

5

AUTHOR

NABESHIKI

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# I PARRY EVERYTHING

WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?

I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!



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I PARRY  
EVERYTHING 5  
WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THE STRONGEST?  
I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!  
"You have no talent at all."  
So the man was told.  
But after mastering [Parry]  
and becoming the strongest...

Everything turned a blinding white.  
A brief moment later, the shock wave reached  
the earth, collapsing buildings and stone statues alike.  
Amid the destruction, Ines tore through  
the monstrosity's flesh, Rala incinerated it, and I  
parried the oncoming lightning.

[Noor]

[Ines]



“We dedicate these goblets  
to our dear friend Roy.”

The silence of the night enveloped  
the two friends’ prayer, and all was still.  
Oken and Astirra lowered their goblets  
without a word, staring downward.

【 Astirra 】

【 Oken 】





# 【 The Story So Far 】

Deep under the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, Noor came across another Astirra: a former member of the Philosopher's Goblet, a three-person party comprising her, Oken, and Roy.

For two centuries, she had been held captive in the Dungeon of Lamentation while her imposter robbed Roy and his people of their sacred crimson gems and became the Theocracy's high priestess.

Elsewhere, after Lynne defeated the battalion of soldiers ordered to capture her, Tirrence revealed that he had been putting on an act his entire life and asked for her help defeating High Priestess Astirra. But when Holy Mithra, a horror in the form of a giant skeleton, consumed and merged with the high priestess, it began to change into an even more terrifying monster...



I Parry Everything  
What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest?  
I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet!

# Characters

## Noor



# Noor

At twelve years old, after being told that he had no talent for any of the six classes, he went into isolation and spent a decade honing his only skill: [Parry]. Despite being an adventurer of the lowest rank, he's unbelievably strong—though he's the only one who has yet to notice.

## Lynneburg ( Lynne )



# Lynneburg Clays (Lynne)

Fourteen. Unequaled in all fields, and the first princess of the Kingdom of Clays. Enemy powers made an attempt on her life, but Noor managed to save her. She has called him "Instructor" and followed him ever since.

## Ines



# Ines Harness

A knight of the Kingdom of Clays. She has wielded a unique defensive skill since she was a child and uses it in her capacity as Lynne's bodyguard. Twenty-one.

## Rein



# Rein Clays

Lynne's brother and the first prince of the Kingdom of Clays. Twenty. A calm and collected man who bears the duty of guiding the Kingdom as the king's advisor. There are some goals he will go to any length to achieve.

## Rolo



# Rolo

A demonfolk boy. The circumstances of his birth and upbringing are mysterious. As his race is largely scorned and oppressed, he has lived a very miserable life.

## Astirra ( Her Holy Highness )



# Astirra the Adventurer

One member of the trio known as the Philosopher's Goblet. She spent years trapped beneath the Holy Theocracy of Mithra before Noor set her free.



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## Chapter 90: Above the Clouds

When I came to, I saw a sea of white.

*Where am I...?*

My thoughts hazy, I scanned the strange scenery around me: a vast, colorless expanse that reminded me of clouds stretching out as far as the eye could see. My body felt weightless, like I was floating in midair.

*How did I get here...?*

My father had always loved stories, and the view before me brought to mind the afterlife he had described when I was young—a world above the clouds where people went after they died. The last thing I could remember was being struck by a skeleton messily covered with flesh, and at once I was led to a single conclusion.

Had it killed me? Was I dead?

*That has to be it...*

Strangely enough, the thought didn't bother me as much as I'd expected. I was at peace. A delicate, pure-white blanket covered my surroundings, and the sun seemed to hover in the distant sky. It was an ethereal view—which made perfect sense, assuming that I was no longer in the world of the living.

*I see. I guess I really am dead.*

As I was on the verge of accepting that fact, however, I noticed a sudden discomfort in my right hand. It was curiously heavy, even though the rest of me was drifting through the air. I cast my eyes down and noticed that I was still gripping my black sword.

*But...why?*

Did a person's favorite possession follow them into the afterlife? That seemed reasonable enough, but it wasn't the only thing bothering me.

*My body...kind of hurts.*



I was supposed to be dead, yet I could feel pain all over—and not just a small twinge. On top of that, the air seemed awfully cold and thin; it was hard to breathe without conscious effort.

*Oh, I get it.*

The dead could still experience pain, and they still needed to breathe. I thought that was kind of strange, but what did I know? I'd never been to the afterlife before. If anything, it was relieving to learn that I could discover new things even in death.

