings.

To answer Kent’s question, there were six types of Dragons here. The most common were Red Dragons, Green Dragons, Yellow Dragons, and Blue Dragons. Then, there were the rarer and stronger White Dragon and the boss Black Dragon.

Tithia heaved out a breath. “Goddess Flaudia, please protect us...”

“You only need to trust in my support, and you’ll be all right. Goddess’s Protection!” I cast other buffs on Tithia as she prayed.

Now, we were ready to hunt!

“Goddess’s Smite!”

“Purrtion Throw!” Tarte shouted just as my Skill landed. Soon, a loud explosion followed, which I estimated was about fifty percent more explosive than before, all thanks to the Fire Potions Tarte was drinking—a busted potion that buffed all Fire Skills by twenty percent. Its only downside was that its ingredients were always a hassle to collect. Even with the buff, Dragons didn’t go down easily.

That was where Cocoa's new Incantor Skills came in. "Here we go! Trampling Warsong...and Moment of Bliss!" Trampling Warsong lowered the target's Defense while Moment of Bliss increased the EXP we'd earn from defeating the target.

"Goddess's Flash!" Mimoza's AOE Skill wiped out the weakened Dragons, turning them into bursts of light and a few dropped Dragon Fangs.

Meanwhile, Kent stood his ground, acting as our tank by shouldering all the hate of the Dragons Blitz and Mimoza lured over. He whooshed out a breath. "These Dragons are scary! But we're taking them down. We're doing it. We're really doing it!" Even though Kent still seemed nervous, he also seemed equally exhilarated now.

And that's what going to a new dungeon is all about! I get it! Grinning like a fool, I applied more buffs to Kent.

Then, Blitz returned to our spot with three Dragons in tow. I pretended not to notice how blanched his face looked.

"Taunt!" Kent shouted without missing a beat. Immediately, the three Dragons set their sights on Kent. Before they reached him, Leroy buffed our tank's defenses while I reapplied my buffs to Blitz so he could go back out and lure more Dragons.

We kept the cycle going as the day flew by.

As soon as we made it into the cave to set up camp, Kent collapsed onto the ground, panting. "Words can't describe how incredible this day was..." He clutched his chest. "My heart's still pounding so fast." Cocoa and Tarte nodded beside him. I was glad everyone'd had fun.

This cave had once been a Dragon's nest, until all the hatchlings had flown off or died. Players had always used this cave as a safe haven in Dragon's Den. Knowing that all my friends were exhausted from their first day in a brand-new dungeon, I volunteered to set up camp—which only involved pitching our tent and pulling out our camping table and chairs from my Storage.

"We worked really hard today, so I think good meat should be on the menu, don't you?" I laid out some freshly cooked dishes.

"Meat!" Kent jumped up.

The table was filled with sizzling steak, plump sausages on the bone, steamed vegetables, and cheesy bread. My mouth was watering too. The Adventure Bracelet was an absolute necessity in this world, and the fact that I could keep hot food stored in it was high upon my personal list of reasons why. I had no doubt the others had stocked up on their favorite dishes too.

While I set the table, Leroy brewed tea and placed a handkerchief on Tithia's chair—but no one else's.

"Let's dig in!" we said, and we did just that. After we racked up so many levels, this had been a very productive day for us.

***

Soon, the sun rose on a new day.

"It's a beautiful morning for a boss hunt!" I announced, wiping any excitement off of everyone else's faces.

Black Dragon—the boss of Dragon's Den—had pitch-black eyes and wings. At nearly double the size of other Dragons, the boss would be intimidating just to behold. On top of that juicy EXP, there was one item it dropped that I wanted really badly. I'd always known we'd be hunting a Black Dragon as soon as our level was high enough.

Wind sliced through the valley, its shrieking sound echoing off the surrounding hills. Players had often described the sound as a Dragon's cry or a Dragon's lullaby, but coupled with the hopeless expressions on my friends' faces, it instead brought to mind the sound of someone screaming.

"Um...we're going to be fine. Look, we gained a lot of levels yesterday," I said.

"Yeah. My level went up to 80 yesterday. I don't get it," Kent said. "I don't *get* it..." he repeated, his eyes not quite focused.

Levels had gone up even faster in the game, so I felt bad that we weren't improving any more quickly. "Now...Tarte, can you hand out the potion we talked about?"

"Yes, Meowster!" Tarte purred and whipped out her fancy new

concoction from her Bag.

"That's the one you crafted from the items those Dragons dropped?" Kent asked.

"Yes! Ti helped me make them." Tarte grinned at Tithia, who proudly nodded. The young Pope had volunteered to help, saying that her day hadn't been as arduous as the rest of ours. "They're Roaring Purrtions!"

The red Roaring Potions were sealed in vials featuring Dragon designs. They were crafted with Dragon Fangs, Dragon Scales, Dragon Blood—all dropped by Dragons—and Fire Flowers, which I had harvested back in Paradise of Erungoa. I would have asked Tarte to make them a lot sooner, but there was no way we could have gotten our hands on these ingredients before now. In this world, there were barely any adventurers capable of hunting Dragons, so there were barely any of their drop items on the market, even at the Guild.

"Drinking it will raise your Attack by ten purrcent for ten minutes!" Tarte explained.

"You told me last night... I still can't believe it," Kent said, thirstily eyeing the bottle in Tarte's hand. Though he was our tank, I would ask him to chip in with attacks whenever he could. Even Leroy had some offensive Skills, so I'd be the only one who wouldn't attack at all, especially because I could probably handle all the support on my own this time.

Tarte passed out the Roaring Potions to the rest of the party. "Don't forget to drink the next one before the ten minutes are up," she said.

"I'll try to keep time for you, but don't hesitate to make a judgment call. We won't always be able to drink it at the ten-minute mark. For example, if you're not sure if you'll get a chance to drink the next one before it runs out, you might want to take it a few minutes early."

"Got it," Kent said and the rest of the party nodded.

Hunting the other Dragons as a warm-up, we made our way to our confrontation with Black Dragon. That morning, I'd shared with the party the strategy to beat the boss. It would be a formidable

enemy, but we wouldn't lose as long as we kept our defenses up. Now that we'd leveled up so much, we had more tools in our arsenal, along with a decent stock of healing items. Quietly, I mourned my days of playing *Reas*, when I could use any item without worrying about it running out.

We passed Dragon nest after Dragon nest until we came to the largest one we'd seen—a Black Dragon's lair.

"Th-That's the Black Dragon?!" Tarte hissed.

"It's huge...!" Tithia chimed in, her voice shaking. Compared to the Dragons we'd been facing, the Black Dragon was much bigger and stronger.

"Yep. Pretty imposing, isn't it?" I said. Nevertheless, we had everything we needed to take it down.

While Leroy and I reapplied buffs to our party, Kent started taking deep breaths. Blitz and Mimoza began doing the same, and then everyone else followed suit.

Tarte huffed. "It's nice to have a mewment to breathe before the battle starts, unlike when we were thrown into L'lyeh's room."

"We must be thankful that we are still alive," Tithia added.

Both girls seemed calmer now, each giving me a nod to let me know they were ready.

"I admire your strength, Your Holiness," Leroy whispered.

Then, they all drank their Roaring Potions.

"I feel power flowing through me... This is incredible!" Mimoza said, inspecting her body. The physical fighters among us, who regularly trained, probably felt the ten percent buff more than the others.

"Okay... Let's go!" On my mark, we scattered to our positions.

Kent sprinted straight toward the Black Dragon. "Let's do it! Taunt, and Fatal Blow!"

Good! Kent's attack landed, drawing a roar from the boss. "Now we all attack!" I shouted. We all jumped in and used our Skills, forcing our knees to stop shaking in the face of the Black Dragon's ferocious roar.

"Purrtion Throw!" Tarte's attack caused an explosion.

"Arrow of light, carve us a path!" Cocoa fired an arrow of light,

dual-wielding her staff and Tome, which did decent damage. Blitz, Mimoza, Tithia, and Leroy all followed up with their own attacks.

Great start, I silently noted.

The Black Dragon shrieked, black fog seeping from its maw.

"Goddess's Smite!" I cast my Skill on Cocoa, then turned to Kent. "Goddess's Protection! Cure!" I'd used Cure to break the status condition caused by the Black Dragon's Affliction—the black fog. The fog that shrouded the Black Dragon not only hid the boss from view but caused status conditions as well. Without prior knowledge, it could be a tricky thing to deal with.

"Thanks! If you hadn't told me about that, it would have messed me up!" Kent said. He'd managed to keep his cool because I'd told him about the affliction beforehand.

"I got your back! Don't worry!" I answered.

If the affliction was left unchecked, it could blind the whole party and leave you with no means to defeat the Black Dragon.

"Goddess's Hammerfall! Mana Rations!" Leroy shouted.

"So far, so good... Wide Heal!" I matched my Skill to Leroy's so I could heal the whole party as we took a moment to see what the Black Dragon would do next—it inhaled deeply.

"Dragon's Breath! Everyone but Kent, fall back to where I am!" I commanded.

"Got it!"

The frontline fighters stepped back. Even I couldn't heal everyone in time if the whole party were to take a direct hit of Dragon's Breath. I was piling buff after buff on Kent when the Black Dragon breathed out black smoke—instead of burning, it made me feel clammy all over, sending a shiver down my spine. *I'm glad it isn't hot, but that's not an attack I want to take over and over.*

"Goddess's Protection. Increase Resistance. Unyielding Strength." I added more of the buffs that were about to run out, and the Dragon's Breath dissipated—there wouldn't be another one for a while. "Drink your Roaring Potions! We're back on the offensive!"

"All right, Taunt!"

After we confirmed that Kent had held off the Black Dragon, we all launched our attacks. Halfway through, the boss thrashed its tail,

but Kent caught that too. Giving out a powerful bellow, Kent turned, throwing the Black Dragon by its tail, then used Taunt again to concentrate its hate on himself.

How fast you learn, Kent!

By flapping its huge wings, the Black Dragon managed to stabilize midair, its hateful eyes glued on Kent. It breathed in once again—furiously enough to shake the very air around us. Then it let out an earsplitting roar.

"That's its final scream, like Meowster said!" Tarte yowled, staggering a step back.

But we couldn't afford to lose momentum now. "It's all right," I told the party. "It's going to fire its scales at us but we can take it!"

"If only we could have taken it out without giving it a chance to do so..." Leroy said. "Goddess's Hammerfall."

Then, a barrage of scales assaulted us.

Mimoza leaped in front of us and began deflecting the barrage of scales, but she couldn't keep up with the hundreds of projectiles flying our way—dozens nicked her arms, blood splattering at every contact.

"Goddess's Protection! Heal!"

Just as I used my Skills, the Black Dragon lashed its tail.

"Steadfast Leader!" Kent shouted, taking the hit for us. This Skill negated all attacks for sixty seconds, so we'd arranged beforehand when Kent would use the Skill.

"Here we go," Cocoa joined in. "One, ten, a hundred, a thousand—infinite strands bind those wings and bring judgment down upon the beast!" The lyrical sentence she wove overflowed with mana. That fact, combined with the shimmering visual effect that indicated her Skill use, made it clear she was a force to be reckoned with. With an earthshaking boom, strings of mana ensnared the Black Dragon, immobilizing it—then, a massive mana hammer came crashing down. After one final roar, the Black Dragon faded into particles of light.

"We...did it," Kent breathed.

The others began murmuring too.

"Wow."

"We really won."

"I can't believe we defeated the boss..."

"Wide Heal! Strengthen!" After casting Strengthen on everybody, I said, "Yeah, we defeated the Black Dragon! Let's grab those dropped items and move on!!!"

Kent—the one who'd been closest to the boss—picked up the items and asked, "Move on?"

When each player defeated the Black Dragon for the first time, they were given a surprise gift, placed in a treasure chest waiting for us deeper inside the cave.

"It's something I absolutely need in order to achieve my dream of seeing everything this world has to offer. Of course, it's going to be useful for all of you too...except, Kent may not need it for long."

"Why me?!" Kent protested...in vain. I wasn't going to ruin the surprise for them.

"But where did you hear— There's no use in asking, is there?" Leroy said, resignation settling upon his face. *Perfect. He's not going to ask too many questions.*

After walking farther into the cave for a while, we came to a dead-end clearing with a dais at its center, holding a treasure chest.

"A treasure chest!" the party shouted, getting their second wind. There was something special about treasure chests that had that effect on people.

"So this is a treasure chest? I've never seen one before," Tithia said.

"I wonder what's inside," Tarte trilled. They seemed to be staring at me in silent demand.

"Let's open it together," I suggested.

"My heart is racing," Cocoa said.

"All right. I'll grab this end!" Kent said.

"Then...I'll hold this corner," Blitz chimed in.

Excitedly, the three of them positioned their hands to open the chest's lid. The rest of us placed our hands on the lid too. After a countdown, we opened the treasure chest. Beams of blinding light illuminated the clearing.

Tarte trilled excitedly. "It's so bright! I can't keep my eyes open!"

After a few moments, she moved her head back and forth as though she were looking around. “Can I open them now?!”

“You should be fine to open your eyes,” Leroy answered. “But what are those...? Some sort of whistle...?”

Inside the chest lay eight whistles, one for each of us—simple ones carved out of Dragon bone, attached to strings that would allow us to hang them around our necks. Taking one in my hand, I flashed the party a grin. “This is a Dragon Whistle! You can use it to summon a Dragon who’ll carry you on its back!”

“What?!” the party blurted.

Kent held his Dragon Whistle in his hand, muttering, “Really...?” then breathing, “Wow,” over and over again.

“Now going from city to city is going to be a breeze. Seeing all those places from the back of a Dragon must be magical,” I said dreamily, and the party looked at me like I was completely out of touch, which was a ridiculous accusation.

Once everyone picked up a Dragon Whistle of their own, I asked, “What did the Black Dragon drop?”

“I took a look around, and it only dropped these two items.” Kent showed me our loot.

“Oh, a Black Dragon Breath! That’s perfect for you, Kent,” I said, pointing at the greatsword. The other item was called Black Dragon Scale—a crafting item.

“Me?!”

“Black Dragon Breath is a dedicated weapon for Dragonriders. Even though Blitz and Mimoza each wield a sword, they won’t be able to use this one to its full potential,” I explained.

“Dedicated...” Kent repeated, fidgeting with the sword. There was nothing like getting your hands on an item that seemed to have been made just for you.

“Then Kent should use that sword,” Tarte said.

“B-But it’s a really rare one, isn’t it?” Kent replied. “I—”

“Stop. We’re going to get our hands on too many items to worry about their value. When we come across items that suit one of us well, that person should have it,” Leroy said, and no one objected.

“Thanks. I’m going to work hard with this sword to...huh?” Kent

tried to lift the sword and strike a pose with it...but found it too heavy to lift. Apparently, since Kent was still a Knight, he couldn't use the sword reserved for Dragonriders. "Wait, what am I supposed to do?! You guys trusted me with this..."

"You'll have to keep it in Storage until you become a Dragonrider," I said. "Keeping it with you won't be a problem. You just can't use it until then."

"I can't use it yet..." Kent whined, visibly disappointed.

"Don't worry. We're going to all get our awakened jobs soon. Our levels should go up to the 90s today, so you just have to wait a few more days," I encouraged.

Kent sighed. "I'd say that's ridiculous, but...I don't think anything is impossible for you, Sharon."

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In answer to the sharp, clear tone of our whistles, Dragons flew down from the sky. I reached my hand out to the one who came to me, and it nuzzled its scarlet head into my hand. *It's so cute.*

"Th-They really came!" Kent exclaimed.

"At the blow of a whistle..." Cocoa marveled.

The Dragon Whistle summoned a Dragon of a random color on its first use. My Dragon was a bright scarlet; Tarte's was light green; Leroy's and Kent's were blue; Cocoa's was a lighter blue; Blitz's was green; and Mimoza's was yellow. Most of these colors were pretty common, ones that I'd seen often among Dragons used as mounts in the game. The exception was my scarlet Dragon, which was rarer.

"I'm going to call mine," said Tithia, the only one who had yet to blow her whistle.

"You want to ride a Dragon alone? Wouldn't it be safer to ride on mine together?" Leroy suggested, overprotective as usual.

"I will be fine," Tithia said. At the sound of her whistle, another Dragon appeared from the clouds, drawing all of our eyes in astonishment. The Dragon was a brilliant sparkling white.

"My Dragon is white," Tithia said.

"It's beautiful," Tarte said.

"A perfect Dragon for you, Your Holiness," Leroy added.

While the rest of the party discussed Tithia's Dragon, I felt dumbstruck. In all the hours I'd put into *Reas*, I'd never seen a white Dragon. There was no telling whether Tithia was just super lucky, or if the white Dragon had come to her because she was the Pope. Other than its color, the Dragon was the same as the rest of ours. Either way, I felt grateful I'd been here to witness it. This was part of seeing everything in this world, after all.

"Now...why don't we fly back until we're close to the city?" I suggested.

"Purrfect!"

I gave my Dragon a gentle pat and climbed into the saddle that came pre-equipped on any Dragon summoned by the whistle. "Wow, I already love the view from here!"

"I'm getting on mine too!" Kent said, practically jumping onto his Dragon and letting out a cheer of amazement.

"M-Me too!" Tarte said.

"So am I!" Tithia joined in.

The girls each managed to hook a foot in the stirrups and pull themselves up by the reins. By the time they were saddled, so was the rest of the party.

"Okay," I called out. "Let's fly!"

"All right!" Kent answered, urging his Dragon after mine.

"Yes, Meowster!"

The party followed suit, in order of Tarte, Cocoa, Mimoza, Tithia, Leroy, and Blitz.

I forgot about our formation to guard Tithia! I realized, chastising myself for flying off first without any consideration. I'd been too excited to see the aerial view from my Dragon's back.

"We're so high up!" I shouted. The cold air felt nice after our heated battle.

"This is incredible," Leroy gasped. "We can see Zille from here." His eyes were glued to the city—the Crystalline Cathedral, in particular. No doubt he was thinking that Tithia was supposed to be there, not Hervas.

"I've never seen a bird's-eye view of where I live," Tithia said

thoughtfully. “So many more people live in this country, even more than we can see now.”

“I know what you mean,” I said. It felt strange to know that this world was now populated not by NPCs but by so many real people. Still, that just made me love this world all the more.

“All right, I’ll race you to Snowdia!” Kent shouted.

Tarte meowed in surprise. “We’ve barely ridden our Dragons for a minute!”

I took the opportunity to speed up my Dragon, and Kent quickly followed suit. “If I’m going to be a Dragonrider soon, I gotta win...!”

“Kent, you’re going too fast!” Cocoa called out.

Tarte’s Dragon passed Cocoa’s. “I can’t stop!” she yowled. Because Tarte was the lightest, her Dragon seemed to have an easy time speeding up—she soon passed Kent and caught up to me.

“Tarte and I tied for the win!” I announced when we arrived in Snowdia a short time later, thanks to our hasty Dragons.

“Purray!”

***

After hunting for a while longer, we all reached the required level to attain our awakened jobs. We each had a quest to complete, and we were going to get them done as quickly as possible.

In order to do that, we first returned to Snowdia before traveling to Zille once more. It was once again time for a job change.

When It Rains, It Pours

Our first stop upon returning to Zille was the Adventurer's Guild so we could sell the items we'd found and buy more Molotov ingredients. Thanks to us paying a premium for them, more and more adventurers were bringing them into the Guild, which was a win-win arrangement.

Tithia, Leroy, and the Paladins hung back at the inn so we didn't risk someone recognizing them here. Tarte, Kent, Cocoa, and I walked up to the counter and set one of the Dragon's drop items on it.

With a tense smile, Prim the receptionist said, "Um...let me show you to another room."

Once we were in the other room, I laid out several more items on the table—not all of them, of course. Even I knew that Prim might faint if we showed her our entire stock of Dragon items.

"I-I've never seen this many Dragon items at once..." Prim said. Kent and Cocoa were nodding along sympathetically.

"How meowch can we get for them? We're happy to barter," Tarte said, showing how comfortable she'd become with handling money and negotiating prices as she repeatedly bought and sold materials for her Alchemy. She'd grown so much since leaving the Cait Sith island. "There are a lot of additional materials we're looking fur."

"I see. To be honest, I can't give you an exact offer for these Dragon items right away. Could you give us some time? Oh, I can pay out our minimum price first," Prim said, giving us their minimum —five million liz. The Guild would then determine how much more our items were worth and pay us the difference later. That was a clear indication of how rare these items were.

My shrewd apprentice hadn't expected that high of a price, apparently. Tarte's eyes were wide and her tail was puffed up, like a cat that had been surprised. "Dragons are amazing."

"Amazing, sure..." Kent said. "I can't even wrap my mind around that much money."

"Yeah, I know..." Cocoa chimed in.

But if we want to grow stronger, we're going to need a lot more than five million. Leveling is an expensive process. "That works for us," I told Prim.

"Thank you," Prim said with relief. "Let me prepare your payment __"

"Look outside!" someone shouted from beyond the door.

Prim rushed to the door and opened it, revealing an adventurer who must have just run in from the street. Others whispered in speculation. "The sky isn't right! It's just not right!"

My party and I shared a look. "The sky...?" To figure out what that adventurer was talking about, we quickly headed outside.

"What...?" I stared up at the sky in incredulity. "What is that cloud?! It's too...sinister to be a thundercloud."

A dark cloud hung over the entire city of Zille, occasionally flashing dark purple. Staring at it, I had the strange sensation that it had rolled in from another world entirely. *Those are L'lyeh's colors,* I couldn't help but notice.

"Oh...! There's a crowd gathering in the central plaza," Prim said.

"We're going to check it out!" I said, and we bolted for the plaza. Many others in the city were doing the same, shouting to each other as they ran.

"Over there!"

"What's going on?!"

"What *is* that?!"

I had to see with my own eyes what was happening.

When we arrived at the plaza, everyone's attention was fixed on the main street—at something approaching from the south. I followed their gaze and found Templars marching in formation—and at the very center of the group, Rodney Hervas was leading the Goddess of Darkness by the chain that bound her hands.

"No..." I muttered.

The goddess was blindfolded as well, her deep burgundy hair draping over her mostly black clothes. She was so quiet that I

couldn’t tell what she was thinking—if she had any thoughts at all beyond her instincts as a monster.