A new sense of discomfort spread through me. This time, it felt like I was being dragged downward—like the white sea below was pulling me in. I was terrified of heights, but curiously enough, I didn't feel at all scared; the ground just looked so...*inviting*. Besides, I'd already died once, and it wasn't like I could die again. Surely I could just relax.

*Wait...what?*

I'd expected things to go exactly as my father had once told me: I'd come to rest on fluffy white clouds and meet a nonhuman being with an equally white beard. I'd actually been looking forward to it. Rather than stopping when I'd reached the ground, however, I'd gone straight through it. Was my sword to blame?

*Even when you're dead, I guess there are plenty of things you've gotta consider, huh?*

That absent-minded thought drifted through my head as I watched the haze covering my vision stream upward like a great white river.

As my descent continued, I started to worry. It didn't look like I was anywhere near the ground. I also had the vaguest sense that I was moving faster and faster.

*I wonder where I'm going...*

All of a sudden, my field of vision opened up. I'd broken through the bottom of a thick bank of what appeared to be clouds.

*Yep. Those are definitely clouds.*



This was my first time seeing them up close, so I'd originally doubted my eyes, but now the truth was clear to me: these were the same fluffy white things I was so used to watching float through the sky. And they were speeding away from me.

*What's going on?*

I adjusted slightly to see a little more of what was below me. In the distance, I spotted a mountain range that looked vaguely similar to the one I'd gazed at through the coach's window during our journey to Mithra.

No, wait—they were the same mountains!

As much as I struggled to remember people's names, I was confident in my ability to recognize terrain. And once I'd realized that the mountain range below was the same one that overlooked the city of Mithra, I started to notice other landmarks too. The wondrous sights of another world had given way to something much more real.

*Don't tell me this means what I think it means...*

Despite my nerves, I finally committed to doing what I'd been trying to avoid this entire time: looking straight down.

*...!!!*

Directly below me were a familiar-looking cityscape and the roof of a *very* distinct cathedral. They were tiny, and I tore my eyes away so quickly that I got only a glimpse of them, but it was still enough for me to realize I was *above* the city of Mithra.

In other words...I was in the sky!

It made no sense. I'd been underground just a moment ago, so how had I ended up here? So illogical was my situation that I had to wonder whether I was dreaming.

Then I remembered a fragment of what had caused me to black out. During my battle against the skeleton monster, it had scooped the ground out from under me and thrown me upward. I'd crashed through the ceiling of the dungeon, using my sword to protect my head, and then—

*Oh.*

That one blow must have sent me through the roof of the Cathedral and up into the sky. It was a working theory and nothing more, but it explained why my head throbbed so intensely. And assuming I *was* correct, that meant I'd shot high above the clouds before beginning my *upside-down descent*.

*...?!*

Once again, I quickly looked in the direction I was falling—and my body immediately froze up. That was when it finally hit me: I wasn't dead yet!

*...!!!*

The moment I recognized the predicament I was in, I almost passed out again. There was no doubt about it: below me was the neat and orderly city of Mithra. It looked more like a tiny diorama than an actual place, which just went to show how high up I was. How far had that skeleton's blow sent me?

I was physically helpless as I plunged toward the city below. The situation alone made me dizzy enough that I wanted to pass out, but I clung to consciousness; if my fear took hold, my landing would leave more than just a few scrapes and scratches.

I desperately clenched my teeth, trying to endure the terror as I continued to accelerate. This didn't make any sense. The air should have been pushing against me, moderating my speed to at least some degree, but I couldn't feel any wind resistance at all. It was the same sensation as when I activated my [Featherstep] skill.

*Yep. But I'm not even using it right now.*

My vision blurred so drastically that it looked like the world around me had melted. I was falling at a speed I'd never experienced before, but why? It didn't make sense.

*Oh. Is it because of this?*

I stared down at the black sword in my hand. Its dull blade was "cutting" through the air as, for whatever reason, it vigorously dragged me downward. The same thing had happened when I fell through the dungeon.



Though I couldn't even begin to imagine how any of this had come to be, one thing was clear to me: this was *really* bad. The scenery around me was an indistinguishable mess of colors; I couldn't make out anything except my destination. This was my first time moving at such an absurd speed, and I was only getting faster.

"...!!!"