“He really brought back L’lyeh...” I breathed. Regardless of how he’d accomplished it, this scene felt like a...cutscene, somehow. *That explains the dark cloud,* I thought. L’lyeh’s presence had disturbed the air, manifesting the dark-purple thundercloud.

“I’m sorry! I need to return to the Guild during emergencies like this. If you’ll come with me, I’ll get your payment ready!” Prim said.

“Got it,” I answered. Naturally, the Guild would need to investigate the cause of this sudden change—the branch was about to be overrun with members and staff rushing to do just that.

“Meowster...are Ti and the others all right?” Tarte asked.

“They should be okay but we should get back to the inn, and quick,” I said, earning nods from Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa. “At least the cloud is contained to Zille... No. It’s slowly—*really* slowly—spreading.”

Kent frowned at the sky. “Dammit! If I were stronger, I could detain Rodney here and now...” Balling his fists, Kent glared at Rodney, who was shrinking into the distance.

As soon as we returned to the inn, Tithia dove into my arms. “Sharon! Tarte! Cocoa! Kent! Are you all right?! When the sky darkened... Oh, I’m so glad you’re back.” Her little body still shaking, Tithia showed us a relieved smile. Seeing the dark cloud outside the window must have been nerve-racking. Worse, she couldn’t risk stepping outside to gain any information for fear of being recognized.

Quickly, I relayed what we had seen. “Hervas brought back L’lyeh. I think she’s the one casting the clouds in the sky. The clouds by themselves don’t seem to pose any immediate danger, but I don’t want to stay under them longer than I have to.”

“I see.” Leroy’s eyes turned cold. “How he managed to return unscathed is beyond me.”

“I can’t say I wasn’t surprised,” I said. When I’d seen that Hervas was at level 46, part of me had thought he wouldn’t make it out alive—but that would have made things far too easy.

“If only he had perished in the depths of Underworld Abbey,”

Leroy said, his voice colder than ice.

"Leroy!" I almost trembled from that coldness.

Tithia gently took her bishop's hand. "You mustn't say such things, Leroy."

"You are right... Forgive me, Your Holiness. I let my emotions get the better of me." Leroy smiled out of devotion to Tithia, though I doubted his opinion on Hervas had changed at all.

After splitting the initial payment we'd received from the Guild for the Dragon items, we began discussing our next moves. "Whatever we decide to do, our next step is to attain our awakened jobs," I said.

"Right. I never thought I'd reach level 100..." Kent trembled with excitement. "I can finally become a Dragonrider."

"Exciting, isn't it? We all need to switch our jobs at different locations—let's split up. Leroy and I will go to Flaudia Cathedral. Kent will go back to the Order of Knights in Blume, and Cocoa to Lief again. Is that okay?"

"Yeah!" Kent and Cocoa answered. Leroy was nodding in approval of my plan.

"Tarte, Ti, Blitz, and Mimoza will stand by. Keep Ti safe," I said.

"Yes, Meowster!"

"You can count on us," the Paladins chimed in.

"Thank you," Leroy said.

"I'm going to furmulate so much while you're away," Tarte huffed.

I chuckled, my heart melted by my apprentice's adorable enthusiasm. "I'm counting on you, Tarte."

"Shall we sneak in at night for ours?" Leroy asked. "After we were discovered last time, it's likely they've increased security—especially now that Hervas has returned."

"That's the problem, isn't it?" I contemplated the situation. Walking in during the day wasn't an option when they knew what Leroy looked like. "Hmm... Let me pose as a visitor and scope out the cathedral. We'll form our plan after that."

"Okay," Leroy agreed.

Kent and Cocoa stood, picking up their weapons. "Then, we'll head out to the Gate so that we can each go where we need to,"

Kent said.

"We'll try to come back as quickly as we can," Cocoa added.

"See you later," I said.

"Be careful!" Tarte trilled.

After walking Kent and Cocoa out to the front door of the inn, I decided I'd leave for the cathedral now. "I'll get going too," I announced.

"See you later, Meowster."

"Take care, Sharon," Tithia said as I left the inn.

I made my way to Flaudia Cathedral, imagining what it would be like now. The silver lining was that Hervas was in Crystalline Cathedral. Hopefully, most Templars would be stationed there, leaving Flaudia Cathedral lightly guarded.

"Charlotte?!" a voice called from behind. It was a voice I knew well—and loathed. Just the thought of whom the voice belonged to made my skin crawl.

Ignoring the call entirely, I kept walking, headed for the crowd I hoped to disappear into. *I just have to get there!* I thought, power walking like an Olympic champion, hastening my steps with Strengthen. If there had been a world record for power walking a city block, I would have set it.

"Zeno!" the voice called, and a gray-haired man several steps before me raised his hand in response. *Uh-oh.* "That's Charlotte! Stop her!" the voice commanded.

"What?! Y-Yes, sir!" Zeno quickly spread his arms and closed in on me, as if to block my way. He moved with the trained agility of a guard—I wouldn't get away without causing a scene.

He had to show up right when I can't afford to draw attention to myself... With no other option, I stopped and turned around. "I'm not going to run or hide. Do you have something to say to me...Prince Ignacia?" A breeze swept back my platinum blonde hair as I came face-to-face with someone I'd never wanted to see again—my ex-fiancé.

Ignacia seemed surprised by my attitude—speechless, even. Maybe those wide eyes were remembering the Charlotte Cocoriara who had once been his obedient fiancée. Too bad for him, I had

regained the memories of my previous life. He wasn't going to walk all over me anymore.

The prince stepped up to me, glowering through his surprise, while Zeno stood at my rear to keep me from running. "Where is Emilia?!" he raged. "If you had begged for my forgiveness, I would have considered granting it...but now?! Do you hate Emilia so badly for stealing me away from you that you'd hurt her?! What have you done to my sweet Emilia?!"

"Huh...?" I failed to comprehend Ignacia's rambling demand at first. Then, it registered. Emilia had disappeared, and he was convinced that I was the culprit, or at least the cause. *Emilia's disappeared?* It was news to me, so accusations didn't get more baseless than this. I didn't bother to hide my disdain as I simply said, "I don't know."

Ignacia gasped. "You still deny it!"

I sighed. "I really don't know." After managing to avoid him for so long, I'd just had to get spotted now. Luck wasn't on my side today. "Besides, I don't have time for this." I had to go scope out the cathedral. My eyes flickered to Flaudia Cathedral, which apparently gave me away.

"The cathedral," Zeno said.

"The cathedral? I knew you were the ones who took Emilia," Ignacia said, as if the church was somehow responsible for Emilia's disappearance. That's when I remembered that Emilia was a Healer. It made perfect sense for her to visit the cathedral.

"You still won't admit it? Just tell me where Emilia is! Then grovel for my forgiveness. If you do, I'll take you back to Farblume myself!" Ignacia offered, full of self-righteousness.

"No, thank you!" I turned on my heel—there was no reasoning with the prince. He could make this a lot messier by causing a scene, but I knew he didn't want that either. I was done taking orders from him. What more did he want from me, when he was the one who'd broken our engagement and gone so far as to exile me?

Once I started walking away, though, Ignacia followed, calling for me to stop relatively quietly as he tried to avoid drawing even more attention to himself.

Ignoring the prince completely, I walked over to Flaudia Cathedral. Visitors still trickled in and out, but there were noticeably fewer of them than before.

"Hey, Charlotte?! Are you seriously going in there? You're with the prince of Farblume—"

"Can't you be quiet already?" I turned, pointing my finger right at Ignacia's mouth. Mentioning Farblume—a nation in conflict with Erenzi—was asking for trouble.

The crown prince managed to catch my meaning and quickly swallowed his next words...though it didn't stop him from spewing other ones in their place. "What does a Dark Mage want from this cathedral anyway? Don't tell me you're praying for world peace here. Speaking of which, you should really smile more."

"Shut your mouth," I hissed before I could stop myself. I needed to regain my self-control, even if my outburst seemed to have finally stunned the prince into silence.

Inside the cathedral, priests and priestesses were bustling here and there. Some Templars walked among them, but they were few and far between. As expected, they must have concentrated their security around Hervas. *Perfect.* With a smirk on my face, I headed toward the room that held Flaudia's statue, just in case it had been reopened. Alas, the door to the Prayer Room remained firmly shut.

"You wanted to get into this room?" Ignacia asked cluelessly.

"It's the Prayer Room that holds the statue of Flaudia. I wanted to see the statue today, but it's been closed off," I explained, wondering if it would kill the crown prince to learn something new.

Ignacia's face brightened. "So Emilia came here to pray...? There could be a clue to her whereabouts inside." He reached for the door and tried to open it.

"Huh?! What do you think you're doing?!" I chastised him. That was a quick and easy way to get kicked out by the patrolling Templars.

"But—"

"No buts! If you want to be ignorant and foolish, that's your prerogative, but don't rope me into it!" I was sick of it—I didn't want anything to do with him anymore.

Ignacia looked visibly shaken. "B-B-But aren't you concerned for Emilia's safety?!"

"No?" *Why would I be?*

"Dammit, why—" Ignacia's frustrated grunt was cut off by a *crack*.

I turned to the source of the sound and found the door slightly ajar. *Did this meathead of a prince break the door? Unbelievable.* I blew out a breath. Now that I thought about it, father had trained Ignacia on occasion. Knowing how absurdly strong father was, I supposed it wasn't too surprising that Ignacia could break a lock with his bare hand.

"That was convenient. Let's take a look inside," the crown prince said, brazenly breaking and entering. Despite my exasperation, I followed him inside—I wasn't going to miss this chance. Even if we were discovered, Ignacia was the one who'd broken the lock. I'd just shed a few tears and play the innocent visitor who'd tried her best—in vain—to stop this stranger from breaking into the Prayer Room.

Silence hung over the room, which looked the same as the last time I'd come, other than the thick layer of dust that coated everything. *Has Hervas kept* everyone *out?* It would make sneaking in easier, but it also made me concerned for the condition of the cathedral. We had to take it back soon and return it to Tithia's rightful hands.

While Ignacia and Zeno took in the room, I double-checked the lock on the door—the break wasn't too noticeable. If no one ever entered this room, I could get away with leaving the broken lock in place so that we could walk right in tonight.

Praying that I'd never see him again, I slipped out of the cathedral without Ignacia noticing.

Awakened Job: Archbishop

In the dark of night, Leroy and I arrived at Flaudia Cathedral. A sort of divine silence filled the cathedral, giving me goose bumps...until the occasional yawn of a patrolling Templar brought me back to reality.

"I didn't think the cathedral would be this unguarded," Leroy murmured, quietly outraged. "What is Hervas thinking? Crystalline Cathedral might be more important, but there is no justification for neglecting to protect this one."

We carried on swiftly and reached the Prayer Room without a hitch. It had been so easy to get here that Leroy and I shared a look, speechless.

"Well, let's make this quick," I said. "You should be able to switch jobs by praying to Flaudia's statue."

"Understood," Leroy said, holding back whatever else he had to say and kneeling before Flaudia's statue.

"Finally..." Strong emotion overtook me as I knelt before the statue. The first time I'd done this was when I'd become a Healer. It felt terribly nostalgic, even though not much time had passed since then—maybe because each day since had been such an adventure.

"Goddess Flaudia, give me a challenge," I prayed, and a quest window appeared.

Switch to Awakened Job: Archbishop
Your dedication to your training is hereby recognized. Heal one another. Love one another. Prove that you will not sell your soul to the devil.

"All right, let's get this quest on the road. If we work together, it won't take long to get it over with. Are you ready?" I asked Leroy.

"Of course. But what are we meant to do?"

I chuckled. That quest prompt had been pretty vague. "It's telling us to defeat Undead monsters."

"Even though we're Clerics? Well, I suppose on our way to reaching this level, we've racked up more than enough experience in battle." Leroy weakly laughed.

"There aren't too many places with Undead monsters... Do you have a preference, Leroy?" I asked.

"No preference. I don't even know where those places are. I may have some knowledge of dungeons, but not nearly as much as you, Sharon."

"Then I recommend Paradise of Erungoa."

"A dungeon that's already been solved?" Leroy asked, sounding a little surprised.

I had sold information about Paradise of Erungoa to the Guild, but I'd never told my party that I was the one who'd shared that info. "If we're going to handle this with just the two of us, that would be the best option. There are other locations with Undead monsters, but those are much stronger ones. Without Kent and Cocoa, it'd be best not to push our luck. You and I could take on Paradise of Erungoa no problem."

"It's settled, then," Leroy agreed.

And we were off.

"You tricked me, Sharon?!" Leroy shouted.

"You wound me, Leroy! I would never!" And I'd never said that the Undead monster we were after wasn't the boss. *How dare he act like I'm some con man?!*

"Why would I expect your recommended monster to be the boss of a dungeon?" Leroy's eyes had lost their usual humor, pinning me with a sharp icy glare. I merely met his gaze in silence. Meanwhile, Ghost of Erungoa stood before us, readying an attack.

"Goddess's Hammerfall! Let's take care of Erungoa first," Leroy said.

"Agreed. Goddess's Smite and Holy Heal More!" I buffed Leroy and attacked Erungoa with a Skill I'd regained after using a Reset

Skill Potion Tarte had given me. The worst part of this quest wouldn't come until after the battle...when I'd have to drink another one of those vile potions. My stomach hurt just thinking about it. *Anything to become an Archbishop,* I told myself.

"Smite those who defy me! Scorching Instruments!" Erungoa shouted, sending his instruments flying.

Timing it perfectly, I chucked a bottle of Holy Water into the trajectory of the instruments. They smashed the bottle, causing Holy Water to spray all over Erungoa, who let out a scream.

"Got 'em!" I said.

"I never thought I'd see anyone use Holy Water like...well, water." Even as he said so, Leroy did not let up his combo of Goddess's Hammerfall and Holy Heal More.

You're pretty outrageous yourself, Leroy... I thought. "Look! We're almost there!"

Erungoa had begun twirling his staff to create a whirlwind—a sign that he had less than ten percent of his HP left. Since the whirlwind prevented us from approaching, the staple strategy was to attack from afar.

"Holy Heal More!"

"Goddess's Hammerfall!"

Leroy and I attacked at the same time and reapplied our buffs, fueled by the exhilaration of coming close to taking out the boss. Compared to the long and grueling battle I'd fought against Erungoa the first time, this was a cakewalk. What a difference some leveling and another party member made.

I threw one last bottle of Holy Water at Erungoa as we readied our final attack. "Holy Heal More!" we shouted together, our voices drowned out by Erungoa's final scream.

***

On the same night that we returned from Paradise of Erungoa, Leroy and I once again visited the statue of Flaudia nestled in Flaudia's Cathedral. Unlike when I'd attained my advanced job, we wouldn't become Archbishops until we physically returned to the

statue. Normally, that wouldn't be a problem in the slightest, but it was quite the nuisance under our current circumstances.

Beside me, Leroy simmered with quiet anger. "The lock on the Prayer Room door is still broken. Did none of the priests or priestess or even the Templars notice? It's as if no one wants to take care of this cathedral anymore..."

"Thanks to that, we're able to pray to Flaudia's statue. Let's call it a win," I said. We'd really caught a break this time.

I walked up to the statue and gazed up at it. Even though I'd prayed to it a couple of times before, this was the first time I'd gotten a good view of it. "Seeing the statue up close, I can really appreciate its artistic and historical value... I wish I could have seen it like this sooner," I said, the last part slipping out. My previous visits to this place had always been rushed. "This is it, Leroy. Let's pray."

"Yes."

I knelt before Flaudia's statue, and Leroy followed suit. Our bodies glowed bright—and just like that, we were Archbishops.

"I'm finally an Archbishop!" I said. It had really been a long journey. Switching jobs would have taken no more than a few days in the game, but everything was different now that it was real. I'd had to relearn how to navigate this world without the items and equipment I'd grown accustomed to and how to fight alongside new friends. At times, I'd felt impatient at how slowly we'd progressed, but I'd also had a lot of fun leveling up together. Still, the pressure had been on, thanks to Hervas.

I blew out a breath and cast a glance at Leroy, who was looking himself up and down. Unfortunately, becoming an Archbishop didn't come with any visible changes. "Now, let's get out of here," I said.

"Agreed. If we're caught, it won't be pretty," Leroy said.

Before anyone came running to investigate the burst of light that had come from us changing jobs, we rushed out of the cathedral.

We blew our whistles to summon our Dragons and flew right over to Sunlit Grove. "Nothing beats a Dragon joyride at night!"

"I was hoping to let Her Holiness know right away that I became an Archbishop..." Leroy gave me side-eye. "Why are we here?"

"We need to level up after getting a new job! Even if it's just one

level," I insisted.

Leroy shrugged. "Very well... I know there's no talking you out of anything you set your mind to."

Leroy and I hunted a bunch of Orcs until we finally gained a level around dawn.

***

"We're back," Leroy and I announced when we returned to the inn.

"Welcome back, Meowster! And Leroy!" Tarte greeted us, followed by Tithia, Blitz, and Mimoza.

Kent and Cocoa apparently hadn't returned from their quests yet.

"Did you both get your new jobs?" Tarte asked.

"Yep. We probably had an easier time because we worked together." *Not to mention my game knowledge,* I silently added. Kent and Cocoa were probably going through an ordeal for their quests.

"Congratulations!" Tarte purred, and the others echoed the sentiment.

"Thank you," Leroy and I replied. Now that I was an Archbishop, I was unstoppable! Next, I'd grind more levels, learn more Skills, and progress the Holy Maiden quest. Clapping my hands together, I turned to Tithia and Leroy. "Let's get this done," I said, only to earn a quizzical look from the pair. "Don't you remember? I'm going to break your curse." Everyone gasped. "I was rushing to become an Archbishop, not just to prepare against Hervas, but to gain the Curse Break Skill." If all we'd wanted to do was stop Hervas, I might not have needed to grind so many levels. But as soon as I'd found out about their curse, I'd known that I had to become an Archbishop. Without any items that could achieve the same effect, the Curse Break Skill was their only cure.

"Finally, you don't have to worry about it anymore," Tarte purred with tears in her eyes.

Tithia's eyes were silvering too, but the young Pope did her best to hold them back. She and Leroy shared a look and then stepped

up to me.

"Thank you, Sharon," they both said, kneeling before me and clasping their hands as they closed their eyes.

I nodded, pointing my staff at them. Now that I knew the Skill, there was really nothing more to breaking this curse. "Curse Break." Angels flew around them, shimmering so much more mysteriously than they had in the game. *It's beautiful...*

"I feel my power returning..." Tithia smiled. Her power swelled, and a pair of angel wings flashed behind her—and vanished. Apparently, the curse had also been suppressing the Pope's power. "I will pray for the country I love..." Tithia said in a clear soothing voice.

Her quiet, powerful prayer caused a change in Zille. As soon as she uttered those words, the dark clouds outside vanished, leaving nothing but blue sky. Tithia had set up a divine barrier through her prayer, keeping the dark clouds from the city.

"This is the true power...of the Pope?" I muttered, looking out the window. Soon, excited voices came from the streets, sounding relieved that the dark clouds hanging over them were gone.



A lot of people had left the city altogether. Just as soon as I breathed in relief, a quest window appeared.

Ascension of the Holy Maiden
As the Pope's curse is broken, an angel appears and shrouds Zille in divine power.
Go with the angel to Goddess Flaudia and learn what it means to be the Holy Maiden.

My Holy Maiden quest had progressed. Part of me had wondered if breaking Tithia's curse was the last step...but it couldn't have been that easy. "Angel? Goddess Flaudia?" I muttered, taking a closer look at the incredible quest directions.

"Oh..." Tithia breathed—her eyes had turned pale gold. "Flaudia's messenger is here."

"What?" I blurted.

Tithia raised her hand and a great light shone in the middle of the room. When it faded, an angel stood among us.

"A-An angel...?!" I stammered.

Leroy moved to protect Tithia, although it was clear that the angel wasn't a threat to the Pope based on what she'd said. "What's going on?!"

Tarte was trilling in surprise, her tail all poufed up. Blitz and Mimoza stood at the ready, unsure of how to react to this turn of events.

Well, this had to be the angel mentioned in the quest directions. "My quest is progressing," I announced. "This angel is supposed to take me to Flaudia." I could almost hear the others gulping.

The angel who had appeared out of the light looked to be about ten years old, with a halo on her head. Her featherlight curly hair was tied into pigtails, the ends dyed emerald green. Pure-white wings sprang from her lower back and her skin was as clear as a porcelain doll's. Her white above-the-knee dress only added to her angelic grace. When she opened her eyes, I saw that they were the same golden hue as Tithia's.

The angel floated down to the ground and smiled, her expression full of compassion. “I am an angel, here to guide the prospective Holy Maiden to Flaudia. Let us depart.” Then she reached a hand out to me.

The Holy Maiden Quest Continues

I couldn't help but stare at the hand the angel extended to me. Her skin was so flawless that it made me realize there was plenty of beauty to be found in this world outside of sweeping landscapes.

Perhaps because I stood there without accepting her invitation, the angel tilted her head. "Let us go to Flaudia now."

I shook my head. "No. I won't go with you yet." It was a tempting offer, but I didn't want to relegate my urgent task to the back burner.

"Why not?" the angel asked.

"I need to take care of the problem with the church. Now that Ti—Pope Tithia's powers have returned, it's our best chance to take down Hervas and retake Crystalline Cathedral," I said.

"Sharon, that's...!" Tithia protested. Judging by the look on her face, she considered it unthinkable to ask an angel to wait.

Think about it, Ti. Do we really have time to go through the Holy Maiden quest right now? No. So often, progressing a quest meant engaging in combat—combat we'd be utterly unprepared for.

Once I explained all that, Tithia relented. "That's true—we may be underprepared, but should we really keep the angel waiting?" Tithia asked again. I understood where she was coming from, but rushing into quests like this was a recipe for disaster.

"Besides, it's too dangerous to move forward without Kent and Cocoa," I added.

"Oh... You're right. They are very powerful," Tithia said.

Once Kent and Cocoa returned, having attained their awakened jobs, they would be invaluable to our party. Progressing the Holy Maiden quest could wait until then. Just to be safe, I turned to the angel for her permission. "Is that all right with you...Your Angelicness?"

The angel made a show of contemplating for a few moments

before saying, “Very well. The cathedral is a vital place of worship for Goddess Flaudia. We cannot allow it to remain under the control of someone like Rodney Hervas. Please take it back as quickly as possible.”

“W-We will!” Tithia snapped to attention. The angel’s command had lit a fire in Tithia’s eyes.

I was just glad the angel was allowing us to delay the Holy Maiden quest without a fight.

“And please call me Angel—just Angel. We angels do not have individual names.”

“Uh... Okay, Angel,” Tithia said through her surprise.

“Splendid,” the angel replied.

***

Once Angel joined our party, we spent our time hunting while we waited for Kent and Cocoa to return. This would bolster the levels of the Skills we’d unlocked with our awakened jobs. At the same time, we put in more purchase requests at higher prices. We were going to need a veritable warehouse of items to complete the Holy Maiden quest, and I wouldn’t let us get caught in a situation where we were worrying about how many potions we had in store.

At the end of a long day’s hunt, we were taking a breather in our inn in Snowdia. Tarte, Tithia, and Angel were sharing treats over tea; Leroy and Mimoza were discussing the future of the cathedral; and Blitz was out trying to contact the Templars we’d freed.

That left me staring up at the ceiling, mind wandering through thoughts of the future. At level 80, you stopped earning Skill Points until you got your awakened job. From whatever level you were once you attained it, you resumed earning Skill Points. You could only earn a total of 30 Skill Points after getting your awakened job, though, which was less than ideal. Since I’d become an Archbishop at level 102, I only had 4 Skill Points to spend at my current level of 106.

“I’m happy with my Skills, but I wish I had better equipment to buff my support abilities...” I muttered. Specifically speaking, I

wanted something to fill my vacant left hand and second accessory slot. Of course, decent equipment could only be found in dangerous locations. Without avid gamers running around, the market was starved for drop items or equipment made by Blacksmiths and those with other crafting jobs.

Overview:
Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 106
Job: Archbishop (Expert in healing. They make sure the party can overcome any danger!)

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.
Heal Completely (Level 5): Heals the target's HP and mana entirely in exchange for 60% of the user's HP and all of their mana.
Curse Break: Breaks curses.
Goddess's Wisdom: Skills take effect faster.
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.
Increase Mana (Level 2): Raises the user’s mana.
Goddess’s Apostle (Level 3): Raises the user’s Attack, Magic, and Defense.
Goddess’s Smite: Doubles the damage of the next attack used.
Goddess’s Protection: Creates a barrier around the target.
Cure: Heals status conditions.
Boost Holy Element (Level 1): Strengthens the user’s Holy element.
Increase Resistance (Level 5): Raises the user’s resistance against 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)

While I lay there grunting, Kent flew through the door calling, "I'm back!" He'd beaten Cocoa to the finish line.

"Welcome back!" we all greeted him.

Kent cracked a grin, his cheeks heated from the excitement of the quest he'd just gone on...and the huge egg in his arms. I hadn't realized that Dragonriders had to care for the Dragon's egg, taking it with them everywhere they went until it hatched.

"What is that egg?!" Tarte trilled, voicing the question the whole room must have been thinking.

Kent laughed, puffing out his chest. "I'm glad you asked! Now that I'm a Dragonrider, this guy is going to be my partner! Once the egg hatches, I'll be fighting side by side with a Dragon, just like Lord Rudith!"

"That's ameowzing!"

"Your Dragon partner is in there?!" Tithia marveled.

The girls were already going crazy with excitement before the Dragon had even hatched. "Can I pet it?" Tarte asked.

"It's a really tough shell. Try it." Kent laid the egg on the couch, where Tarte and Tithia gasped in amazement as they gently touched it. "And, uh...?"

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Who is *she*? She seems...divine, somehow." He was gazing at Angel.

Right. I'd forgotten to introduce our newest acquaintance. "She's Flaudia's messenger," I said.

"I came to lead you to Flaudia. Please call me Angel—we have no individual names."

"A-A-Angel?!" Kent stammered, blinking furiously. "Can I really address her so casually?! But..."

"Has anyone not been shocked when they first met you?" I asked Angel.

Angel shook her head. "We rarely appear before humans."

"Gotcha..." I'd turned to make tea so I could explain to Kent about Angel and our next moves when the door opened again to reveal Cocoa. "I'm back!"

"Hi, Cocoa," I said.

"Welcome back!" We all once again greeted the newcomer.

As for Cocoa, she spotted Angel as soon as she stepped into the room—and froze, except for the blinking of her eyes. Maybe her brain had crashed at the overwhelming divinity in the room.

"Let's have some tea and talk about what comes next," I announced, retrieving some tea and snacks so I could walk through my plans for the immediate future.

"So, now that we've leveled up, we're going to take back the cathedral..." Kent summarized once I'd finished.

"And then go see Flaudia," Cocoa added.

"That's right!" I confirmed. "We already broke the curse on Ti and Leroy. We should take back the cathedral too, especially now that Kent's a Dragonrider and Cocoa's a Lyrical Sorcerer." *Besides, it can't be good for this world to leave Hervas unchecked.*

"All right. Let's take back the cathedral—for Ti and for our friends. And this is my country too. I'm not going to let Hervas make it his playground," Kent declared.

"You're right. Let's take back our country!" Cocoa agreed.

"Yeah!"

Kent and Cocoa were fired up. I'd have to match their heat with the best support I could bring to the table.

"That's right! I brought some things back," Cocoa said. "I bought some ingredients for you to formulate with, Tarte." Cocoa placed the materials on the table.

Tarte's tail shot up as she purred. "Purray! Thank you, Tarte!" The table quickly filled with Fire Shrooms, Water Shrooms, and Herbs, among other materials. "I can make more Meowlotovs! And some defensive purrtions with the Water Shrooms! Thank you, Cocoa," Tarte said again, scooping the trove of ingredients into her Bag.

"Why didn't I think of that?!" Kent grumbled. He'd probably been too preoccupied with his new Dragon egg...which was scheduled to

hatch twenty-four hours after he received it, so he expected to be able to show off his partner by tomorrow.

"It's okay. We can go shopping anytime with the Transportation Gates," I reminded him.

Kent gasped. "That's right! Then I'll go buy them while Tarte is getting ready. Cocoa and I are about the only ones who can shop around Blume."

"Yes, purrlease."

"You got it!" Kent said and ran out of the inn to head right back to Blume.

Once Kent returned, we decided to go out and grind a few levels while Tarte put her nose to the cauldron and formulated all she could...even if I felt a twinge of guilt that I was leaving my apprentice behind to do monotonous labor while we hunted monsters.

Our hunting ground of choice was Dragon's Den, where we could score the ingredients for Roaring Potions. Kent fought on the front line, backed by me, Tithia, Leroy, and Cocoa. Blitz and Mimoza were out contacting the other Paladins and Templars.

Since we'd done this song and dance before, Kent seemed much more comfortable hunting here. "Taunt! And Whirling Tornado!"

"Here we go! *Sharpen your downcast eyes and impale the enemy!*" Cocoa sang, and the water floating above the Dragon's head shaped itself into swords—which pierced the monster through. With a staff in her right hand and a Tome in her left, Cocoa looked so cool...not to mention that she was much more powerful now than when she'd been an Incantor.

I have to step up my game! "Looking good!" I called out. "Goddess's Protection. Goddess's Apostle!"

"Fallen Goddess's Blessing. Goddess's Hammerfall!" Leroy could turn to attacking since I could handle the support on my own.

After hunting for a while, we sat down for a break.

"You know the Black Dragon we took down before...?" Kent took a swig of his water. "Will it ever come back?"

Back in the game, most bosses had respawned in anywhere from

one to three hours—the Black Dragon had respawned after an hour. "Dungeon bosses take longer than other monsters to reappear, but they should all come back," I said. "Not that I've seen it with my own eyes, but the Black Dragon could have come back within an hour."

"An hour...? Wow..." Kent muttered, apparently surprised that the respawn was so quick.

The Black Dragon had had a quick respawn because everyone received a Dragon Whistle upon beating it for the first time—it was a very popular boss, constantly getting beaten into the ground. "You want to go take it down again?" I asked.

"No, no, no, no, we can't do that fight again! Not now! Tarte and Blitz and Mimoza aren't here!" Kent said, wiping any suspicion from my mind that he was itching for a boss fight.

I laughed...then noticed something. "Your egg is lighting up, Kent!"

"Whoa!" Kent lifted the Dragon's egg he'd kept tied at his waist all day—it was ready to hatch.

"The Dragon is on its way?!" Tithia asked.

"A-Are you sure you can let it hatch in a place like this?!" Cocoa rushed over.

"I don't know, but—the egg is cracking!" Kent said.

While the party fretted over the egg, its cracks began to turn into crumbling pieces of shell...until, with a cute little cry, a Dragon hatchling emerged.

The Dragon—Kent's new partner—came into this world already looking like a tank. Its black scales shone like dark steel while its light-blue eyes shone as clearly as water. The tanklike Dragon was more adorable than ferocious for now, but that scale would tip as it grew.

A Dragonrider's first Dragon had a chance of being one of three colors: Black—like Kent's—which emphasized Defense; Red, which emphasized Attack; or Blue, which emphasized healing and other types of support. A Black Dragon was good for Kent, who fought on the front line and often served as a tank. My brother had gotten a Red Dragon.

“You’re my partner...!” Kent breathed with pure excitement.

“Congratulations, Kent! Now you’re a full-fledged Dragonrider!” I said.

“I’m so happy for you!” Cocoa gushed.

“Congratulations!” Ti and Leroy chimed in.

“Oh!” Kent beamed. “I gotta give it a name! Hmm...” Kent hummed for a long breath, then said, “I got it! You have those clear blue eyes, so I’m going to call you Sora! Let’s fly through the sky together, Sora!”

Sora the Dragon answered with a delighted squeak. Sora meant “sky” in Japanese. It warmed my heart that Kent had decided to name his Dragon after its sky-colored eyes. It was perfect for Kent somehow.

“Nice to meet you, Sora,” I said, earning another happy squeak from the baby Dragon. Now that everything was real, I couldn’t help but think that Dragonrider was a pretty cool job too.

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“Does everyone have their purrtions? If you’re missing anything, tell me right away!” Tarte said after distributing the one-use items and going over how each of them worked.

“We got everything we need, thanks to you, Tarte!” Kent said as each of us stored our share in our Bags. He was particularly happy about the Watercloak Potion—which buffed the user’s Defense—crafted from the Water Shrooms Cocoa had brought back. We’d be using the Watercloak Potion as constantly as we could during big battles, and that was especially true for our tank, Kent. “We have the Roaring Potions too... I admire your skills as an Alchemist, not to mention how powerful your Potion Throw is!”

Tarte chuckled bashfully. “I do need a bunch of tools and ingredients, but it’s so meowch fun.”

Angel curiously watched us gear up. “Humans spend a great deal of time getting ready. That is a large number of potions,” she said, eyeing each vial Tarte had handed out.

“There are no do-overs, so we need to prepare as best we can,” I

supplied.

"Death is irreversible, after all... Do take care. We angels are not permitted to aid humans in battle, but I will pray for your victory." Angel favored us with a divine smile. "The cathedral is a very important location for Goddess Flaudia as well."

"We will," we said, and Angel beamed us a smile as bright as her halo.

Taking slow deep breaths, I gazed up at Crystalline Cathedral where it towered above us. There, Hervas and L'lyeh awaited, along with the Dark Knight we'd encountered in the abbey. Our levels had probably overtaken the Dark Knight's by now, but we'd do best to keep our guard up nonetheless.

I looked over my shoulder and took in my gathered allies: Tarte, Tithia, Leroy, Kent, Cocoa, Blitz, Mimoza, and a cavalry of twenty Paladins and Templars who'd come to our aid. Back when I'd left Farblume as a lone disgraced villainess, I'd never imagined I'd have so many people to fight alongside.

"The time is nigh to defeat Rodney Hervas!" I declared, and I could sense everyone tightening their grip on their weapon. Their taut expressions and the solemnity in the air were clear indications that we all knew how critical this battle was going to be. Angel, as a mere spectator in the battle to come, was perhaps the only one here untroubled by urgency.

Our goals tonight were to capture Hervas, take down L'lyeh, and defeat the Dark Knight—whether that meant capturing him or killing him. As for Templars siding with Hervas, they were going to be detained until the dust settled.

Templars on our side led the charge, followed by our core party. Leroy, Blitz, and Mimoza took up formation to protect Tithia while the others and I maintained a flexible position around them, ready to provide extra protection or deal with threats. The role of our half of the party was to take on the Dark Knight while Tithia's group cornered Hervas.

By the time I made it into the cathedral itself, battles had already broken out. Hervas's Templars seemed daunted by Blitz's furious

charge, backed up by a team of his own Templars.

Our levels are all higher than theirs!

Leaving Blitz and Mimoza to stand their ground, we charged toward Tithia's room, where we expected to find Hervas.

"Almost there—" Kent's call was cut off by someone's Skill attacking us. Kent managed to deflect it with his greatsword and turned to face the attacker—the Dark Knight from the abbey...as expected.

Recasting all the buffs I could, I stared at the door to Tithia's room, which was closed and guarded by the Dark Knight.

"Keep him on you, Kent!" Cocoa shouted. "*Scorched by earth, I pray for a breath of life!*" Singing a verse derived from the *Reas* theme song, Cocoa made vines shoot out of the floor and constrict the Dark Knight.

"What is this magic...?!" he growled, straining against the unyielding vines—a testament to the power of a Lyrical Sorcerer.

Leroy sighed. "It's almost too easy."

"How dare you?!" the Dark Knight bellowed, still trying in vain to break free.

At this rate, capturing Hervas might go more smoothly than I'd thought. Then, the door to Tithia's room swung open. I hadn't expected Hervas to come out of hiding—he must have overheard our battle against the Dark Knight... But, instead of the low-level Cardinal, L'lyeh herself emerged from Tithia's room. She looked the same as before, including the blindfold and the heavy shackles around her wrists. Cold air seemed to hang about her, sending a shiver down my spine.

"Foolish humans. Do you really think you can beat me...?" L'lyeh tilted her head, a faint smirk on her lips. "There."

With just a casual wave of her hand, the Goddess of Darkness sent us flying. Although Goddess's Protection prevented us from taking damage, it was pretty taxing to be physically blown away.

Is she stronger than she was in the Underworld Abbey?! If we'd been facing the same L'lyeh from the abbey, we would have had every tool we needed to take her down together. But facing off against the goddess as she was now, I couldn't visualize us winning.

Taking a hit without protection—even a single hit, for those of us backline fighters—could take us out—kill us completely.

How has she gotten so strong?! The surprise must have twisted my face as if I'd eaten a sour grape. It wasn't fair that I'd been facing so many powerful enemies when my adventure had just begun!

But...is L'lyeh really meant to be this powerful? I couldn't help but wonder. Maybe there was some sort of item or quest that served as the key to defeating L'lyeh. If there was such a key, it certainly had to do with Flaudia—the inverse of L'lyeh.

Did I take the wrong path, coming here before accepting Angel's offer? I wanted so badly to take back the cathedral for Tithia's sake...but we stood no chance. There'd be no point in dealing with Hervas and the Dark Knight if we couldn't take out L'lyeh.

"Retreat!" I shouted, and the party was clearly in agreement. Cocoa's Light magic sent the message to the others in the cathedral. With a bitter taste in my mouth, I left Crystalline Cathedral behind me...as L'lyeh walked back into the room, apparently uninterested in those who showed no sign of challenging her.

Sweet Treats in a Human City

Having fled from our second encounter with L'lyeh, we decided to regroup—otherwise, we wouldn't stand a chance. *The Goddess of Darkness is no joke!* I realized. *We just need to grind more levels and thank our lucky stars we made it out of the cathedral alive.*

For now, we'd returned to our inn in Snowdia, where we'd have to restock our items and make other preparations before heading back out. As I was getting ready to go out shopping, I noticed Angel staring out the window, flanked by Tarte and Tithia.

"What is that?" Angel asked.

"A snowman," Tarte said.

"It's a decoration someone made by compacting snow," Tithia explained.

Angel's gaze flickered all over the part of the city she could see from the window, taking in the curiosities of a human city.

"Why don't we all go out?" I suggested, prompting all three girls to whip around. Their excitement was so clearly written on their faces that I couldn't help but laugh.

"I'll come too!" Cocoa said.

"Me too, of course," Mimoza added.

"Then let's have a girls' day out and grab something sweet!" I said, so we decided to go treat ourselves.

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Once we were out on the streets, Tithia started fidgeting guiltily. "Are you sure we should be...?" *Taking time for ourselves when we still need to defeat L'lyeh?* I could easily guess what she was worried about.

"I'm sure," I stated. "Fighting nonstop would wear out our minds and bodies, clouding our judgment. We'll stock up on supplies too,

but it won't hurt to catch our breath. Working hard is beneficial. Overworking is not."

"I see... You are so knowledgeable, Sharon," Tithia said.

"Okay...?" I wasn't sure I'd go that far, but I wasn't about to argue with the adorable Pope staring up at me with eyes full of respect.

Tarte and Angel were admiring the small snowman outside the inn. "Now it's a snowcat!" Tarte purred, adding pointy snow ears and little marble eyes. *Adorable!*

Angel admired the snowcat one more time before turning to Tithia and me and tilting her head. "Why is Tithia— Why is Ti hiding her face under her hood?"

"Oh... If someone recognized me, we would be in great trouble. So, every time I go outside, I wear a coat and pull its hood down low."

"I understand," Angel said. "But it seems like a waste, Ti, because you are so cute. Would they still recognize you if you changed your clothes and hairstyle and applied makeup?"

"What...?" It could work...but if Tithia changed clothes, it would lower her Defense. If we'd had something more protective than her Pope's Robe for her to change into, that wouldn't have been an issue. With Tithia in danger and needing every bit of protection she could get, it wasn't an option.

"Thank you, Angel. I don't mind it," Tithia said.

Angel plucked a feather from her wing and tucked it in Tithia's hair, just above her ear. As soon as she did, Tithia's robe changed under her coat—an angelic white outfit beneath a fur-lined cape tied at her chest with a blue ribbon. Her thick full-length skirt was made of quality fabric with accents in a checkered pattern.

"Wow...!" Tithia breathed.

"Meow! That's so cute!" Tarte trilled.

"Did you really do that, Angel?! That's incredible...!" I said.

"My feather did. Its effect will not last long—until nightfall, if we are lucky," Angel explained. So the feather only changed the *look* of Tithia's clothes, which wouldn't change its defensive stats.

Tithia smiled. "Thank you, Angel."

"Do not thank me yet." Angel took Tithia by the hand and sat her down on a nearby bench. "This will not take long."

Angel produced a large makeup kit out of thin air. When she opened the box, all sorts of cosmetics glittered inside it like gems. I'd known from the start that she had an adorable appearance, but to think, she was even into makeup. Inside and out, Angel was a total girly girl. *She can never find out I only ever carry the bare minimum makeup and skin care products.*

"Close your eyes, please," Angel said.

"O-Okay!" Tithia obeyed.

Angel began with a light layer of foundation, then moved on to eye shadow. She started with a shimmering pink, then added a line of pastel blue and finished with a dark brown eyeliner that curved past the corners of her eyes. That alone gave Ti a new look.

"That's ameowzing...!"

"You have such a cute face, Ti. You wear makeup well." Angel began working on Tithia's hair. She parted Tithia's bangs on the left of her face, then wrapped her long hair into a high bun on the right and a low bun on the left. Once she braided the rest of Tithia's hair on the side, it came together in a perfect blend of maturity and cuteness. "I am finished."

"You're so cute!" The rest of us squealed in unison. In her new outfit, hair, and makeup, Tithia looked different enough that those who hadn't spent time with her might not recognize her.

Tithia was staring at her reflection in the pocket mirror Angel had handed her. "Is that really what I look like? No one would recognize me now. Thank you, Angel."

"You are welcome. I enjoyed giving you a makeover." Angel smiled brightly. "Shall we?"

Everything about this familiar town was new to Angel, who peered into every shop window with brimming curiosity. If it weren't for her wings, she'd look just like a normal girl.

That was when an unexpected problem arose—I started noticing passersby whispering.

"Those two are so cute."

"Look at those wings. Is she supposed to be an angel?"

"They got angelic looks anyway."

Tithia with her angelic makeover and Angel—who dressed like she knew how to maximize her good looks—were drawing a lot of attention.

"Sharon, they're all staring!" Cocoa whispered.

"I was just going to say the same thing...!" I said. Their good looks drawing attention was one thing, but Angel's wings were quickly becoming a topic of conversation among onlookers, who audibly speculated about whether the wings were real. Not many people would think her a real angel, but we didn't want rumors spreading and drawing a crowd.

"Angel! You have a lot of eyes on you. Is there something you can do?!" I asked. Even though it would put us back where we'd started, I was going to ask Tithia to put her coat back on.

Angel took a look around. "Understood. They cannot find out who Ti is. I will make my wings disappear and place a recognition prevention on us."

"Wait, you can do that?" I asked.

"A simple one. It will not work on anyone who already knows us, and it only makes it difficult for people to see our faces if they do not have clear intent to do so."

"I see," I said. Despite Angel's nonchalance, recognition prevention wasn't an easy thing to set up. It would help me hide myself from anyone from Farblume who was looking for me, and it would make it easier for Tithia and Leroy to get out more.

"Thank you, Angel. It's very nice to walk the streets without worrying about being discovered," Tithia said.

"I am happy that you are happy," Angel said.

Tithia and Angel—whose wings had supposedly been made invisible to others—looked the same as before to me, but I noticed that passersby had stopped whispering about them. It was working.

"Let us look at more shops," Angel suggested.

"Okay!" Tithia said as they resumed their stroll.

They stopped at a particular shop, putting their faces to the window. "Those bejeweled accessories are very cute. Humans are

skilled in modifying objects found in nature," Angel said.

"If you're interested, we should go inside!" Tarte suggested. "Any of those would look wonderfur on you, Angel!"

"Thank you."

Following Tarte, we went into the shop that specialized in jewelry, many of the pieces fitted with large and clear rubies, emeralds, or sapphires. Jewels this magnificent would have been hard to find back in Japan—another perk of living in a video game world.

Mimoza inspected the merchandise carefully before turning to Tithia. "This clear aquamarine would match your outfit."

"That *is* an adorable light blue," the Pope replied. "What do you think of this topaz, Mimoza? Look at that bright orange."