I was so terrified that my voice refused to leave my throat, and relaxing for even the shortest moment would almost certainly cause me to pass out. As long as I continued to hold my black sword, I wouldn't be able to slow down, but casting it aside would leave me without its reliable sturdiness to protect me as I collided with the ground. In the latter case, my death was inevitable. In the former, it was only extremely likely.

Gripping the sword as tightly as I could, I fought against the terror coursing through me and forced my eyes wide open, keeping them fixed on where I was due to land. As I awaited the inevitable collision, I loosed a voiceless scream.

"...!!!"

Upon reaching Mithra, I whipped through the blown-apart roof of the Cathedral. The giant skeletal monster from before was directly below me, waiting where I was about to land. Hadn't it been deep underground a mere moment ago? Maybe it had clambered to the surface using the hole I'd created during my skyward ascent. That didn't explain why it was suddenly so dark outside, though. Just what was going on?

More questions were running through my mind than I could count, but there was something far more important I needed to deal with first. My target was in the perfect position.

[Parry]

At just the right moment, I used all of my might and momentum to bring my black sword crashing down on the monstrosity's head, breaking my fall in the process.





# Chapter 91: Twenty Thousand Years of Hunger

As I used my [Divine Shield] to scythe through the waves of monsters continuously spilling from the depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation, I frantically attempted to grasp the situation we had found ourselves in.

*What in the world is happening?*

Upon reaching this chamber stacked high with Demons' Hearts, Rolo and I had carried out the order given to us by Prince Rein. Our next move should have been to escape, but that was easier said than done. I was unable to move from where I stood, and Rolo was slumped over on his knees, still reeling from the immense shock of our discovery. He simply stared at the mounds of crimson gemstones before him, making not a sound as tears streamed down his face.

I couldn't blame Rolo for his inaction; he was an intelligent child, so he must have understood what it meant for his people's remains to have been stockpiled down here in the darkness, hidden from the world. It was a revelation too traumatic for any twelve-year-old to endure, which was why I'd prepared to escape with him in my arms if the need arose.

Unfortunately for us both, our situation had deteriorated so much that carrying Rolo to safety was no longer an option for me. Following our arrival at this chamber, powerful monsters had immediately begun spewing forth from the darkness. Sweeping through their vast numbers had been easy enough with my sword of light, but there hadn't been an end to the blasted creatures.

From there, our struggles had somehow managed to get even worse. The dungeon's walls had shaken and crumbled under the strain of a thunderous tremor, and as if on cue, the number of monsters pouring out of the darkness had increased exponentially. Now they surged toward us with all the forcefulness of an avalanche.

*Rolo's safety is my top priority.*

Still without a firm grasp of our predicament, I maintained the shield of light

I'd placed around Rolo, keeping him protected as I continued to cleave through monsters with my radiant swords. Even while covering for him, one swing was enough to fell dozens of our foes, but my offensive wasn't enough; the veritable plague of beasts formed a gapless, ever-advancing wall that refused to allow me any room to breathe.

Time was against me in this ordeal. As things stood, sweeping up Rolo and trying to flee would only end poorly for us, so I chose to wait, praying that he would regain his composure while I kept the monsters at bay.

Once more, a cacophonous rumble shook the entire dungeon. An impact somewhere above—one resembling an explosion—created deep fissures in the sturdy walls around us.

"Ines." Out of nowhere, Rolo looked up at me. "Something's coming down from above. Something big."

"Excuse me?"

The tremors must have been a portent of more strangeness to come. Just as Rolo had said, *something* was crashing through the earth above us, as if an unstoppable force had driven it deep into the ground. And it was almost upon us!

*Watch out!*

Acting on instinct, I took Rolo in my arms and leaped out of harm's way as the ceiling came apart with a deafening crash. A massive *thing* fell through the fresh hole, crushing the horde of monsters below.

The thing—no, the *being*—was a freakish, gargantuan abomination. Its head was caved in, and the rough-hewn flesh clinging to its bones made it look more like a ghoul than anything else. Most notable were its clothes: a resplendent, familiar-looking robe bedecked with precious gemstones. It took me a short while to process what I was looking at, but an answer eventually came to me.

"Holy...Mithra...?"

The monster's robe looked identical to the one featured in the many depictions of Holy Mithra displayed throughout the Theocracy. Extensive burn marks marred the authority the white garment had once represented, to say



nothing of the grossly disfigured skull of the creature wearing it.

How had such a monstrosity ended up here, of all places? As I grappled with that question, a horrendous wail erupted from a cavity buried deep in the creature's face—the horrid remains of its mouth, I assumed.

**“AAAAAAGGGHHHHH!”**

Then, one of the creature's incomplete eyeballs swiveled in its socket. It came to rest on Rolo before a monstrous hand shot out to grab him.

**“F-FOUNNDDDD...YUH-YOU!”**

[Divine Shield]

At once, I summoned a wall of light to block the monster's hand. I was successful, but only by the skin of my teeth—another fraction of a second might have cost Rolo his life. Cold sweat trickled down my brow; the atrocity moved far too quickly for its gargantuan frame.

**“AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGHHHHH!”**

In a fit of madness and rage, the abomination continuously slammed its fist against the radiant wall. My shield prevented all impacts from getting through, but seeing our foe's unbridled fury brought me to a swift conclusion: I needed to slay this thing here and now.

[Divine Shield]

Still protecting myself and Rolo with my shield, I created a blade of light that would tear through the monstrosity's body. The swords I created with my unique Gift could effortlessly carve through orichalcum, mithril, and even adamantite, the toughest of all materials. I was sure that, with the sole exception of the Black Blade, there was nothing in this world that I couldn't rend.

Yet when my sword made contact with the colossal monster, I immediately sensed that something was wrong.

*My blade... It's not enough!*

I knew my weapon had cut through the monstrosity's flesh, but my foe hadn't even reacted to the damage. And when I created more blades and continued

my onslaught, I experienced more of the same. My opponent's movements weren't hindered in the slightest; it was as though my blades were passing straight *through* its body.

Ignoring its superficial wounds, the monster continued to swing its fist.

**“AAAGHHH! GUH... RUHHH?”**

My barrier stymied the monster's attacks, and my own swipes did nothing at all. It would have been a stalemate if not for the waves of monsters still pouring from the darkness. To make matters worse, the monstrosity's rampage had torn apart the dungeon like a violent tempest. My footing was starting to crumble, threatening to ruin my balance.

Unless something changed, I wouldn't be able to protect Rolo.

*There's nothing I can do. I can't win.*

Just as my frustration was setting in, the faceless monstrosity ceased its assault and started to groan. Suspicious, I watched it closely as it whipped around and crawled toward the darkness as though it had suddenly noticed something. An eerie moan spilled from the base of its neck as it reached for the many mounds of Demons' Hearts.

“Stop. Those are—”

Rolo's voice, quiet as a whisper, reached my ears, but the creature's groans easily drowned it out.

**“GGGUUUHHHHHHHHH!”**

The guttural noise sounded as though it should have originated from the bowels of the earth, and it shook the dungeon around us. Looming in the darkness like a specter, the creature then began scooping crimson gemstones toward the opening in its throat.

**“AGGGHHH! GUH! RUHHH!”**

The monster gulped down the crimson gemstones, its skinless chest and stomach thrumming with eerie delight. Once again, the entire dungeon shook, and my shield—which should have been impenetrable—started to warp. The vast deluge of mana flowing from my opponent washed over me, and the



resultant vertigo caused me to reel. My balance finally crumbled along with the walls and the ground.

*What...is...happening...?*

As my shock passed, it gave way to astonishment at the aberrant sight before me. My foe's strength had already been too fearsome for my attacks to cause any damage, and now it was growing explosively. Bloodred skin wrapped around the monster's bare flesh as though it were alive.

*Did that abomination...absorb the strength of the manastones it consumed...?*

The monstrosity was still wholly focused on its feast. It scooped up every Demon's Heart within its reach, and its mana signature pulsed more intensely with each gulp. I couldn't shake the feeling that the entire Dungeon of Lamentation had somehow become a beating heart.

My opponent was far too powerful. I'd understood from the moment it had appeared that I wouldn't be able to defeat it, and its strength had increased drastically since then. Even now, it continued to empty the chamber's stockpile of gemstones. There was only one way this could end.

Amid my indecision, there was another explosive increase in the monstrosity's mana.

**“GGGRRRRRRRAAAAAHHHHHH!”**

*Nobody can stop it now.*

The monster was already on par with the wicked gods from the myths of old: beings beyond the ken of humanity. Just witnessing it was enough to paralyze me. Far from being some imagined horror, my foe was all too real. Not even the combined might of every military asset at the Theocracy's disposal would stand a chance against it.