Before long, everyone seemed enamored of the jewelry. We were girls, after all. Even if we didn't regularly shop for them, there was something alluring about pretty pieces of jewelry. I went up to Cocoa, who was staring longingly at a certain piece.

"Why don't you buy it?" I suggested. We all deserved to treat ourselves once in a while. *With how hard we work, we deserve to treat ourselves every day!*

"What? No! Jewelry isn't really...my thing."

"Maybe it should be," I said. "You're a high-level adventurer now, with all-new gear! And you're so cute and petite! And you're always thoughtful and considerate. You'd be hard-pressed to find another girl like you!" *Come to think of it, plenty of adventurer boys must be dreaming of finding someone like Cocoa.*

"Sharon..." Cocoa murmured bashfully. "Sure, my level's gone up and my equipment's improved...but I don't think I'm ready for jewelry like this. My family wasn't that well-off when I was growing up. Spending money on equipment and items is another story," she added with a smile.

Am I rubbing off on Cocoa too much? A part of me was concerned for her future.

None of us ended up buying anything, and we moved on to a café.

"Welcome," a server greeted us. "For today's afternoon tea, we are serving flan and seasonal hot tea."

"That'll be great for all six of us," I said, ordering for the table.

"They'll be right out."

Once the server left, I stretched my arms and settled into my seat. Window-shopping our way through the city was a lot of fun but also a lot of walking. "How did you enjoy our shopping trip, Angel?"

"There were so many cute things to see. I had a lot of fun. I thought I was only going to show you to Flaudia. I am a lucky angel to have experienced a day like this."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, just as our flan arrived.

Angel stared quizzically at the dish placed before her.

"You eat it with a spoon," Tarte explained.

Angel did just that, taking her first bite. "Mm! It's so smooth and decadent!" Her face lit up like she was about to ascend to heaven on a wind of deliciousness. Seeing her this awestruck over flan made me want to feed her more good food. "The tea is delicious too. I like afternoon tea."

"I'm very happy you're enjoying it," I said.

"You can eat as much as you like," Tithia said, explaining that Angel could order seconds if she wished.

We'd been fighting nonstop lately, and the only relaxation we'd had was soaking in the hot spring bath at the inn. *I've been running them ragged... I need to do better.* "What do we do now?" I asked myself, already knowing that the only thing we could do to defeat L'lyeh was to raise our levels some more. The question was where. *Underground Factory? Dreaded Falls?*

While I was weighing our options, Angel cleared her plate and said, "In that case...why not go see Flaudia?"

Everyone froze for a moment.

"That's definitely an option, since we're stuck on the L'lyeh path," I said.

Angel beamed. "Yes, please! Flaudia is waiting for you." It was her job to bring us to the goddess, after all. The sooner she could get that job done, the better.

Time to buckle down. "Let's buy all the food and items we might need. Pack for anything that could happen."

"Yes, Meowster!"

"Wonderful idea."

Tarte and Tithia were quick to agree, and even though Cocoa and Mimoza looked nervous, they didn't seem opposed to this decision—much to my relief. To give us the energy to keep going, we all ordered a second serving of flan before stocking up on supplies and heading back to the inn.

"Oh, Your Holiness! What spectacular regalia!" As expected, Leroy immediately commented on Tithia's outfit, going so far as to clasp his hands in a sort of prayer.

"There's no need for all that, Leroy. But I am glad that you find it so. It was Angel's doing."

"No wonder you look so divine," Leroy breathed.

Meanwhile, I was speculating that Leroy would have been the kind of *Reas* player to screen record every instance of Tithia appearing on-screen.

Slumbering Volcano

In answer to our high-pitched whistles, eight red-winged Dragons swooped down from the sky and landed before us, shaking the ground with their impacts.

"Let's fly over the volcano on our way," I said.

"Yes, Meowster!"

On my mark, our Dragons took off as a group, sending a shivery thrill down my spine as we soared high into the sky. *I could get used to this.*

We were currently flying over Slumbering Volcano toward a dungeon called Flaudia's Memorial. That was where Angel was taking us.

What do you mean "Memorial"?! I wanted to ask. I'd gotten my hopes up that I was going to come face-to-face with the goddess herself. What was more, Flaudia's Memorial was a dungeon I'd never been to—the one that had been scheduled to release on the day I'd died back on Earth. I was absolutely jonesing to go, but...a brand-new dungeon was its own kind of hell—the kind that our party might not survive. Normally, new dungeons were meant to be solved through trial and error. When exploring a newly released dungeon, it was all too common for players to die and be revived several times, or even for the party to get wiped out and have to start the dungeon over. The thought made my blood run cold...but I wanted so badly to go!

While I sat atop my Dragon, feeling like I was being torn in two by my indecision, Kent shouted, "There's someone collapsed on the ground!"

"On this scorching mountain?!" Panicking, I scanned the ground and soon found someone wearing a lab coat and lying flat on the ground. That was definitely Maryl—the lab coat was a dead giveaway. He had been one of the people I'd had to heal on my

quest to become a Cleric. If I remembered correctly, he was supposed to be exploring the volcano for his research...but I hadn't expected to find him flat on the ground. When Kent had first pointed him out, I'd wondered if it was someone related to Hervas, since his men had also gone into Slumbering Volcano.

"Let's land!" I called to the group.

"Thanks for the rescue. I thought that was going to be the end for me," Maryl said. Apparently, he'd suffered heatstroke. After I healed him with a spell, gave him water and salty food, and cooled his body, he quickly regained his strength.

"I'm glad you're all right," I said. "The climate here isn't conducive to hiking."

"You can say that again. I got carried away by my research for just a short while...and here I am," Maryl said.

"Make sure to drink water and take your breaks frequently," I insisted. I didn't know much about Maryl, but it was clear that he couldn't be left alone. Seeing that the researcher was in better shape, I asked what had been on the forefront of my mind. "Have you seen any Templars around here?"

"Templars? Now that you mention it, I saw them climbing down the mountain, apparently toward the village on the other side. I was hoping to ask them some questions about the volcano, but I couldn't catch up to them." Maryl chuckled. "Those Templars have great stamina, don't they? I should work out more. It would help me in my research."

"I'm sure it wouldn't hurt..." I said, sharing his chuckle. Then, I thought about the significance of finding Maryl here—was he important to the Holy Maiden quest? He had mentioned a village on the other side of Slumbering Volcano—a village I didn't know about. That meant the village was the one that had been slated to release with the new update. *Can anyone just walk into that village?*

"Are you going to the village too?" I asked.

"That's the plan," Maryl said. "There's more I'd like to learn about the volcano, but I'm just as curious about that village. Supposedly, Eden, the Furthest Village, is where Goddess Flaudia once lived."

All of us shared a look—we were stunned by that new

information.

"I have never heard of such a village," Tithia said uneasily.

"Me neither," Leroy added.

The village had been hidden even from the Pope, but Hervas had somehow known of its existence since he was the one who'd sent his son Owen to the volcano.

"Something about this is fishy..." I muttered.

Maryl chuckled again. "The village is very secluded, so information about it is hard to come by. I happened to learn about it completely by chance." He added that the village had been here since before the founding of Erenzi. That explained why Tithia didn't know about it. The only way into the village was a hidden path through the volcano.

"Then we were really lucky we found you," I said. If there was a walkable route through the volcano set up, the village must have been inaccessible—or perhaps very dangerous to access—by air.

"But I really don't know too much about it," Maryl said. "I've never been there before, and considering all the monsters on the path, I'm not sure I'll ever make it there."

"I see..." I said.

"Then why don't you come with us?" Tarte suggested. "You can show us the way, and we'll purrtect you from the monsters." My apprentice turned to me. "Meowster?"

"That's...probably our best option," I said. "What does everyone think?"

"That is fine with us," Leroy spoke for the party while everyone else nodded in agreement.

Just like that, Maryl had joined our party!



"Oh, no! Meowryl disappeared!" Tarte yowled.

"Not again!" Kent shouted.

Adding Maryl to our party had come with an unexpected drawback—he had a habit of disappearing. Whenever he spotted a rare plant or mineral or anything that piqued his curiosity, he'd disappear without so much as a sound. We'd already gone through the rigmarole of realizing he was gone and frantically searching the area several times.

"He should still be close! Look for him!" Kent shouted, rushing to start the search. Monsters were less prevalent here, but their combination of the Fire element with a decent power level made them a hassle to fight against.

While we spread out to look for our wayward researcher, Angel came up to me. "Humans are curious beings."

"Maryl is an exception," I said, taking offense at the association. "Are we still on the right track, Angel? I was hoping for more...guidance."

Angel only ever pointed in the direction of our destination, without using any kind of magic to teleport us there or even so much as giving us detailed directions! If she had led the way, I was sure we'd be at Flaudia's Memorial by now. Of course, I wouldn't have felt right about leaving Maryl unaided, so we probably were on the proper route.

"He's over here! He found some geodes!" Mimoza called, waving her hand in the air.

Relieved that we'd been able to find him unscathed, we rearranged our formation to keep Maryl in the center of the group before resuming our trek.

"Divine Retribution!" Mimoza finished off a Baby Salamander. Her relief was short-lived as she caught a glimpse of what flowed a few steps away from her. "Is there really a path this way? There's lava right there..."

Maryl had directed our group into the volcano to reach the path to Eden. Perilously close, lava flowed like a river just off the path. One tumble and we'd be done for.

"Yes. Please watch your step. No potion can save you if you die instantly," Maryl said as if it were as simple as needing to tread carefully.

"Right..." Mimoza said, eyes still fixed on the flowing lava.

We walked for a while, sweat-drenched in the heat now radiated by lava instead of the glaring sun...until I felt a faint breeze.

"There it is," Maryl said. "Walking through the gap in those rocks will lead us out of here."

"That's more of a crack than a gap," I said. I could walk through it just fine, and so could Maryl and Leroy—who were on the slender side—but Kent or Blitz...

Kent stared at the crack with his brows pinched. "Can I get through?" He tried but couldn't get past the first few steps.

"It's pretty tight... What if you took off your armor?" I suggested.

"Looks like I'll have to." Kent unstrapped his armor and stored it in his Bag. "All right, I'll take the lead."

"Then I'll take the rear."

"Thanks, Blitz!" Kent said.

With our formation decided, we lined up single file—with Tithia and Maryl in the middle—and squeezed into the small gap in the rocks.

Kent nearly got stuck a few times, but it didn't take long for the crack to widen and make walking easier.

"The wind is getting louder," I said. Almost as I spoke, the sunlight at the end of the passage came into sight.

"We made it!" Kent shouted, rushing to look out the exit—and gasped. "Wow...!"

I walked up beside him. "Kent? What do you— Wow, look at that view!"

Anyone would have been awestruck by the view. We were halfway up the volcano, the expansive sky all around us, the sound of flapping wings filling the air. Below us, a sea of clouds rolled over a forest and a small village in the distance—Eden.

Kent blew out a breath. "It's amazing that we get to see things like this. I felt the same way when I first flew... And you can't see this unless you go through an adventure like we did. Being an

adventurer is the best, isn't it, Sharon?"

"The best...!" I agreed. Without a shadow of a doubt, I knew it was my calling.

A trembling whine came from behind us—Maryl. "We're really high up... Are we going to climb down from here?"

"We are pretty high... It's almost a cliff out there," I said. The way up the volcano had been a gradual incline, but we'd come out atop a cliff steep enough that we'd tumble all the way down if we were to miss a step. "But don't worry."

While Maryl watched wide-eyed, I blew my Dragon Whistle, and the others followed suit. Seven Dragons—plus Sora—came swooping down, and we jumped on their backs.

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Whaaaat?! Dragons? What's happening?! Do we fight them?! You're *riding* them?!" Maryl stammered in his panic.

Kent laughed. "They're *our* Dragons. They won't hurt you. Ride with me, Maryl."

"What? Okay. You're all Dragonriders... No, you all had different Skills..." Maryl muttered, trying to figure out this phenomenon. Kent shrugged and yanked the researcher by the arm to pull him onto Sora's back.

Seeing the view from a Dragon's back cast it in a whole new light.

"Let's get going!" Kent announced. "We're going to that village, right?" he asked Angel.

"Yes," Angel answered, flying alongside Kent with her own wings.

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"Who are you?!"

Once we landed our Dragons close to the village, villagers rushed out and surrounded us, lances poised to strike. Apparently, they thought we were here to invade.

"No! We're adventurers! We don't mean your village any harm!" Kent protested.

"Th-Th-Th-That's right! I'm just a researcher looking to learn more about the village!" Maryl chimed in.

"Why would you want to learn about our village?! To what end?!"

one of the villagers countered.

"Maryl!" we all shouted—he'd made them even more suspicious of us!

"I purromise, we're just normal adventurers!" Tarte said.

"What's normal about those ears and that tail!" the villager shouted.

As Tarte yowled in protest, I saw that many of them were eyeing Tarte with fear in their eyes, like she was some sort of monster. Even if they had never seen a Cait Sith before, how could they look at my adorable Tarte and see a threat?! We had to break this standoff, but peacefully—no good could come from harming the villagers.

While I racked my brain for a way out of this sticky situation, Angel took a step forward. "You must not fight."

The villagers went wide-eyed...and threw themselves down on one knee.

What's happening?!

The villagers began frantically speaking to Angel.

"A-Are you Goddess Flaudia?!"

"Wings of pure white are her mark..."

"We have been praying for you."

Right. This village must have had a strong foundation in worshipping Flaudia. Angel certainly looked divine enough to be a goddess, so I understood why they would revere her.

Angel wore a compassionate smile. "I am not Flaudia, only an angel who serves her."

"An angel...!" the villagers breathed in awe.

"Yes. I hope to stay in the village with these people and visit the island. May I have your permission to stay in the village and borrow a boat?" Angel asked.

"Of course!" The villagers acquiesced without missing a beat. *Good thing we have an angel on our side.*

"We'll be taking a boat to our destination?" I asked.

"Yes. The mist above the island makes it too dangerous to fly there," Angel said.

"Got it." If it was dangerous enough for Angel to warn us against it, we definitely shouldn't fly there. I went along with Angel's request

to borrow a boat from tomorrow onward.

Eden, the Furthest Village, looked like an ancient ruin. The long rows of living quarters that must have been white when first built were now yellowed with age. A relief of Flaudia and an angel marked one of the walls, which helped explain why they'd been so quick to accept Angel.

One of the men who'd pointed a lance at us earlier was the village leader. "Please stay in my house," he volunteered. "And allow us to host a feast of welcome. Everyone will be so excited to know an angel has graced our village."

"Thank you... But I must not indulge in such things while Flaudia awaits. I will accept only your generosity," Angel said.

"How selfless...!" the leader exclaimed, brought to tears by Angel's compassion.

While the other villagers looked on, we came to the leader's house, which was the building that stood closest to the sea on the other side of the village. Next to the house stood a dock and a boat. "There's one room for the angel, and would the others mind grouping up into male and female?"

"Not at all," Leroy spoke for the party, and the village leader looked relieved.

We regrouped in the girls' room, and Angel sat on the edge of the bed assigned to me. She let out a big yawn. "I am a little tired. But we have finally come this far." She flashed a smile. By the sound of it, we were very close to seeing Flaudia.

"We are going to the island tomorrow," Tithia reminded her. "Please get some rest."

"Thank you, Tithia," Angel said. Even she looked worn out by the long day we'd had.

While Tarte was getting us tea, there was something I had to ask. "Angel, I'd like to know more about...the place we're going tomorrow."

"It is where Flaudia sleeps. That is all I can say."

She shook her head, and that was that.

The Angel Named Angel

The next morning, we decided to take a quick tour of Eden before departing for the island. Everywhere we went in the village, Angel was a huge hit with the villagers.

"Flaudia's Angel! Please accept this offering."

"Please enjoy these with Goddess Flaudia!"

People rushed to kneel before Angel, presenting her with offerings. Each time, Angel would say, "Why, thank you," and accept. We couldn't so much as glance at merchandise in a store without the owner practically shoving it at Angel, free of charge.

Blitz and Mimoza looked like they didn't know what to do about this. Even Tithia watched the offerings anxiously—she would have politely refused anything offered to her, but she clearly didn't feel that it was her place to tell Angel what to do. *As for me, I've decided not to worry about it!*

"If we see any good items, we should pick them up," I said.

"And hopefurly some ingredients!" Tarte chimed in. There was no way the package of brand-new village and dungeon didn't come with a suite of new items.

After we walked the village for a while, a sweet scent tickled my nose. "What is that fruity smell?" I asked.

"Let's check it out!" Kent said, darting toward the source of the scent—a fruit stand.

They were selling cups of carbonated water infused with mouthwatering bite-sized pieces of fruit: apples, pineapples, pears, peaches, and cherries.

"Good morning!" the vendor greeted us. "Come try our village's famous—A-A-Angel?! Please have a taste. When you drink this Fresh Fruit Soda, your total mana will increase by fifty percent for thirty minutes!"

"Why, thank you," Angel said with the same nonchalance as

always.

"F-Fifty percent?!" we humans blurted in shock. That would give us a significant edge in any combat. We were going to have to stock up on these.

"I'd like to buy some!" I said.

"Me too!"

"And me!"

"Meow too!"

All of us jumped to buy our own Fresh Fruit Soda.

"A-Absolutely," the vendor said, and made us three cups each—using up all the fruit he had on hand.

"We'll definitely be back for more!" I promised.

"That'd be great."

With our Fresh Fruit Soda in our Bags, we hopped on a boat and started for the small island. We hadn't come across any new materials for sale to speak of... I had been so confident that they must have introduced something new.

Soon, the boat docked on the small island—Flaudia's Memorial.

"This is a dungeon, isn't it...? It just looks like an islet," I said. Flaudia's Memorial was no larger than a football field, without any monsters that I could see. I was scanning the island for something more—a passage that led to another area or a tunnel that went underground—when Angel flapped her wings and flew over to the center of the islet.

"Wait—Angel?!"

"Don't go rogue!" Kent shouted as we rushed after her.

In the center of the islet where she landed stood a memorial—a three-meter-tall statue of Goddess Flaudia that looked abandoned, with overgrown grass covering its base. *Poor Flaudia.*

"Oh, I finally made it!" Angel cried, overjoyed to at last complete her mission for the goddess. Tithia looked relieved by Angel's reaction.

"Now we can ask fur Flaudia's help?"

"We gained some levels along the way too. We can finally beat L'lyeh!"

Tarte and Kent were nothing but excited, but I couldn't shake this

feeling that kept gnawing at me. Was it because the name of the dungeon had an ominous ring to it? Maybe I would have felt more optimistic about this place if it had been called something like "The Sacred Ground Where Flaudia Sleeps." It didn't help that the islet was misty and gloomy.

Tithia took a step forward. "So, this is where Flaudia... Angel, what do we do next?"

"It is very easy." Angel smiled gracefully and turned to me. "This is where Flaudia is sealed—a seal that will be broken by the sacrifice of the Holy Maiden. You have been chosen for a role of great honor, Sharon."

A quest window materialized before my eyes.

Ascension of the Holy Maiden:
Give your life to Goddess Flaudia and break her seal. With your sacred sacrifice, you will be remembered as the Holy Maiden forevermore.

Angel's cold voice seemed to freeze us all where we stood. She meant it—she wanted me to sacrifice my life.

"Sacrifice...?! You want Meowster to sacrifice her life?! You can't mean that—you serve Goddess Flaudia!" Tarte shouted, desperately seeking an explanation.

Others shouted at Angel too.

"She can't do that!"

"Why do you need a sacrifice?!"

Just as I was about to reject Angel's demand, I saw the weapon in her hand—a glaive with a blade of blue that faded into white. If I hadn't been afraid for my life, I might have admired its mystical beauty.

Tithia covered her gasp with her hands. "Angel?! Why...?!"

I took a step back as reality sank in—Angel was showing her true colors.



We're in big trouble, aren't we?

Angel only chuckled. "I could not have been more clear. It is time for you to become the sacrifice that frees Flaudia." She leaped toward me and swung her glaive.

Immediately, I cast Goddess's Protection on myself. The glaive bounced off the barrier, allowing me to put some distance between me and Angel.

"Taunt!" Kent shouted as he ran past me.

If we let our guard down for a second, we're done for! I really hadn't seen this betrayal coming—not from someone I'd considered a friend.

"Crap, there's so much force behind each hit...!"

"Kent! I'll hold down the front with you! Divine Shield!"

"Thanks, Blitz!"

How high is Angel's Attack?! I didn't think Kent or Blitz would go down in one hit, but it was a complete mystery what kind of attack Angel would deal next. *A quest I don't know about and can't redo... This isn't an uphill battle—it's an up-a-sheer-cliff battle!*

"Goddess's Apostle! Mana Rations!" I began applying buffs, when one of Angel's relentless attacks sliced into Kent's shoulder. "Heal More!"

Angel was swinging her glaive around like it was as light as a feather, each blow striking as hard as a Dragon's tail.

"I do wish for you to stop this futile resistance and sacrifice yourself," Angel said.

"You think that's what the goddess wants?!" Kent challenged.

Angel blinked once before her lips curved up. "Of course. This world needs Flaudia. We should celebrate the fact that she can be brought back with Sharon's life alone." Angel let out a sigh, as if she couldn't understand why we'd possibly fight against this.

"What...?!" Kent breathed, nearly speechless.

"You're wrong!" Tithia cried out, her voice and eyes shaking from the pain of her shattered illusion. "I have served as Pope in hopes of bringing peace to this world! And true peace is never built on someone's sacrifice. I will never accept that...!"

"Ti..." I whispered.

"You defy Flaudia, then? You should learn your place, Pope." Wrath burned in Angel's eyes. She swung her glaive once, trimming a few blades of grass.

A moment later, an overwhelming blast of air struck Tithia, drawing a scream from her as she was thrown backward.

"Your Holiness!" Leroy managed to catch her, but he wasn't strong enough to withstand Angel's attack—they were both tossed backward.

"Wide Heal! Goddess's Protection!" I shouted, healing and reapplying the barriers on Tithia and Leroy. "Angel, stop this!"

"Why? You have the honor of becoming the Holy Maiden," Angel said. "All you have to do is say that you want to be—"

"I will be the Holy Maiden!" a voice called from my right.

I had been sure we were the only ones on the islet, but I must not have noticed the arrival of another party while I was so focused on battling Angel. When I turned toward the source of the voice, I found Emilia and several Templars, a young blond guy in a church robe standing among them—Owen Hervas. *When I didn't see them in Slumbering Volcano, I thought they might have been taken out.* Evidently, they hadn't been.



Without a hint of surprise at their sudden appearance, Angel tilted her head to the side. "You wish to be the Holy Maiden...?"

"Yes. It isn't Lady Charlotte who deserves to be the Holy Maiden—it is I!" Emilia declared so confidently that I had no idea where to start with her. Even our battle had come to a halt, everyone in my party staring at Emilia with utter confusion.

"It does not make a difference who becomes the Holy Maiden," Angel said.

Emilia puffed out her chest. "I am the only worthy choice!"

Most likely, Emilia had only heard the part about me becoming the Holy Maiden and not the part where the Holy Maiden was meant to be a human sacrifice to bring about Flaudia's return. While I considered my next options, Owen approached us.

"You've traveled far, Owen," Tithia said.

"I was going to say the same to you," Owen said. "I thought my father must have killed you by now."

A faint smile appeared on Tithia's face. "I was never going to go down without a fight." She pointed her staff at Owen's throat, while Leroy stood close guard at his Pope's side. "What is the meaning of all of this, Owen? As Pope, I cannot tolerate what you have done."

"It is all according to my father's plans," Owen said without balking at Tithia or her staff, glancing at Emilia and Angel.

Tithia followed his gaze. "Who is she?"

"A Farblume noble," said Owen. "She claims to be the crown prince's fiancée, but the engagement isn't officially recognized. I brought her with me because she wouldn't stop talking about becoming the Holy Maiden... Is that really possible?"

It sounded like Owen had brought Emilia in case she proved to be useful. Emilia—Ignacia's current lover—was a low-level Healer. If my memory served, she had the Heal Skill but little more. *Should I stop her? Or let this play out?* I hesitated for a moment before deciding that I couldn't let someone—even Emilia—become a human sacrifice.

I ran up to her and grabbed her wrist. "To become the Holy Maiden is to be sacrificed! Lady Emilia, you need to leave this place now! She's going to kill you!"

"Y-You can't fool me with such lies! How low will you stoop to steal the Holy Maidenhood from me?! I can't see how you were even considered for it, considering that you are a Dark Mage. Unlike you, I am a Healer!" Emilia shrieked, as though I were the one who didn't belong here.

I'm trying to save your life here, you little— No, I couldn't lose my temper so easily. With some deep breathing, I calmed myself down. "We just need to get out of here—"

"Then, Emilia. Show me the proof that you are worthy to become the Holy Maiden," Angel demanded, still smiling.

"Pr-Proof?!" Emilia stammered.

Angel had to mean the item that triggered the Holy Maiden quest in the first place. I'd gotten it from a dungeon treasure chest, so I doubted Emilia had gotten her hands on the same thing—her panicked look verified my theory.

"Quickly," Angel urged.

"Um...where can I find this proof?" Emilia asked.

"You have fallen remarkably short of the mark. How unfortunate. You are no longer needed, so you may die now. Perhaps you can aid Flaudia in some small way," Angel said.

"What—"

A beam of light shot from the tip of Angel's glaive and pierced Emilia's abdomen. It happened so fast that it felt like I'd lost a moment of time. I blinked and it was over.

"Heal Completely!" I'd used the Skill before I had a chance to even think.

Emilia was successfully healed, but her white robe was soaked with blood, and she was sobbing from shock and choking, perhaps on the stench of iron. If I had been a little slower on the draw, I would have been too late.

I quickly downed a potion to recover the HP and mana I'd spent to use Heal Completely. "Can't you see, Lady Emilia? The angel is not on our side. The Holy Maiden is merely a sacrifice for Flaudia."

"No... Why...? I only wanted to become the Holy Maiden to help Ignacia...!" Emilia sobbed.

"His Highness was searching for you. Why don't you get out of

here and go meet up with him?" I suggested. The least she could do was rein in the crown prince so he didn't come and bother me anymore.

"He was...?" Emilia breathed.

"This is becoming tedious. Everyone may die now," Angel announced.

"What?!" I shouted. I'd tried to get Emilia and her companions out of here, but Angel wasn't going to let anyone leave the islet, it seemed.

Her glaive poised, Angel darted toward us like a whirlwind—like a bolt of lightning.

"Not so fast! Got Your Nose!" Kent jumped in with his Skill, causing Angel to scream.

That's the first time she's reacted, I noted. I'd expected her to be immune to most attacks, but much to my relief, that wasn't the case. *Time to buckle down.* "Everyone! We're going to take down Angel!"

Shouts from the rest of my party echoed my determination as we rushed into our combat formation. Kent and Blitz moved to the front, with Mimoza as their backup, while I rapid-cast buffs on them. Behind them stood Tarte, Cocoa, and Tithia, supported by Leroy. Thankfully, Owen was chipping in with supporting Skills of his own—we could use all the help we could get.

"Taunt! Dragon Lance!" Kent landed the first blow, followed by a barrage of attacks from the rest of our party—including Owen's Templars.

"Scorched by earth, I pray for a breath of life!"

"Divine Retribution!"

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Goddess's Smite!"

"Merciless Retribution!"

"Shining Retribution!"

As I watched all our attacks find their mark, I prepared to reapply buffs...when I saw particles of light pour out of Angel.

"I have been defeated...by humans?!" Angel said, before she dissolved into shimmering dust.

Tithia fell to her knees, head slumped. "Why...?" Her whisper

trembled with uncertainty, like she wasn't sure we'd made the right decision in fighting Angel.

What other choice did we have? I would never have laid down my life for the goddess.

Ascension of the Holy Maiden

"We won...didn't we?" Kent asked, and I could see some of the tension leave the others' bodies, even though my heart was still thundering and my breath was still ragged. I wanted to lie down on the grass right then and there.

"We did it... We did it...! Meowster!" Tarte ran over and threw her tiny arms around me.

"Tarte." Holding my apprentice tight, I finally let out a breath of relief. If Angel had beaten us, I would have already become a sacrifice by now.

What would have happened if Flaudia had been brought back? I wondered. And if becoming the Holy Maiden had meant being sacrificed, there wouldn't have been a Holy Maiden job to begin with. We'd dodged the immediate threat of Angel killing me, but something didn't sit right. *Is there a way to become the Holy Maiden without being sacrificed?*

I walked up to Flaudia's Memorial and stared at it. "If Angel was telling the truth, this is where Flaudia sleeps... I'm never going to sacrifice myself, so I guess she won't wake up."

Just as I said that, a voice spoke directly in my head. "Why...?" I recognized that voice. "Charlotte, you are my kin. Give up your life for me, and the world will be at peace."

Shock rumbled through me. "Flaudia...!" I hadn't expected the goddess to demand the life sacrifice of me too. *And what does she mean I'm her "kin"...?* It took me a moment to remember—that was the prayer I'd given to her statue when I'd switched jobs to Healer. "That's just the scripted line to switch jobs!" I countered. I'd *had* to say those words to become a Healer, so it wasn't fair that Flaudia was holding them over my head. I'd never had any religious devotion to her or any god.

Flaudia continued as if she hadn't heard me at all. "Do not worry.

I love every creature in this world. Take comfort in knowing that you will live on through my love for them."

"No, thanks!" Tightening my grip on my staff, I leaped away from the memorial and promptly applied the full set of buffs to everyone, making sure to apply Goddess's Smite to Tarte. There was no way we weren't about to fight Flaudia herself.

"Meowster!"

"Be ready to use Potion Throw. Everyone, prepare for combat!" I shouted.

Tarte looked like she wanted to say something but quickly swallowed it. "Yes, Meowster!" Everyone quickly took their fighting stances.

If Goddess Flaudia does attack us...can we beat her? Shivers ran down my spine at the thought but there was no backing down from this fight.

Just then, an earsplitting scream erupted from the memorial, the shock waves that came with it threatening to knock us off our feet—by leaning forward, we just managed to stand our ground.

"What an introduction," I muttered. Controlling my breathing, I straightened myself. "There she is."

Tithia's own breath quivered where she now stood next to me. "Th-That is Flaudia...?" Her face was twisted in disbelief as she came face-to-face with a goddess irreconcilable with the picture her devotion had painted in her mind.

"Charlotte..." Flaudia called, her voice distorted.

The Goddess Flaudia who emerged from the memorial looked more like a fallen angel than a goddess. Her two pairs of white wings—one on her shoulders and another emerging from her waist—her shimmering golden hair, and her pure-white dress were all beautiful. In contrast to her compassionate smile, the sword in her hand looked sinister enough to inspire terror. *Would she have appeared as a benevolent goddess had I sacrificed myself?* I wondered. *But how can she be a true goddess if she can only stand on the corpse of her kin?*

Staring down Flaudia and the sword in her hand, I couldn't help but feel nervous. Everyone in my party—other than me—was from

Erenzi, where Goddess Flaudia had been a symbol of their religion and the object of their worship since they'd been born. I had to expect some hesitation when it came to fighting the deity of their religion.

On the flip side, I was surprisingly calm, given this turn of events. Maybe it was because the betrayal of an angel or a goddess or the like had been pretty common in the fiction I'd known—a subversion of morality.

Kent inhaled, and I heard it clearly. "Here she comes! Taunt!"

I used my Skill just as Kent used his. "Goddess's Protection!"

As soon as Kent blocked Flaudia's sword with his own, my Skill landed on him, reapplying his barrier—perfect timing!

But...do we stand a chance? This was the most nervous I'd been since regaining my memories. I wasn't foolhardy enough to consider Goddess Flaudia as anything but a formidable threat. One wrong move and we'd be dead.

We still have L'lyeh to contend with too... What a boss rush. "Keep your defenses up. No risky plays. We're in for the long haul."

"Yes, Meowster! If any of you think you're going to run out of purrtions, let me know early."

"Got it!" the team answered.

There was no point in rushing the battle and putting ourselves in a dire situation. *Survival first! Still...how do we beat her?*

With a light kick off the ground, Flaudia rose into the air as weightlessly as a feather. She floated backward for a few moments before holding her sword out, pointing forward. In the next moment, the goddess vanished.

What?

"Look out! Divine Shield!" Blitz shouted, just in time for Flaudia's sword to clash into the shield he'd created. Both he and I were thrown back by the impact.

I hadn't been able to follow a single moment of Flaudia's attack with my eyes. I blew out a breath. "Thank you, Blitz."

"Anytime. But if that attack keeps coming..."

Something cold slicked down my spine. Our tanks were the only ones who stood a chance of blocking an attack that fast. I felt my

lips form a tight line as the realization sank in.

Leroy helped me up from the ground. "We may not make it through a long haul. Goddess's Smite."

"I agree... Goddess's Apostle. Regeneration. Mana Rations." Once I used those Skills, Flaudia disappeared again. "Where did she—" All the air left my lungs as my back slammed into a boulder. Flaudia had targeted me again. Goddess's Protection kept me from taking any damage, but the massive impact of the sword hitting my stomach wasn't pleasant—nor was the crash against the boulder.

"Goddess's Protection. Heal." I let out a deep breath. "I don't know if I should have expected this, but Flaudia's after *me*," I said. Maybe it didn't make a difference who made me into a sacrifice—myself, Angel, or Flaudia herself. Flaudia concentrating her attacks like this would be brutal for me, but we could turn that into an opportunity.

Maybe I'll grab Flaudia's arm when she attacks and hold her while everyone else attacks! That wouldn't work—no way my skinny Archbishop arms could hold down a giant-sword-wielding goddess. *In* Reas*, I'd be ready to die a dozen times before figuring out how to beat her.* While I stood there hopelessly, Tithia walked past me.

"Ti?! Don't get too close!"

"Your Holiness!"

Tithia ignored my call and Leroy's as she walked right up to Flaudia. Before I could slap all the buffs I had on her and drag her back here, Tithia knelt before Flaudia.

"Oh?" the goddess said.

I swallowed my words when I saw how full of sorrow Tithia's eyes were. "You are not the Flaudia who blesses this world with her love—the Flaudia I believed in."

"Pope... My dear lamb. Do not concern yourself with that. Once the Holy Maiden gives her life to resurrect me, I can bring true peace to the world," Flaudia said, steadfast in her assurance that as long as she was brought back, the world would be at peace again.

There was an argument for obeying Flaudia. It was nearly impossible to protect an entire population, so sacrificing the few to save the majority wasn't an unreasonable trade-off. The problem

was that I had no intention of being sacrificed.

I came up next to Tithia and stared down the arrogant goddess. "What do you mean by 'peace,' anyway?" No wars? No monsters? No disasters? World peace sounded great on paper, but it was too nebulous a concept. "Everyone has a different idea of what peace looks like," I said.

Flaudia stared back at me quizzically before smiling softly—as if to mock me for not getting something so obvious. "True peace is to live by my word. My presence alone will ensure peace upon the world."

"What...?! Without free will, there's no life at all!" I shouted. "A kingdom full of puppets for you to control is not true peace!"

Flaudia shrugged. "You are only a child, Charlotte. You do not understand. Alas...you never will see a world of true peace, my sacrifice."

It was no use. Flaudia was all but ignoring my words. I could pour my heart out, yet my words would never reach her... I ground my teeth.

Tithia rose to her feet. "I do not believe that true peace means someone must be sacrificed or that we all must relinquish our free will. You may call that idealism, Goddess Flaudia, but how could I expect anyone to believe in a peaceful world if I do not strive for it myself...?!" A single tear fell from her eye as Tithia slowly intertwined her fingers in a prayer.

I realized what she was about to do. "Tithia!" I held my staff tight and prepared for the worst.

"Tiny little thing," Flaudia said. "Do you really think you stand a chance against—"

"Judgment Day." Tithia's clear quiet voice rang out to the heavens.

Flaudia's eyes widened, so she must have known the effect of that Skill—a terrifying fifty-fifty chance to either insta-kill or completely heal its target. The weight of the Skill's activation—a sort of electricity in the air—pressed down upon us as an angel with a greatsword emerged from the sky above Flaudia.

Please...! I silently prayed, putting my arm around Tithia and

holding her upright in preparation for the Skill's effect knocking her out.

Just then, the angel ran Flaudia through with the sword. "No...! This cannot be...!" The goddess's shriek rang out.

"Death!" The angel's voice boomed as judgment was passed.

"Goddess Flaudia!" Tithia cried out painfully as the goddess burst into light. Even though she'd rejected Flaudia's influence and been forced to eliminate the goddess herself, I could see how much the idea of Flaudia meant to her.

I wish I could have served Flaudia as the Holy Maiden, I thought.

After what seemed like a long time, Flaudia disappeared completely...leaving behind a small box.



We had defeated Flaudia...but all we could do, exhausted and breathing raggedly, was stare at the goddess's memorial.

What a horrible quest, I thought, suffering more than just a bitter taste in my mouth. Physically and emotionally, I was completely wiped out. Entrusting Leroy with the fainted Tithia, and resisting the urge to collapse on the ground, I walked up to Flaudia's dropped item—a small white box I'd never seen before. I had no idea what to do with it, other than open it up and see what was inside.

"Hey, can I open this box, or...?" I asked the party to see how they wanted to divvy this up. As soon as I touched the box, though, it glowed and opened on its own.

"Let there be peace upon the world," Flaudia's voice echoed loud enough for us all to hear.

I'd thought her an egomaniacal goddess, but I had to respect that, even in her defeat, she wished for world peace. When the last echo of Flaudia's voice faded, a quest window appeared before my eyes.

Ascension of the Holy Maiden:
With Goddess Flaudia gone, there is no goddess left to wish for world peace.
You must become that goddess in her stead.
However, becoming a goddess will be too strenuous for your human body. You must fulfill that sacred duty as the Holy Maiden.

As soon as I finished reading those words, a pillar of light erupted from me. "What?! No, wait—!" Like getting smacked in the face out of nowhere, I became the Holy Maiden.

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After that, we took the boat back to Eden and slept like logs before returning to Zille. As much as I wanted to simply sleep for a year straight, we still had a major problem to deal with.

Once we were back in our room at the inn, I told the party that my Holy Maiden quest had progressed and that I believed the quest was somehow related to Hervas and his coup.

"...that's what these are," I said, showing the party my new equipment that had come from Flaudia's box—a matching set of bracelet and ring called Flaudia's Dewdrops. They were defensive items with crazy stats: a twenty percent buff to healing Skills, a ten percent buff to any Skill using the Holy element, a twenty percent discount on mana spending, a boost to my natural recovery of mana...and it even came with a dedicated Skill to use.

"That's ameowzing, Meowster!"

"I see..." Leroy said and contemplated for a while. "It seems more likely that the Holy Maiden quest began because Hervas made his move."

"I can't say for sure..." I said, hoping that Hervas had been the catalyst. If me starting the quest had caused Tithia to be overthrown, I wouldn't be able to look her in the eye!

"Considering how large the scale of Hervas's attack was, I expect him to have spent years planning it. He wouldn't have been able to take control of Crystalline Cathedral with, say, only a few months of planning," Leroy said.

"Right... That makes sense," I said, failing to hide my relief.

"All we need to do now is take down Hervas— Well, take down L'lyeh. That's the trouble, though, isn't it?" Leroy added, and the rest of us grunted in contemplation.

We knew all too well how powerful L'lyeh was, and I didn't expect a few extra levels to make a difference. But...now I had a trick up my sleeve. "I should be able to keep L'lyeh in check."

"Really?! Did you learn a new Skill now that you're the Holy Maiden?!" Kent asked.

"Purray, Meowster!" Tarte cheered, and the others joined her.

It was natural for them to celebrate—for the first time, we had a real shot at taking L'lyeh down. Still, I gazed around at my party nervously... I hadn't told them about a big problem. They were expecting to go take back the cathedral right away after this discussion, but that wouldn't be possible.

"I need to tell you something," I said solemnly.

"Sharon...?" They all stared at me, waiting for what I had to say.

"When I became a Holy Maiden...I dropped back down to level 1!" I confessed.

"What?!"

Back to Level 1

In *Reas Life Online*, switching jobs had reverted your level back to 1. It had been a feature, not a bug, so there was nothing I could do about it. The same thing had happened when I'd switched from Dark Mage to Healer. Even though it hadn't been very long since then, it felt like years ago to me.

So, I had come out to grind some levels with Kent, Cocoa, and Leroy. Kent would be our tank; Cocoa would be our emergency nuke option; and Leroy, of course, would support. Their help was much needed since I had no Skills yet and didn't even know what kinds of Skills I'd be learning as the Holy Maiden.

The others were holding the fort back at the inn. As much as it had pained me to do so, I'd asked Tarte to whip up a bunch of Reset Skill Potions. I almost gagged just thinking about it.

Our first leveling spot was the area directly south of Zille. Here, I'd be taking on Jigglies and Flower Bunnies until I reached level 10 or so.

"Strengthen, Increase Attack, Increase Defense, Goddess's Protection, Goddess's Smite," Leroy rattled off.

"Taunt!" Kent chimed in.

"Moment of Bliss," Cocoa added.

"Thank you!" I cheered and downed a Roaring Potion, further boosting my Attack. It was so much fun leveling with a full set of buffs!

I whacked a Jiggly with my staff—*poof*!

Then, I clobbered a Flower Bunny with my staff—*poof*!

"This is so much fun!" I squealed.

"Why does this feel like cheating somehow...?" Kent muttered as he kept using Taunt on every monster that appeared, even though it wasn't necessary when I was taking them all out in one shot.

Once I reached level 15 through a fun montage of clobbering, we

took a break. “Let me take a look at my Skills,” I said.

“Okay,” Kent agreed and stopped luring monsters.

“Got it!” Cocoa chimed in.

Leroy came over to me. “I’m curious what Skills you’ll have as the Holy Maiden.”

Let’s find out. “Hmm... The Skills have different names, but many of them are simply better versions of Healer Skills,” I explained. That also meant that the more levels I regained, the more powerful I’d be compared to when I’d been a Healer of the same level.

There were several Skills I could obtain right now: Heal with Light, a Heal upgrade that also restored a little HP to those near the target; Smiting Light, which tripled the target’s Attack for their next Skill; Protective Light, which set up a steadfast barrier; Glorious Light that significantly boosted the target’s physical abilities; and Retribution, an attack of the Holy element.

These Skills are busted. Other Skills would become available once I learned their prerequisite Skills. I learned Retribution for now, to help me with my leveling. “Onward and upward!” I announced.

“You decided on your Skills already?” Kent asked.

“Yep. Just the attacking Skill for now. I’m going to try it out!” Testing Skills was very important—that was a hard lesson we’d learned with Tithia’s Skills.

Standing before a Jelly, I proudly shouted, “Retribution!”

A flash of light fell from the heavens, and the Jiggly was impaled by a sacred sword. When the sword disappeared, so did the Jiggly, leaving behind a Jiggly Jelly. I had to stand there dumbfounded for a moment before I let out a cheer. “That’s awesome!”

“That’s brutal...” Kent said.

“I’m not sure what Holy Maiden even means anymore...” Cocoa said.

“This *is* Sharon we’re talking about...” Leroy muttered.

While I was over the moon at how powerful my Skill had turned out to be, I felt like my companions were a little disappointed. “What were you expecting from the Holy Maiden when Flaudia and Angel turned out the way they did?” I demanded.

“Touché,” they said in unison. *Thanks, Flaudia.*

"Okay. Let's go hunt some Orcs next!" I suggested.

"Instead of Wolves?!" Kent asked, his face full of concern for me.

"No prob. I can totally do it," I reassured him. It'd be a piece of cake with my busted Retribution Skill.

"You're going too fast..." Kent grumbled, even as he agreed to accompany me to Sunlit Grove.

Overview:

Name: Sharon (Charlotte Cocoriara)
Level: 73
Job: Holy Maiden (A divine soul who loves the world. With miraculous power, she heals all, praying for world peace.)

Titles:

Fiancée No More: +5% Resistance to attacks from Male enemies.
Subbing In for the Goddess: Healing Skills are 30% more effective / Magic Attacks do 20% more damage.

Skills:

Holy Maiden's Prayer: Summons an angel.
Heal with Light (Level 6): Heals the target and slightly heals nearby allies.
Heal Absolutely (Level 5): Greatly heals a single target.
Rainbow Rejuvenation (Level 5): Heals everyone in a 10-meter radius.
Smiting Light (Level 3): Triples the next attack.
Protective Light (Level 3): Creates a barrier around the target.
Glorious Light (Level 3): Increases physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).

Holy Maiden’s Boon (Level 10): Greatly increases physical strength (Attack, Defense, Dexterity).
Moonlight (Level 10): Recovers mana every 20 seconds.
Starlight (Level 10): Heals HP every 5 seconds.
Restore: Heals all status conditions.
Divine Domain (Level 5): Creates a barrier that keeps monsters out.
Holy Maiden’s Domain (Level 10): Creates a large barrier that keeps out anyone with malicious intent toward the user.
Quiet Prayer (Level 1): Increases the user’s HP and mana.
Reflect: Reflects Dark attacks.

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: Flaudia’s Dewdrops (+20% Healing / -20% Mana cost *+10% Holy element* Recovers mana faster / Enables the Reflect Skill)
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)

“We’re back!” I announced as we returned to the inn. After a full

day of nonstop leveling, I'd climbed back up to level 73. One of my Titles—Flaudia's Blessing—had dropped off, probably because I'd defeated Flaudia herself. In its place was a Title called Subbing In for the Goddess. As for the Holy Maiden's default Skill, Holy Maiden's Prayer, I'd been too afraid to use it after reading its description. I had no plans to use it for the foreseeable future either.

"What? Your level can go up that meowch in one day?" my apprentice exclaimed.

"Level 73 seems...physically impossible," Mimoza murmured.

Tarte and Mimoza stared at me, eyes wild with confusion. That stung a little. I'd been counting on Tarte to call me "ameowzing" again.

Kent was the one who spoke up in my defense. "She actually did it... Her Attack Skills are so strong that after we hunted Jigglies and Flower Bunnies, we skipped Wolves and went straight to Orcs. By the end of the day, she was taking down Wyverns..." By the time he finished explaining, even he seemed to be in disbelief.

"You've been through some harrowing battles..." Mimoza chuckled. "Let me make us some tea." She went to prepare tea and snacks.

I enjoyed our brief respite with hot tea and snow cream, knowing that we would soon transition to a strategy meeting. "That's why I'm going to relish this tea and ice cream! Mm, it's so good!"

"It is, but one's not enough..." Kent said longingly. We'd been out hunting all day, so naturally he was hungry.

"I have fresh-baked pizza," I said, sliding the pie I'd bought earlier onto the table. The smell of warm cheese and generous toppings made my mouth water.

"That looks good...!" Kent said.

"Wow, it looks amazing!" Cocoa chimed in, her gaze even more ravenous than Kent's.

"Are you hungry too?" I asked the rest of the room. "Let's share it."

"Yes, purrlease!" Tarte crowed.

"I am starving!" Tithia said.

Splitting a pizza helped us extend our break while we chatted

about this or that. Once we were full, we'd talk about our next steps.

"To wrap up, that's how I think we should proceed. Thoughts?" I asked, having explained an overview of my plan—everyone agreed to go along with it. Our strategy wasn't much different than last time, except that I was way more powerful this time around. We finally had a shot against L'lyeh.

Then, Tithia timidly raised her hand.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I do not believe this is something we should concern ourselves with right now...but what should we do about Owen and the others?" Tithia asked.

"Oh..." I'd forgotten about them. Owen, Emilia, and their Templar entourage must have been on their way back to Zille on foot or still resting in Eden.

After our battle against Angel and Flaudia, Emilia had gone into full hysterics, sobbing, "Why am I not the Holy Maiden?!" The way all of us had recoiled from her was still fresh in my memory.

"I was the one who brought her," Owen had said before volunteering to smooth her feathers—a task easier said than done. In the end, he'd practically dragged her off the island.

In a strange twist of fate, I had accomplished Owen's goal of defeating Flaudia. Owen hadn't seemed like a zealot for his father's cause, though. He had held his hands out before me, offering himself up to be detained. Apparently, he'd always been a reluctant participant. In fact, he'd said he admired Leroy for his devotion to Tithia. Owen had definitely chosen the wrong role model.

"He's not a threat, so let's let him be for now," I said. "Once we deal with Crystalline Cathedral, we'll send the Templars for him."

"Yes... That seems wise," Tithia said.

"Okay, then. Let's get ready for our final battle. For real this time," I said.

Our whole party cheered, united as one.

Battle for Crystalline Cathedral

"Holy Maiden's Boon!" When I used my Skill, an impressed cheer rose from those who hadn't been with me when I was leveling. They were all feeling how much of an upgrade this Skill was compared to Strengthen.

"I feel so much stronger. We can do this!" Kent shouted, clenching his fists in determination.

"We won't let Hervas get away," Blitz promised confidently.

Commanding a team of Templars, Blitz and Mimoza charged into Crystalline Cathedral. The rest of us followed, making a beeline for Tithia's room. *Not even L'lyeh will chase us away this time.*

"Stop!" Kent shouted, catching sight of enemy Templars running at us from ahead. Rather than wasting time dealing with them, he was going to lead us down another hallway.

Before we could change directions, though, the Templars called out, "Wait!" They threw down their swords and knelt.

"We wish to serve Pope Tithia!"

"We can't stand to serve Hervas a moment longer."

"Please, let us serve Her Holiness," they all pleaded.

"In that case," Leroy said, standing before the Templars. "Show me that you can be of service to Her Holiness. We must face off against L'lyeh."

"Allow us to show you the way."

"We are at your disposal!"

"This way!" they said, taking the lead.

Our party shared a look and followed after them.

After running down a long corridor and up several flights of stairs—perhaps a five-minute run in total—we came to the door of Tithia's room, where L'lyeh still lurked within.

As I applied buffs to all of us—the Templars included—Kent bellowed, "Let's do this!"

"Yeah!"

We're going to win, I kept telling myself. *This time, we are going to win.*

I opened the door.

Because we'd stormed the cathedral in the dead of night, there was little light in the room, save for a sliver of moonlight peeking in from the large window at the back. I scanned the room and noticed that a swing hung from the ceiling, just like the one in Underworld Abbey.

"Taunt! Bring it on, L'lyeh!" Kent roared.

In the next moment, L'lyeh's Dark magic struck Kent's greatsword with a weird clang. When I looked back toward the swing, L'lyeh was already on it, a bat familiar perched on each of her shoulders.

"A magic attack?! Protective Light!" I shouted, throwing a barrier around Kent.

"Purrtion Throw!"

As soon as Tarte attacked, I reapplied the buff to her Attack. "Smiting Light." So far, we hadn't suffered any damage, but L'lyeh wasn't the kind of boss you could hope to take down unscathed.

"Darkness..." L'lyeh said as she swung her staff wide, an eerie smile curving her lips. It was easy to guess that a powerful Dark magic would be coming at us.

"Kent!" I shouted as I ran up to him, holding my left hand out toward L'lyeh.

"Got it!" Kent stood his ground.

Flaudia's Dewdrops glowed bright, projecting a translucent magic circle in front of me. "Reflect!" I commanded, using my Skill just as L'lyeh fired off her attack.

What a busted piece of equipment, I thought.

What L'lyeh had sent our way—a ball of darkness like a miniature black hole—bounced right off of the magic circle and struck L'lyeh in the stomach, drawing an earsplitting screech from the goddess. L'lyeh went flying, crashing into the wall, where cracks spiderwebbed from the point of impact.

If that attack had hit me, I might not be standing right now. To calm my jittery heartbeat, I forced myself to breathe deeply and

slowly. *It's okay. We can win. L'lyeh's attacks use Dark magic. As long as I keep reflecting them like that, we won't lose.*

Opening some distance between Kent and me, I quickly reapplied our buffs before L'lyeh could make her next move. I'd spent a good amount of mana, so I made sure to recover that too.

"Here we go!" I shouted.

"Purrtion Throw!"

"Merciless Retribution!"

Tarte's and Tithia's attacks found their marks, and L'lyeh groaned. Compared to last time, this fight was going incredibly well so far. Still, a part of me felt a little guilty, fighting someone who looked like a cute little girl.

What's wrong with me? One wrong move and we're dead! I reminded myself.

"Another magic attack, Sharon!" Kent announced.

"Got it!" Stepping up again, I reflected L'lyeh's attack. The goddess was learning, though—she dodged it. "I thought this Skill would be our silver bullet... I didn't think she'd dodge it!" It shouldn't have been possible—my Skill reflected L'lyeh's attack instantly, like a mirror reflected light. Perhaps it was L'lyeh's ridiculous agility that made it possible.

We'll have to switch gears. Reflect is only for defense. We need to damage her in other ways.

I decided that, barring any devastating attacks from L'lyeh, I'd stay in the back of the formation, where Cocoa was. When I came alongside her, she pointed to the wall at the other end of the room. "Sharon, do you see that...?"

"What?" I followed her pointing finger to see L'lyeh's mark on the wall—the same one we'd tried in vain to destroy with the Molotov when we'd sneaked in the first time. *So frustrating...*

"Isn't it weird?" Cocoa asked. "Well, I don't know if 'weird' is the right word, but there's some black haze coming out of it that seems to tether L'lyeh to it."

"What?!" I said again, taking a closer look. Sure enough, the haze seemed to flow from the mark on the wall toward the goddess. I didn't know what that meant, but there had to be some reason

behind it. Maybe that was her power source. It was a pretty common gimmick for quest bosses. If we could break that magic circle, there was a good chance we could weaken L'lyeh. It was even possible that the reason we hadn't been able to beat L'lyeh before was because we hadn't destroyed that magic circle.

"I feel like destroying that magic circle is our way to win this," I said. "The problem is how..."

"Even a Molotov couldn't do it..." Cocoa said.

How are we supposed to destroy it? I wondered if one of my Holy Maiden Skills would do it, but it didn't make sense for completion of the quest to rely upon a random Skill I might not have learned before coming here.

"What about your bracelet?" Cocoa asked.

"This? It only reflects attacks, so I can't do anything with it unless L'lyeh attacks," I explained.

"Oh, right..." Cocoa said.

Unless the magic circle itself started attacking us, Reflect wouldn't help us break it. "I'll think of something!" I assured her.

"Okay," Cocoa said.

I moved away from her, reapplying buffs to everyone. They'd taken hits here and there, but nothing so serious that Starlight couldn't heal them at once.

L'lyeh swung her staff and sent balls of darkness toward us, small enough for each member to handle without me reflecting them—then it dawned on me. I could try to reflect these balls of darkness onto the magic circle. Maybe if we kept at it...

It's worth a try, I decided. "Kent! I'm going to draw L'lyeh's attack for a while. Stand back for a bit!"

"What?!" Kent blurted, utterly surprised—I had the lowest level among us, and my Skill set hardly made me a tank.

"Don't worry! A good supporter can do her job while keeping a boss occupied!" I said.

"For real...?!" Kent breathed.

Yes, for real...though that usually calls for better equipment and items. Right now, I had to work with the cards I'd been dealt. Keeping my distance from the rest of the party, I moved to a spot

from which I could aim for the magic circle with Reflect. While I did, Cocoa whispered the plan to the others, so they made sure to give me enough space.

"Do it quick, Sharon! I'll jump back up there if things start looking tough!" Kent called.

"You got it...!" I answered. *This is do or die.* Flexing my core, I threw a Molotov at L'lyeh as hard as I could. With its fiery explosion, the goddess shifted her attention to me. "Here she comes...!"

Numerous balls of darkness floated around L'lyeh, which she sent flying at me. These weren't lethal but they'd be painful if they hit. I carefully watched for the right moment. "Now! Reflect!" I swung my left hand up, and the balls of darkness scattered around the room, at least some of them striking the magic circle. "All right!" I cheered, and saw that both the magic circle and the haze around L'lyeh had slightly faded.

"The magic circle looks weaker!" Kent said.

"I may be able to handle the rest. Merciless Retribution!" Tithia's attack crumbled the wall, taking the magic circle with it.

"We did it!" Tarte crowed as the haze around L'lyeh completely cleared—she had been connected to that magic circle, as we'd theorized.

"Now we can win—"

"Sharon!" someone shouted.

"No—" I'd let my guard down for a split second, but that was enough time for L'lyeh's massive attack to reach me, too quickly for me to use Reflect. *I really, really hope those defense buffs keep me from dying...!* I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for impact...but nothing happened. I slowly opened my eyes in time to see L'lyeh's spell burst into thin air. "Wh-Why did it...? Oh, the Sacred Dewdrop!" Just then, I remembered that Tithia had given me a Sacred Dewdrop—an item that nullified any Dark attack, just once.

I'm alive... I could have sagged with relief.

"Sharon, are you okay?!" Kent shouted.

"I'm great! L'lyeh should be weakened now. We just have to take her down!" I said, reapplying buffs to the whole party.

L'lyeh screeched, and a magic shield appeared before her. Kent

began with Taunt, and everyone followed with their offensive Skills. Unlike earlier, L'lyeh was backed against the ropes. Even though she was taking up a defensive stance, she wouldn't be able to protect herself from all of our attacks. Still, she tried to fire another round of Dark magic at me—the biggest one I'd seen, at easily double the size of the goddess herself. The ball of darkness covered L'lyeh entirely.

"Sharon, you okay?!" Kent shouted.

"I got this!" My bracelet could reflect attacks of any magnitude. No matter how powerful L'lyeh's attack was going to be, I was going to reflect it!

"Reflect!" I managed to bounce back the Dark spell. *We won!* But then, something cold wrapped around my neck. "What...?" My breath was choked out of me as I was lifted into the air by my neck —L'lyeh was stringing me up with her chains.

Everyone was shouting my name, but I couldn't answer them. L'lyeh yanked the chains and sent me flying through the window of the tower room and into the open air.

"Sharon!" Leroy's voice cried above the rest.

This is really bad... I thought, unable to speak after L'lyeh's chain had crushed my windpipe. There was no surviving a fall from this height—Tithia's room was on the highest floor of the cathedral's tower. I caught a glimpse of the red moon in the corner of my eye, like a splotch of blood marring the sky.

"I..." *I wish I could have gone on more adventures.* If I could have spoken, maybe I could have gotten myself out of this situation somehow.

With a whooshing sound, the red moon vanished.

"There you are, Lottie!" a voice called.

R-R-Rudy?!

My brother Rudith had caught me, riding on the back of his red Dragon. I choked out a cough.

"Huh? You have choke marks... Drink this." He gave me a potion, which I quickly downed—immediately, my throat no longer felt constricted.

Oh. I could have drunk a potion, I realized. Panic had set in

earlier, and the thought hadn't even crossed my mind. It didn't help that this was a situation I'd never had to think about dealing with when I'd just been playing a game. *If there's ever a next time,* I promised myself, *I'll drink a potion right away.*



Despite my miraculous survival, I couldn't help but beat myself up for how I'd dropped the ball. "Thank you, Rudy."

"Don't mention it. So, where's the fool that did this to you? In the cathedral?" Rudith asked. Behind the mask of his gentle smile, I knew he was about to snap. *Not that it would be a bad thing if he took his anger out on L'lyeh.*

"Can you fly over there?" I asked, pointing to where Tithia's balcony had once been.

"Yep," Rudith said, flying us over to the spot I'd indicated.

The devastating attack had obliterated the balcony. At least I'd made it back alive. While Rudith helped me off of his Dragon, I noticed all eyes in the party locked on us in surprise. On top of that, Kent and Cocoa looked a little starstruck.

"Meowster! I'm so glad you're okay. Lord Rudith, thank you for saving Meowster too!"

"Meowster...?" Rudith repeated.

"Lord Rudith! It's an honor to see you again...!"

"Kent...?! You're already a Dragonrider?!" Rudith asked—now it was his turn to be surprised. "Well, that doesn't matter right now. Who did this to Lottie?"

"Well..." Kent trailed off, which didn't make sense to me. If they had defeated L'lyeh, there was no harm in saying just that.

Oh, maybe she got away, I suspected. "It's okay. Tell me what happened after I was thrown out the window."

"Allow me. Not that we understand what has happened entirely..." Leroy chuckled and pointed to the canopy bed in the corner of the room. "Look at that."

After our battle, it was barely a bed, with its layered white lace singed and one of its legs broken off. The state of the bed itself wasn't important, though, compared to what was on it.

"L'lyeh...?" I blurted, finding the Goddess of Darkness fast asleep on the broken bed, her rhythmic breathing an indication that she was still alive. "Um... Wait a minute."

"As I said, we don't understand it either," Leroy reiterated.

"I-I can see why..." I said. Nothing about this situation made sense.

According to Leroy, as soon as she'd thrown me out the window, L'lyeh had let out a screech and collapsed. "We decided not to finish her off just yet, especially without your input."

"I see..." I'd never been in this situation in the game, so I had no insight into what to do here. The only thing I could say was that it didn't feel right to attack a defenseless girl sleeping in a broken bed.

As I contemplated how to deal with the Goddess of Darkness, three Templars came running into the room—the same ones who'd shown us here. "We captured him!" they announced.

"Well done," Leroy said.

I turned to see whom they had captured...and found Hervas tied up behind the Templars. "Wait, you captured Hervas?!"

"Yes! We pledge our loyalty to Her Holiness Pope Tithia!" the Templars said.

While I stood there dumbfounded, Leroy instructed the Templars to keep Hervas in an underground cell with several of them on watch. This was when I realized that he had commanded the Templars to capture Hervas if they wanted to prove their usefulness to Tithia.

"I wish we could lock up L'lyeh as well, but I'm not sure if we want to let her out of our sight," Leroy said.

"I agree..." I murmured. "If she were to wake up while we're not around, that would be a disaster." Low-level Paladins and Templars wouldn't stand a chance against her.

Then, L'lyeh stirred. She must have woken up because she sat up and turned her head toward us, even though her blindfold made it difficult to see her expression.

L'lyeh slowly asked, "Are you the ones who saved me?"

"What?! You can talk...?! Now that I think about it, you might have gone off-script a couple of times," I said. In hindsight, L'lyeh hadn't felt like a monster. I'd only ever known L'lyeh as a boss from the game, but she seemed a little bit different somehow. Perhaps she was sentient, just as Angel had been.

"Um... What makes you say we 'saved' you?" I asked carefully.

"I was in a dark place for a long, long time. Long ago, the abbey was a wonderful place full of people..." L'lyeh said, and went on to

explain that her beautiful abbey had gradually transformed into Underworld Abbey. With it, L'lyeh had changed too. The Goddess of Darkness had been corrupted and turned into the boss of the dungeon.

That was when Hervas had shown up. For whatever reason, she'd had to obey his orders as he brought her here. All this time, she had been fighting with a black haze over her mind, unable to make any rational choices. "When the haze went away, I felt like my head was going to split open... And I don't remember what happened after that."

"That headache must have knocked you out," I said, guessing that that must have happened when she threw me out of the window. Instead of making L'lyeh stronger, the magic circle might have been a sort of curse that had kept L'lyeh bound. "Now that the magic circle is destroyed, I don't think there's anything controlling you. How do you feel?"

"My head doesn't hurt anymore. I can't remember the last time my mind felt so clear." L'lyeh took off her blindfold and revealed eyes that glittered like gemstones, shining brightly with innocence. Her mouth had curved into a beaming smile.

Hervas was to blame, after all. L'lyeh was just a victim.

Well, for the time being, it seems like the battle is over.

***

Ten days had passed since our battle in Crystalline Cathedral, and I was still recuperating from it in our room at the inn.

Someone tugged on my sleeve. "Sharon, I'm hungry," L'lyeh said.

Even after the battle, L'lyeh's mind had remained sound and undisturbed. So, I'd decided to look after her for a while. She hadn't faced any prosecution for two reasons: She was just another victim manipulated by Hervas, and as the Goddess of Darkness, she was kind of above human law anyway.

I took a sandwich lunch from my Storage and gave it to L'lyeh. Like everything else in Storage, the sandwich packed thick with bacon and lettuce was preserved just as it had been when freshly

made. Now that she wasn't a boss monster anymore, L'lyeh had discovered the joy of good food. She chowed down on the lunch with a look of pure bliss on her face.

There wasn't much more to do about L'lyeh. *It could be fun to travel around with her for a while,* I thought.

"Have some tea," Tarte offered.

"Tarte... Thank you. I like your tea the most," L'lyeh said.

"Hee hee hee..." Tarte trilled. I was glad they were getting along well.



Tithia, Leroy, Blitz, and Mimoza had returned to Crystalline Cathedral—now renamed Tithia Cathedral. Her name was on the cathedral, and she had regained the official position of Pope.

It was a happy ending for everyone—well, almost everyone. There was one big problem I still had to deal with.

I heard someone bounding down the hall, and the door to our room flew open.

"Lottie! I finally defeated a Black Dragon...with Kent and Cocoa's help! I never thought that Swordsman would grow so strong so fast!" Rudith rattled off, Kent and Cocoa standing behind him with half smiles on their faces.

"Welcome back, Rudy..." I said.

"Welcome back, Lord Rudith!" Tarte said. She'd grown very close to Rudy, even after seeing how much of a meathead he was. Any noble lady would have been exasperated by him, but Tarte must have been a goddess.

I had come clean about who I was—that my full name was Charlotte Cocoriara and that I was from a noble family. Kent, Cocoa, and Tarte had been super surprised at first when I'd told them I was Rudith's sister...but they had quickly seemed to accept it, much to my chagrin.

While Rudith was greeting L'lyeh, I had to ask, "Rudy, when are you going home?" Even after ten whole days, my brother showed no inclination to leave. There was no way he'd taken this much time off. When I gave him a dirty look, he laughed kind of hollowly—a bad sign. "Rudy. Did you actually request time off for this?"

"Of course!"

"Did you tell them how long you'd be gone?" I pushed, and Rudith fell silent. I let out a sigh. For all I knew, our family was worried sick. "Don't worry mother and father too much."

"Yes, you're right." Rudith gave a quick smile as he rose to his feet. "Oh, well. I'll go see them soon. I have to tell them you're doing good. While I'm at it, I'll take Prince Ignacia back to Farblume."

"Thank you. I know that'll be a pain," I said.

"Your big brother can handle it," Rudith boasted. Maybe Ignacia's

presence had given him an excuse to stay in Zille for so long. "His Majesty was *not* happy when the prince left... I can't wait to watch the fallout when I bring him back!" Rudith said, giggling like a little boy who was about to pull a prank. "It's the least he deserves! The *least*!" he kept barking.

He's such a boy sometimes. I felt a dose of secondhand embarrassment, but I did understand that Rudith was only this upset because of what Ignacia had done to me. *Maybe I should egg him on.* It was tempting.

"Are you flying home already, Lord Rudith?" Tarte asked.

"I do have work I need to do. Tarte, you and Lottie have to come see me. You're welcome anytime," Rudith said.

"That would be wonderfur!" Tarte beamed. "I purromise we'll go soon!" I could tell she was already looking forward to it.

Rudith stayed for a few more nights before finally going back to Blume.

"Hmm... Maybe I should set my next goal," I said, curled up in my bed. Taking a quest at the Guild would be rewarding, but I also wanted to explore other cities and countries. And I couldn't forget to test out my Holy Maiden Skills. "There's actually a lot to do."

There was something I wanted to research as well. "About Flaudia and L'lyeh...and Angel. Ideally, there would be an old document I could read." There could be something like that in the cathedral, so I decided I'd ask Leroy about it. If there was nothing in the cathedrals here, I could travel to other countries and even revisit Eden.

"I didn't really get to relax in Eden... There has to be a lot of views I missed out on," I mused, deciding to revisit the Furthest Village as a tourist next time. I was making mental notes of all the things I could do next, humming in excitement. "Oh, and I should check the dungeon in Eden too." It had to be a high-level dungeon, though, which meant that I'd have to be careful about when to go crawling, lest I end up dead.

Then, I heard something small and metal hit the floor.

"What?" I looked down and saw the key Tithia had given me. I'd

kept it in my Bag, so it was impossible for it to have fallen out on its own. “Does this mean...I should use this somehow?” I’d nearly forgotten about the key, but it looked like it was going to be an important item in my next adventure...even if something about this seemed a little sinister. “First thing’s first, I need to find out what this key unlocks.”

Excitement overpowering my nervousness, I reached for the key.

Epilogue

Crystalline Cathedral, now called Tithia Cathedral, was an icon of the Sacred Land of Erenzi. Before the cathedral stood the Divine Tree—something I thought I'd never see again.

As I stood dumbly staring at the Divine Tree, a voice called from behind me, "What are you doing?"

Nothing, really. So after a moment's hesitation, I simply answered, "Just looking."

"I see."

"And what brings *you* here? I thought you would be getting ready, Your Holiness." I turned to Pope Tithia, the one who had called out to me.

She smiled. "Don't tell Leroy."

"I'm afraid I can't do that...for my own safety." Ignoring the Pope's request, I signaled for Leroy with a magic tool.

Sure enough, he was here in the blink of an eye. "Your Holiness! There you are!"

"Leroy!"

Having sprinted out of the cathedral, Leroy was inspecting Pope Tithia for any injuries. Today was a day of prayers to celebrate her return to the Papacy. She was going to make a ceremonial procession through the city and offer a prayer at the end.

My father, the mutinous Rodney Hervas, had cast shadows over this city not long ago. The event was fresh in the minds of its people, who must have felt anxious for the future. Pope Tithia would be offering a prayer to ease their anxiety about the matter.

I'd thought I was going to receive the same punishment as my father, but here I was...still breathing—all because Pope Tithia said that I was different from my father.

But...am I? I hadn't been happy about helping my father, but I'd followed his orders. He'd told me to get rid of Goddess Flaudia, and I

had agreed to. In the end, Pope Tithia and her party had taken down Flaudia instead. Even if the result was ultimately the same, my intention in eliminating the goddess was to oppose Pope Tithia's rule. I deserved punishment, the same as my father.

"We must finish getting you ready," Leroy said. "The priestesses are waiting with adornments to make you the most beautiful being in the world. Oh, I can't wait to see you in them, divinely graceful..."

"You exaggerate, Leroy."

Watching Pope Tithia and Leroy, I couldn't help but think that they shouldn't have anything to do with me, someone who should be suffering the consequences of his own actions. *Why is Pope Tithia allowing me to be here?* Even having spared me, it wouldn't have been too much trouble for her to relocate me away from the capital. I couldn't comprehend why she wasn't doing even that.

"I would like another Paladin," the Pope said.

"As you wish, Your Holiness," Leroy agreed smoothly to the sudden request. If memory served, she had a handful of Paladins in training to choose from.

"Good. Owen, I would like you to become a Paladin."

Confusion rumbled through me. "What...?" Many pined for the honorable position of Pope's Paladin—it made no sense for *me* to be selected over all of them. "That's not possible." The words had slipped out before I could even consider them.

Pope Tithia smiled almost apologetically, like she was breaking bad news. It seemed I had no choice.

"I am not all compassion, you know. Making you a Paladin is a calculated move," said the Pope. I didn't understand what she meant.

"Her Holiness's commands are unbreakable to her Paladins. As soon as you become one, she will command you to never harm her in any way," Leroy explained.

This was as harmless as calculated moves came. If she was intent on keeping me alive, her priority was rightly set on guaranteeing that I wouldn't harm her. I had no intention whatsoever of harming the young Pope...but I had no way of proving that. Immediately, I

knelt before Pope Tithia.

"Thank you, Owen. I anoint you my Paladin and command you to never harm me in any way," she said.

"I, Owen, pledge my allegiance to Your Holiness, Pope Tithia." As soon as I voiced that vow, my body began to glow. I knelt there in awe of how instantly I had felt that I was now a Paladin. *That's all it takes...?* I'd expected it to take longer or involve more of a process. *If she can anoint loyal Paladins so easily, she should do it more often,* I thought briefly before dismissing the thought. The fact that she didn't abuse powers like this was another reason Pope Tithia deserved her position.

"I am glad to have you on my side, Owen. For the time being, please follow Leroy's directions," she said.

"Understood," I replied.

Leroy clapped his hands together. "Now you go and get ready, Your Holiness. I will follow once I've given Owen his directives."

"I will," Pope Tithia said, and two Paladins—Blitz and Mimoza—approached. They had been following the Pope these past days as her bodyguards. From what I'd seen in the battle against Flaudia, Blitz and Mimoza far outstripped any other Paladin, myself included. They could protect Pope Tithia from any threat; I was sure of that much.

In a few moments, Pope Tithia and her guards were out of sight, leaving Leroy and me alone. I took a slow breath and turned to Leroy, who must have hated me enough to kill me after the actions I'd taken against his Pope. He would never show his wrath in Pope Tithia's presence, though.

"Your will is my command, Leroy. No matter the task, I will complete it or die trying," I said.

"I don't know what you're expecting, but no one is going to 'die trying.' Unless you intend to spit in the face of Her Holiness's mercy?"

"No..." I conceded. Now that Pope Tithia had spared me, devaluing my own life was tantamount to devaluing her compassion. "Then, what is my charge?"

"Now that Her Holiness has regained the Papacy, she is no longer

in danger. Of course, there are no more Templars devoted to Rodney Hervas either."

"You're right," I said. Most of the Templars hadn't followed my father's orders out of loyalty to him, but only to continue receiving their salaries. Those Templars didn't care whom the Papacy belonged to, but there had to be a small portion of them who genuinely sympathized with my father. *That's where I come in,* I realized. As Rodney Hervas's son, I could gain the trust of those loyal to him. Leroy wanted me to draw out those loyalists and get rid of them. If anyone else were to discover that there were still Templars who sympathized with my father, it could threaten Pope Tithia's authority—I'd have to execute this mission with utmost discretion. *And that's going to start today.*

"I should catch up to Her Holiness," Leroy said.

"Of course. I would like to watch her prayer from within the city."

"That would be best," Leroy said and went back into the cathedral.

***

Walking down the main street, I scoped out the city, where droves of Templars were on patrol to keep the peace. It would take a lot of time and effort to find the ones still loyal to my father.

Suddenly, a beam of light shot out of Tithia Cathedral and into the sky, where it burst in all directions, showering the entire city. Each ray of light was imbued with a fraction of Pope Tithia's power, and where it fell, it healed the injured within the city. Hopefully, it would heal the people my father had hurt as well.

Suddenly, I heard a voice that made me jump. "Stay with us, L'lyeh! You're going to get lost!" I turned toward the voice and found the Goddess of Darkness, Sharon, and Tarte. "Oh! Owen!" Sharon said, spotting me.

I chuckled at the chance encounter, especially because I hadn't expected to see any of them again. "Thank you for the other day," I said. "I've decided to devote my life to Pope Tithia as her Paladin."

"What?!" Sharon and Tarte responded, while L'lyeh stared at me.

They were all victims of my father's scheme.

"I am sorry for my father's actions," I said. I'd been wanting to apologize to them for a long time.

"No, that's not..." Sharon stammered. "It's all in the past now. If Ti—Her Holiness made you a Paladin, that's good enough for us." She smiled without a hint of resentment.

Ignoring how my heart skipped a beat, I looked at L'lyeh—the Goddess of Darkness my father had been obsessed with. She looked like a girl of about seven years old, and she gazed around the streets with innocent curiosity. With more stalls set up for the ceremony, there'd be a lot to see in the city today.

"My father was the one who unleashed L'lyeh, and now you're saddled with the burden of it..." I said.

"She's not a burden," Sharon corrected me. "L'lyeh is a lot of fun."

"Fun?" I'd never thought of the Goddess of Darkness that way.

"With L'lyeh by our side, don't you think we could go to places no one else can?!" Sharon said with aggressive enthusiasm.

"I suppose so," I said, not sure what kind of place Sharon meant. *Places like Underworld Abbey, perhaps?* That did seem kind of exciting...even if I would get wiped out by monsters before I could take a single step inside a dungeon like that. "I look forward to hearing your tales of adventure. If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know."

"Thank you." Sharon smiled again. It felt like the weight on my shoulders had lightened, just a little. "Wait, L'lyeh! You can't eat those without paying! Sorry, Owen. We need to go!"

"Thank you for your time. I hope you enjoy the festivities," I said.

"You too!" Sharon called, rushing back to L'lyeh and Tarte.

Watching L'lyeh wander from stall to stall with wonder in her eyes, I couldn't help but regret that this wasn't the future my father had envisioned. "I'd better get back to work," I muttered to myself. Even with Flaudia gone now, Pope Tithia would protect this country.

That was a future I could truly look forward to.

Side Story: My Dear Sister — Rudith Cocoriara

"Dammit! You're not gonna get away with this!" a voice shouted, muffled by the whooshing sound of Mach—my Dragon and partner—flapping his wings.

I leaned over and glowered at the guy I'd tied to Mach's belly by a rope—the crown prince who used to be Lottie's fiancé. He shrank away. "What? You want me to cut you loose?" I asked. He only had to say the word and I'd happily cut the rope and let him fall to his death.

"D-Don't you dare drop me!" the prince yelped.

"Lord Rudith, please...! You can't kill Prince Ignacia!" Emilia—the crown prince's mistress—shrieked in my ear. As much as she disgusted me, I had little choice but to let her ride on Mach's back.

"Ugh," I sighed, relieved from the bottom of my heart that Lottie had never married this loser.

The prince and his harlot were supposedly exhausted, though you'd never guess it from how much they were running their mouths.

I'd come to Erenzi mostly to look for Lottie, but I'd also been tasked with recovering the crown prince. The king and queen didn't want their son off his leash any longer. To be honest, I might have been able to enjoy some more quality time with Lottie if the prince hadn't turned up...but I knew breathing the same air as this guy had been stressing Lottie out.

Speaking of Lottie, she'd gotten unbelievably stronger in the short time she'd been away. *I guess she doesn't need her big brother anymore.* Not too long ago, she'd spent most of her time studying at home, only leaving the estate for tea parties or balls. With the prince accompanying her at every ball, she'd never gotten a moment to

enjoy herself. At her last ball, the crown prince had gone so far as to insult poor Lottie before breaking their engagement and exiling her.

"Hey, Prince. You're pissing me off all over again. I think I'm gonna drop you after all," I said.

"What?! This already amounts to treason! Are you trying to get executed?!" the prince barked, panicking at the suggestion.

This is what Lottie had to deal with over and over... I would have clocked him in the face after three seconds of listening to this garbage. My little sister is so precious and full of compassion—

My thoughts were disturbed by the high-pitched whining coming from behind me. "You're a knight, aren't you! You serve the royal family, so you must obey Prince Ignacia!"

"Nah, I don't answer to him... He should be thanking me for my generous rescue," I said.

"You call this death flight a rescue?!" the mistress shrieked. I'd heard she was an idiot, but I would never have guessed she was *this* bad.

"Farblume and Erenzi are in conflict. The extended undercover stay was bad enough...but then you went and got yourself involved with their church. You should be weeping with gratitude that you're even alive right now."

The mistress squeaked a breath and began trembling, wrapping her arms around herself. "B-But...I didn't know. I just wanted to be the Holy Maiden...!"

"Holy Maiden, huh?" That was a job you could only find in fairy tales. At one time, it was rumored that Erenzi's Pope was the Holy Maiden...but those rumors had been unequivocally denied.

The mistress was still talking. "Then, Lady Charlotte of all people becomes the Holy Maiden—"

"What?!" That was information I couldn't tune out. "What did you say? *Lottie's* the Holy Maiden? How did *that* happen?!" I demanded, rounding on the mistress as I slowed Mach down. I could tell that Lottie had grown stronger, but I hadn't even considered that her job might have changed. *And there I was thinking that she still needed my help...*

"I-I don't really know!" the mistress began. "I'd been attacked. I

almost died—”

“No one asked about you. What about Lottie?” I said.

“I don’t know anything!” The mistress turned the other way, as though she had nothing more to say to me. It was pretty clear that she really didn’t know anything, though. She’d just coincidentally been there when it’d happened.

I let out a groan. I’d have to go see Lottie again once the dust settled. I urged Mach to fly faster. Ignoring the prince’s desperate screaming, I hurried to Farblume.

***

“Rudy, you’re home!”

“Good to see you, Rudy.”

Father and mother greeted me as soon as I stepped through the door of our house, the question “How is Lottie?” written all over their faces.

“We have tea ready. Come on, darling,” mother said, eager to sit down and talk. Father had a pep in his step too.

After sitting down and taking a sip of my tea, I considered what to open with. I was excited to talk about how much she’d grown, but I also wanted to tell them about how many friends she’d made. *Speaking of which...* “Father, do you know Kent? He’s the boy who came to see the Order of Knights.”

“Hmm? What’s that got to do with Lottie...? The boy who came to switch jobs? I heard you looked after him, Rudy, and that he joined training that day. The knights said that he had potential...” father said, wondering what connection I was drawing.

“Kent is one of Lottie’s new friends,” I said.

“What?!” father shouted, shooting out of his seat...and then sagging his head. He was clearly upset with himself for not picking up on this link to Lottie when Kent had come so close to him. Of course, I’d had no idea back then either. “I should have been at training more often...” father continued. “Switching jobs isn’t easy. He sounds like a reliable young man...who’s traveling with Lottie.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. Kent has a girlfriend—Cocoa,” I said.

"That's good to hear!" father exclaimed with such relief that I had to laugh.

There was one more thing about Kent that I had to share with him. "Kent became a Knight that day...and now he's a Dragonrider."

"Excuse me...?!" mother cried.

"A Dragonrider...?! Our kingdom has the best knight-training program there is, and we still only have a handful with awakened jobs..."

Their surprise seemed to match mine when I'd first found out. "I went hunting with Kent and Cocoa. They're both forces to be reckoned with."

"That's high praise, especially from you," father said.

"Sure is," I confirmed and told them about what had happened when the three of us had gone to Dragon's Den.

***

Amid the shrieking winds, I could hear the flapping of Dragon wings. Real Dragons too—not Wyverns. I could hardly believe I was in a dungeon with a Black Dragon as its boss, and not just reading about it in a storybook.

"Two of us are in the front and one in the back. Without a supporter, we need to be cautious on the defense," Kent said.

"Yep. I can use some supporting Skills to cover you both, but be careful. I can't heal that much," Cocoa said.

"Perfect!" Kent added.

From how smoothly they laid out our plans, I could tell they'd been hunting a lot. Getting everyone on the same page before a hunt was a critical skill that they were exercising well.

"Let me get started," Cocoa said, singing her Skill. "*Let prayers turn to blessings and breathe life into the earth.*" Immediately, I could sense that my physical abilities had been boosted. "The effect will last thirty minutes."

"I've never met a Lyrical Sorcerer before. Impressive stuff," I said.

"Th-Thank you! It means so much to hear you say that," Cocoa said.

Both of them made for very trusty allies. Then, I drank the potion Tarte had given me. This Roaring Potion increased the Attack of whoever drank it—an effect I'd never even heard of in Farblume. *Are any of Lottie's friends normal?*

"Here we go! Taunt!" Kent shouted, immediately drawing the attention of a nearby Dragon. I didn't miss a beat in landing the first attack, but it was too weak. Worse, two more Dragons were headed our way. If we didn't take them out quickly, we were going to be in big trouble. "Dragon Lance!" My Skill struck flawlessly, but I knew it wouldn't be enough to take out a Dragon.

Then, a blast of magic flew by me and dealt massive damage to our target, courtesy of Cocoa. Then, Kent shouted, "This should do it! Dragon's Breath!"

Finally, the Dragon burst into light, leaving behind a Dragon Scale. *Just one of those would fetch a small fortune.*

"Taunt!" Kent shouted, snapping me back to attention.

Two more Dragons incoming! I remembered. Tightening my grip on my weapon, I turned to face them. "*Four* Dragons?!" I shouted—and I had every right to. Normal adventurers went their whole lives without ever fighting multiple Dragons at once.

"Mach!" I summoned my partner and leaped onto his back, steering him toward the oncoming flight. "Dragon's Roar!" I commanded.

Mach roared indeed, shooting a blinding beam of light out of his maw. This attack—the most powerful one Mach had—had gotten us through plenty of dire scenarios.

"That! Was! Awesome!" Kent shouted, his eyes brimming with wonder. Well, this was the cool part about being a Dragonrider—fighting side by side with your Dragon.

"They're still alive!" Cocoa shouted. "*One, ten, a hundred, a thousand—infinite strands bind those wings and bring judgment down upon the beast.*"

As I stared at the bound and immobile Dragons, I couldn't believe how powerful Cocoa's Skill was. When the spell struck, the Dragons burst into sparkling light, leaving behind nothing but a few items. *Do they always hunt this explosively?*

"By the way," Kent said as he scooped up the dropped items. "How far do you want to go today? Should we take on the Black Dragon?"

"The Black Dragon...?" My jaw must have hit the floor. The Black Dragon was a powerful monster straight out of a fairy tale. It wasn't a creature we should have been challenging on a whim. I wasn't even sure humans were capable of defeating the Black Dragon. And yet, Kent had made it sound so easy.

"Kent, be realistic," Cocoa said. She was clearly the voice of reason that pulled Kent back from the ledge of reckless insanity. "This is our first day hunting together, and we don't even have someone to heal us. We have to get more accustomed to this. Let's at least wait until tomorrow."

Nope. She's just reminding him of the correct *way to nose-dive.* "All right, Black Dragon! Bring it on!" I shouted. I was a Dragonrider who fought on the front lines. How could I look my knights in the eye if I backed down from a dungeon boss?

I suggested challenging the Black Dragon that same day—which sent Kent over the moon.

***

At this point in my story, my parents gasped.

"I always knew you were reckless, but to take on a Black Dragon..." father muttered.

"I'm so glad you're unharmed. Seeing as you aren't horribly injured, I assume you either retreated early or received some healing," mother added.

"No, we beat it."

"What...?" Apparently, my parents were convinced that I'd tucked my tail and run from the boss.

Laughing, I repeated, "We beat it. Not on our first try, but the three of us gained a few levels and took it down on the second try."

"My son...!" father breathed, his voice shaking with pride.

"I am so proud of you!" mother said too.

They seemed relieved too, having learned how capable Lottie's

friends were.

"I'm glad I don't need to worry about her, but I still miss her..." father said pitifully.

"I did tell them to swing by when they can... The whole party might come and hang out pretty soon," I said.

"Really?!" father exclaimed, bursting with excitement.

"Well done, Rudy. Well done. We need to have rooms ready for Lottie and her friends so they can stay the night anytime they want," mother said, doubling father's joy at the prospect of seeing their daughter again. Mother sipped her tea—which helped her regain some composure—before asking, "Anything else?"

She certainly didn't have to strong-arm stories of Lottie from me—there was so much more I wanted to tell them. "This took me by surprise when I first saw her—Lottie has a Cait Sith apprentice. A young girl. She seemed to look up to Lottie. The girl had excellent manners too. You'd like her, mother."

"My! Just another reason to look forward to their visit," mother said, and I could see she was already picking out dresses to give the young apprentice when they arrived.

"What else..." I contemplated. "Lottie and I went out into the town and..." I went on, talking about what we'd done in Zille, reassuring them that Lottie was in excellent health and that she was smiling more—before I knew it, it was the middle of the night.

Glancing out at the darkness beyond the window, I vowed to go rescue Lottie if she was ever in need again. Then, I thought of a few more stories about Lottie to tell our parents.

Side Story: Time to Furmulate — Tarte

I caught myself purring while I took in the pile of Dragon items before me, every one of them a rare material that couldn't be bought on the market. *Time to make new purrtions!*

"I can help, Tarte."

"Ti! Aren't you tired?" I asked.

"Not as much as our frontline fighters," Ti said, glancing at the tent.

Kent was snoring loudly, letting us know that he'd already fallen asleep. *Sleep tight, Kent.* "It must be hard to fight at the front like that...and to orchestrate our party like Meowster does. Everyone is ameowzing."

"Every one of Sharon's party members is," Ti agreed. "Which, of course, includes you." She smiled. Even though she was the Pope, she was always so thoughtful.

"Thank you. You're ameowzing too, Ti."

Ti smiled even wider. "Thank you, Tarte."

Now that we'd thanked each other, we began crafting purrtions together. Most of the others were asleep, but Leroy kept watch while we worked. Purrtions could be crafted with the Furmulation Skill that Alchemists like me could learn, using an Advanced Cauldron, Fast Firestarter, and Ludia's Sapling Stirring Spoon—three tools I cherished because Meowster had bought them for me.

"There is something so exciting about seeing Alchemy tools," Ti said. "It is strange to think that you can craft potions with these."

"I've wondered about that," I said. Skills worked in strange ways. All I had to do was toss in the ingredients and stir. It was easy and fun and exciting all at once. Pulling out my Intermediate Alchemy Tome, I looked over the materials. This book contained all sorts of

things I could furmulate, including the recipe for what we were going to make—Roaring Purrtion.

"Wow, you can make all of these?" Ti asked, peering over the book with sparkling curiosity.

"I know. I could read this book furever. When she first bought it for me, Meowster would have to take it from me at night because I stayed up late reading it..." I remembered what Meowster had said, that she understood how badly I wanted to read the book but that I had to wait. The book wasn't going to run away, she'd said.

When I told Ti about it, my ears flattened back, Ti said, "I know how you feel. Books can be so difficult to put down. On several occasions, I've taken a book into bed because I had to know what would happen next."

"Me too!" I purred.

Then, we were both chuckling. "Perhaps we're very similar," Ti said.

I flipped through the book and showed her the purrtion we were about to make.

"So this is it. Wow, it calls for a lot of Dragon items..." Ti said.

"Surprising, isn't it?" Roaring Purrtion was made from Dragon Blood, Dragon Fang, Dragon Scale, and Fire Flower. The three Dragon items had been sourced from today's hunt, and Meowster had a lot of Fire Flowers she was letting me use.

I started the fire, put the materials into the cauldron, and started stirring them together. After I'd mixed for a while, the cauldron glowed—a signal to put in the new material, which Ti handled.

I stirred over and over and over until there was a small vial left in the bottom of the cauldron. "It worked!"

"Wow!"

I picked up the Dragon-shaped vial, which was filled with a red liquid that looked like it would make us stronger.

"It's shaped like a Dragon. It looks kind of cool," Ti said.

"Kent is going to love it," I said.

"Yes, I'm sure he will!" Ti said with a chuckle.

"Let's make as many as we can!" I trilled.

"Yes, let's!"

We kept furmulating until there were no more ingredients left. Meowster had said that we would continue using this purrtion, so there was no such thing as making too many of them. *Even though we hunted Dragons without them today?* I wondered. Of course, that only meant that Meowster had an incredible plan. All I had to do was trust Meowster and support her the best I could.

After making purrtions, Ti and I stayed up a little longer talking before going to bed. Every time I furmulated, I felt like I was becoming a better Alchemeowst! I sneaked a peek at my Skills using my Adventure Bracelet. After hunting Dragons, I'd gained a lot of levels.

I can't wait to brag to Torte. There was going to be another day of hard work tomorrow, and I couldn't wait!

Overview:

Name: Tarte
Race: Cait Sith
Level: 83
Job: Alchemist (Expert in Formulation who can craft potions for both attacking and healing.)

Skills:

Drop of Inspiration: A rare chance to find an extra material for Formulation.
Formulation (Level 10): Crafts all kinds of potions.
Potion Throw (Level 5): Attacks by throwing a potion.
Material Comprehension (Level 10): Uses understanding of materials to improve quality of Formulation.
Thirst for Knowledge (Level 10): Every Formulation yields more items.
Deconstruct (Level 5): Breaks down items into parts.
Reconstruct (Level 10): Combines multiple items into new items.
Star Scales (Level 10): Finds an item of equal value to

a Star Piece.
Increase Mana (Level 10): Boosts the user’s mana.
Increase HP (Level 9): Boosts the user’s HP.

Equipment:
Head: Hexagram Ward (+3% Physical Defense)
Body: Mademoiselle Dress (+5% HP)
Right Hand: Iron Mace (A simple iron-wrought mace)
Left Hand: —
Accessory: Adventure Bracelet (Enables the Menu)
Accessory: Father’s Locket (+5% Physical Defense)
Feet: Mademoiselle Socks (+3% Natural Recovery)
Bonus: Mademoiselle Dress Set 3/3 (+15% HP / +5% Natural Recovery)

Side Story: A Day in the Life of Maryl — Maryl

Today, my life might come to an end.

My day always began with that thought. Because I traveled all over the world for my research, I'd been to plenty of dangerous places and nearly died in many of them. Still, I thanked Goddess Flaudia that I was still alive.

After I parted ways with Sharon and her party, my soul was singing at the sight of Eden, the Furthest Village. "I didn't think I would make it here...! Oh thank you, Goddess— No. Thank you, Sharon and friends!"

While headed to Eden on my own, I'd collapsed somewhere on Slumbering Volcano. I'd thought I would draw my last breath there, but fate was on my side. Sharon and her party had happened to come across me. With their help, I'd managed to make it all the way to Eden. We'd separated once we'd come to Eden, so I was on my own again.

"Just a small field beyond Eden before the sea..." I said. To the south was a snowy field full of dangerous monsters. If I wanted to research Eden further, my best bets were the village itself and the island I could see floating out on the water ahead.

I wandered around the village for a bit and came across a rental bookstore. "There could be old documents in there!" Changing course, I headed right into the establishment, the smells of paper and ink and history tickling my nose. In search of precious historical documents, I began inspecting every title on the shelves.

Then, the shopkeeper emerged. "Oh... I haven't seen you before. Are you visiting?"

"Yes. My name is Maryl. I'm a researcher. I was hoping to see any of Eden's historical records..."

"Historical records, huh?" The shopkeeper reached for a book. "Maybe this'll work." It wasn't a historical document but a fairy tale.

"What is it?" I asked.

"A story about the formation of our village. It is a fairy tale, but we don't have any factual records of that time," the shopkeeper explained.

"I see..." Then not even the villagers knew when the village had been formed. Flipping through the book, I said, "The village has a unique structure, almost like ancient ruins. Is there perhaps a path here that leads to actual ruins?"

"No. Once in a while, we think we've found a path that leads somewhere, but it's always a dead end."

"Is that so...?" I answered. If the whole village had only found dead ends, it was safe to assume they hadn't missed anything. More likely, whatever condition was required to open a passage hadn't been met. *Maybe there's a clue hidden in the fairy tale.* The story told of a time when Goddess Flaudia had lived in the village—definitely not the sort of thing one found in a historical document. "A village where a goddess—" I almost laughed off the very idea but thought better of it when I remembered Angel traveling with Sharon's party. If angels were real, why couldn't the goddess be real? "Can I take this with me?!" I needed to analyze every page of this book.

"We're a rental bookshop..."

"Oh." I'd forgotten about that. "Then I'd like to rent it."

"Thanks for your business. Don't forget to bring it back in ten days," the shopkeeper said.

"Of course." I rushed out of the bookshop, eager to dive into the book and study it in depth.

It looks like I'll be staying in Eden for a long while...!

Side Story: The Cold Place — Rodney Hervas

The darkness, the mildew, the aches in my bones... Everything was gnawing away at my will to live. "H-How could this happen...to *me*?" My voice was so hoarse, I could barely speak.

I had been close—so close to solidifying my eternal place as the Pope of Erenzi alongside L'lyeh. Without most of her Paladins and Templars, I'd expected Tithia to become powerless. Why had so many powerful people come out of the woodwork and defended that little brat?

To add insult to injury, the ones who'd arrested me were Templars who were supposed to be on my side. They'd betrayed me—their Pope—and sided with that girl!

"I paid them...more than...ever." I coughed something up. What more could they have wanted?

Someone tell me this is all a cruel joke, I pleaded silently. Feeling the bite of cold iron around my wrists, I closed my eyes in an attempt to get whatever rest I could.

After some time, the creak of the door roused me. Another Paladin or Templar had come to extract information from me, no doubt.

I didn't bother opening my eyes until I heard the voice of my visitor. "Hello, father."

My head snapped up. "Owen! W-Well...done. Get me out...of here!" I rasped. It was imperative that we retake Crystalline Cathedral. Goddess L'lyeh had most likely been captured too, but once we released her, nothing could stop us. L'lyeh wasn't in this cell, so I'd have to send Owen to search for her and release her as soon as possible. Then, I'd never let L'lyeh out of my sight again. *Only her power can be trusted, not the so-called loyalty of Templars!*

"That's not possible," Owen said coldly.

"Owen...?" I realized it then. "Your clothes..." He wasn't wearing his robe. In fact, it almost looked as if...

"I became a Paladin in service of Pope Tithia," Owen said.

"You...betrayed me...?!" I tried to shout and tasted blood in my throat. *My own son betrayed me?!*

"I did not betray you," Owen said, which calmed my frayed nerves somewhat.

He must have meant it was impossible to free me *now*. Owen was a smart boy. He was wearing the Paladin's outfit to remain undercover. *Brilliant.*

"Until now, I have always followed your orders. Not because you were my father, nor because I held any shred of loyalty to you, but simply because you were my boss," Owen said.

"What...?"

"Inside and out, I am a Paladin now—a loyal servant of Pope Tithia. Father— Rodney, tell me how you came to find L'lyeh. Then your pain will ease."

"Nonsense...!" I bit down on my lip at Owen's heartless remark. Never had I imagined that my own son would humiliate me like this! I made to lunge at the fool, only to be tugged back by the heavy chains around my wrists. *Curse these shackles!* I couldn't even land a punch on the filthy traitor before me!

"Apparently, your emotions are still too unstable. You're not in any shape to talk. I'll be back." Owen left the cell.

Good riddance. I never wanted to see his face again. The only face I ever wished to see...was L'lyeh's. If Tithia hadn't been surrounded by powerful allies, my plan would have gone over flawlessly. *There is no Goddess Flaudia after all.*

"Goddess L'lyeh, with you, I was supposed to mold this country to my own design..." My words echoed pointlessly in the cold cell.

Side Story: Day of Prayer — Tithia

Ornaments in my hair and on my clothes chimed with every step I took, amplifying my presence. Citizens of Erenzi crowded the streets I passed through, their eyes following me. *Come to think of it, I rarely showed myself to the public before.* I was doing so now so they could feel the presence of their Pope among them. Leroy had been so excited for this day that he had made all the arrangements and preparations before I knew it.

Walking down the main street of Zille, I scanned the faces of those who'd come to see me. Most of them looked relieved to be free of Hervas's threat. Then, I heard some voices: children and someone who sounded like their mother.

"She's the Pope?"

"She's so pretty!"

"That's right. She is the one who protects us all. And she's going to pray for us today, so let's pray with her."

"Okay!" the children answered, warming my heart. I could see them, hands clasped together in an intent prayer.

I need to protect every one of them, I told myself again. I'd always prayed for Erenzi and thought about its people, but seeing the crowd today renewed my resolve. At first, I'd been a little embarrassed to be the center of attention like this, but now I hoped to repeat these festivities every year.

I'd passed Flaudia Cathedral and come up to the Adventurer's Guild when I heard voices call out, "Ti!" Sharon, Tarte, Kent, and Cocoa were waving at me, L'lyeh holding Sharon's and Tarte's hands, looking for all the world like a normal girl. Kent and Cocoa were also jumping, determined to get a good look at me.

As I waved back at them, Leroy smiled beside me. "They all came out to see you."

"Yes. I'm a little embarrassed, but I'm very happy. If I were to

ask for anything, it would be for them to join me in procession." They had all fought alongside me to take back Crystalline Cathedral. The country deserved to know that they were my heroes.

Leroy chuckled softly. "That will never happen."

"But Sharon is the Holy Maiden," I countered. "Who better than she to offer a prayer?"

"Sharon may be the Holy Maiden—and a merciful one at that—but her place is on the battlefield. Besides, she wouldn't like this kind of attention."

"I suppose you're right... She probably would have turned me down if I had invited her to join me," I admitted.

Even though Sharon was the Holy Maiden and a supporter specializing in healing, I always felt like she was the strongest of us all. If, for argument's sake, I were to fight her, I couldn't imagine winning, despite my powerful attacking Skills and Sharon's lack of them.

"Where does Sharon's strength come from? Her knowledge? How she uses her Skills?" I muttered.

"Greed," Leroy said unapologetically.

"I don't think I can argue with that," I said. I had never seen Sharon happier than when she was excited to explore unknown places and new sights after gaining new levels. Tying her down to Erenzi under any ceremonial title would not be fair to her. She was too adventurous to be tied to a single country. "I want to defend this country so that Sharon feels safe to explore the world. Will you defend it with me, Leroy?"

"Of course, Your Holiness. I will be by your side forever and perform any task you give me."

"Thank you." On this day, I quietly renewed my vow to do everything I could as Pope to protect this country.

After parading through the city, we returned to Crystalline Cathedral—now renamed Tithia Cathedral. I was rather mortified by the name change, but a window had popped up before me and notified me of the change, so there was little I could do about it. When I tried to reverse the change anyway, Leroy—who had always taken my side before—insisted that Tithia Cathedral was the better

name. Not only that, Blitz and Mimoza and all the other Paladins took Leroy's side. For a moment, I had longed for some form of opposition party.

"Your Holiness, it is nearly time for the ceremonial prayer. Are you tired or otherwise indisposed?" Leroy asked.

"Not at all. It was just a stroll through the city," I said. After what we'd been through, walking through the city's evenly paved streets where there was no threat of monsters could not have been more effortless.

Leroy smiled as if he'd read my mind. "We had one adventure after another... This way, Your Holiness." He gestured toward the front entrance of Tithia Cathedral, where we had decided I would offer the ceremonial prayer because it offered more people a chance to watch me.

"Yes."

A few steps away from the Divine Tree, a white cloth had been rolled out with bottles of Holy Water on either side. Ordinarily, this was where a statue of Goddess Flaudia might have been expected to be placed. Now that I had seen her true colors, though, I had no intention of erecting a statue to her. The statue in the cathedral still remained, but I intended to discuss what to do with it later. *If only I could melt Flaudia's statue down and change it to a statue of Sharon.* Imagining how angry she would be if I pulled a stunt like that, a small laugh escaped my lips.

I walked up to the center of the white fabric and knelt there, clasping my hands. Once I closed my eyes, I no longer heeded the sounds of the crowd. My mind quieted as I focused on my prayer. "I, Pope Tithia, pray that we may find happiness with our own hands and forge a nation of peace. I pray that we march toward a peaceful future with our own feet, without relying on anyone else to bring it about for us. I pray that we as a nation gain the strength to do so..." As I prayed, shimmering light rose all around me, becoming a pillar of light and stretching to the heavens. It burst in the sky and showered all of Erenzi with a rain of light.

Even my prayer alone can be so powerful, I realized. I kept my

eyes on the sky, feeling full of hope for the future.

***

"You were magnificent, Your Holiness." Leroy brought me tea while I relaxed in my room that night, adding a little bit of sugar and plenty of milk to help me relax after the busy day. "Would you like something to eat with it?"

"No. Thank you, Leroy."

"Of course."

I drank the tea and felt it warm my body from the inside out. The tension that I had felt since the ceremonial prayer loosened. "You make delicious tea," I said.

"Thank you." Leroy smiled. "By the way, who did you offer your prayer to today?"

"To the Divine Tree that watches over this country. I asked for it to keep me on the path I have set out on." I no longer believed that Goddess Flaudia was someone I could pray to. She might still be the Goddess of Light, but she was not a deity that we should entrust our prayers to.

"A wise decision, Your Holiness," Leroy said quietly.

I felt a weight lift off my shoulders. Perhaps I'd just needed someone to approve of my decision. "Thank you, Leroy. I would like to continue to pray to the Divine Tree for the protection of Erenzi."

"Then perhaps we can build a statue of the Divine Tree."

"That is brilliant!" I said. If one were built beside the statue of Flaudia, it would draw the people's interest, allowing them to learn more about the Divine Tree. "There is much work to be done."

"I will be with you every step of the way," Leroy said.

"I am counting on it." Next year, I would publicly announce that I was praying to the Divine Tree. The thought of it brought a smile to my face.

May there be peace upon Erenzi—and upon the world—forever.

Side Story: Rumors of the Little Pope — Charlotte Cocoriara

After the ceremonial prayer, I ventured out into the city alone while Tarte and L'lyeh stayed at the inn enjoying the sweets they'd bought from street vendors. *Maybe I'll bring back even more treats.*

While my mind was wandering to delectable desserts, I heard a girl who seemed to be in her early teens give a cheer.

"I did it! Mom! I became a Healer!"

"How wonderful! Her Holiness would be proud of you."

"I'm so happy!"

Tithia's prayer had given people hope to keep working toward their dreams. *You can do it, little girl. Dream big.*

Hervas hadn't controlled the cathedral for long, but it had been dangerous to have the statue of Goddess Flaudia that enabled people to become Healers sealed away from the public. As soon as Tithia had regained the Papacy, she'd stripped away all the shady practices Hervas had implemented. The statue was available to the public again, and people no longer needed to pay anything to enter the cathedral or the Prayer Room. I hadn't heard about anything else, but I could imagine that Hervas had had more evil schemes brewing. If he had, I guessed that Leroy would have put out those fires by now—that guy would lasso the moon for Tithia.

I came across more and more children who had been inspired by the young Pope today.

"I'm going to be a Templar when I grow up!"

"Well, I'm going to be a Paladin!"

"I asked dad to buy me my first sword on my birthday!"

"What? Then I'm gonna go beat a Jiggly all on my own!"

"Then I'm gonna take down a Flower Bunny!"

Apparently, she had even inspired some adorable competition.

Those boys would have to train very hard to become Templars or Paladins, and Tithia would have to find them worthy if they wanted to pursue the latter. *How romantic to pursue a career of loyalty and chivalry to protect someone they admire. The future of Erenzi is bright.*

Then, I heard the topic of conversation shift to Tithia herself.

"I didn't realize Her Holiness was so young."

"Come to think of it, I hadn't seen her before. She may be younger than mine, but she must be a hundred times more mature. If only my kids would learn from her example," a mother sighed.

I chuckled at that. It wasn't fair to compare other kids to Tithia—kids with that much emotional maturity were hard to come by. *Except my Tarte, of course.* Tithia might take the crown in maturity, but my apprentice was the cutest in the world!

While I was sighing over Tarte's adorableness, conversation had shifted once again.

"What was that light anyway? I know it came from Her Holiness's prayer..."

"Heal with Light! It healed the scratch on my arm!"

"No way! Maybe I couldn't tell because I didn't have any marks... Now that I think about it, I think my body feels lighter."

"They said the prayer festival will be held every year. Why don't you see what happens next year?"

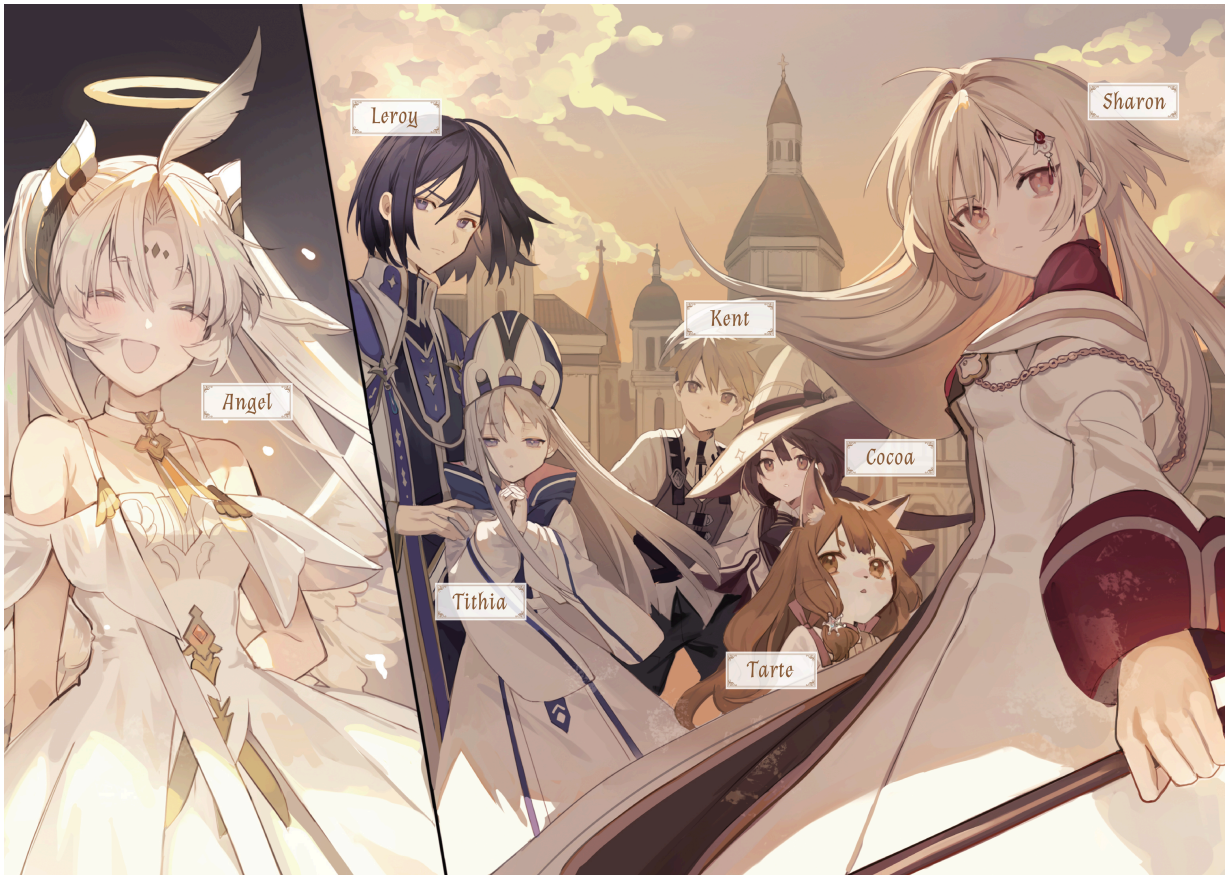
"I will!"

Even I hadn't known that her prayer healed people. Of course, I was constantly healing myself anyway, so Heal with Light wouldn't have had an effect on me. "But to the people of the city, it was a miracle." Tithia's light might have even reached the rest of Erenzi too. A healing light like that wasn't something you could experience every day. "And Ti's going to pull it off every year...?!" It'd be nice to come back to Zille each year to admire Tithia's work as the Pope and enjoy the festivities. "I'm already looking forward to next year."

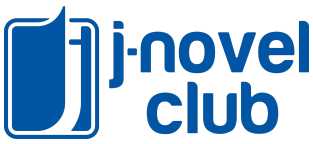
I picked up more sweets for Tarte and L'lyeh and went back to our inn.


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Illustrator: Yoh Hihara
Vol. 4
Ascension of the Holy Maiden, Part Two
From Villainess to Healer




Leroy
Sharon
Kent
Angel
Cocoa
Tithia
Tarte


As soon as I touched the box,
it glowed and opened on its own.
Flaudia's voice echoed
loud enough for us all to hear.
"Let there be
peace upon the world."



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by Punichan

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