As despair overtook me, the intimidating aura of another threat sent a violent chill through my body. It was coming from right beside me, and even with such an unbeatable monster before my eyes, I couldn't help but turn to its source.

“Rolo...?”

Gone was his quiet weeping. Now he simply watched the monster in

complete silence, his expression devoid of emotion as it continued to pull gems into its gaping maw. He merely stood and stared, not even blinking...so why did his presence cause a ghostly chill to ripple across my flesh? I should have been focused on the despair-inducing monstrosity before me, but it was the young boy standing behind me that had invoked the most terror.

“Hey. *You.*”





Rolo's voice was quiet but rang out clearly enough to reach the monster. It was also much colder than I ever would have expected. He slowly stepped out in front of me and addressed the creature.

"You ate them."

The atrocity raised a massive fist. I prepared to shield Rolo at the same time—but then our opponent swung straight at its own jaw.

*What...?*

The mess of meat about to form the monster's face was torn apart, causing large chunks to scatter throughout the chamber as the dungeon's walls kept deteriorating. I was unable to act, taken entirely by surprise, but Rolo approached the abomination. I reached out to stop him, only to instinctively retract my hand as fear overcame me. The source of my terror wasn't our enemy but the very boy I'd sworn to protect.

"That hurt, didn't it? I *know* it did. I know *exactly* how you feel right now."

Rolo took another quiet step toward the monster, which retreated a step in response.

*"I understand,"* Rolo continued. "You've been starving for all those years, desperate to finally eat something. It was the same for me. I was hungry...for such a long time."

Again, the monstrosity raised its fist as if to crush the boy slowly approaching it. And again, it smashed that fist straight into its own face, tearing apart the flesh that remained.

"But you see, those are *my* people. I don't know what they look like, nor have I ever met them, but they're my family. You know that, don't you? Of course you do. It was *because* you knew that you did all this in the first place—I can tell that much without you needing to utter a word. I can also tell you've been reveling in joy this entire time."

The monstrosity began tearing into its own body with reckless abandon, ripping and crushing its flesh as it reverted to a skeleton. The flesh would immediately attempt to grow back, only to be clawed away again and again and

again. The sight was the definition of madness.

**“AAARGHHH-GHHH-GAAAAAAHHH!!! RUHHH... RUHHH...  
RRRAAGHHHHHH!!! RAAA—GUHK!”**

The skeleton’s unintelligible shrieks of pain were cut short as it forced its arm down its throat and started ripping out the flesh inside its neck and stomach. This being had enough power to rival the gods of myth and legend, yet here it was, helplessly tearing itself apart. The sight was surreal.

Once again, Rolo’s cold voice pierced the darkness.

“You’re in a lot of pain, aren’t you? I can tell. *We’re both feeling it. Exactly the same thing.* But that’s okay. It’ll take a lot more than this to kill you, right? You know that as well as I do.”

The monstrosity didn’t respond; it was ripping into its throat, face, and stomach too viciously to be able to.

“You don’t need to say anything. I already know the truth. Your fears. Your desires. The gems sustain you, don’t they? Go ahead, then. Eat as many as you please. It’s not like the dead can come back to life, and you’ve been so, so hungry. Haven’t you? I know exactly how you feel. So, go on. *Eat.*”

Rolo jerked his head up. Then, as if on cue, the skeleton took one great fistful after another from the pile of crimson gemstones and started slamming them into its broken maw with all the force of a savage punch. Its power swelled massively as it devoured them, which only made what followed all the more gruesome: the monster forced more Demons’ Hearts through the gaping holes in its mouth, throat, and stomach, crushing its newly regrown head, torso, and arms in the process.

“Are those gems tasty? I really don’t mind you eating them. Consume every single one if you want. The dead can’t come back, so why shouldn’t they become your ‘strength’? At least they won’t be put to any more nefarious uses. Still... In exchange for that...”

No sooner had Rolo’s icy words spread through the cavern than the monster violently recoiled. It had just thrust both arms into its chest, and with a sickening tear, it wrenched out its heart and threw it on the ground.

“All the pain they felt...” Rolo continued, not a trace of emotion in his voice. “The sadness, the regret... I want you to experience it, even if only on a fraction of the scale. It won’t make up for the past, though. Not in the slightest.”

The monstrosity raised its arms high into the air before slamming them down onto its heart, crushing it into the ground. Then it returned to striking its own face, splattering the cavern with its almost-restored cheeks and eyeballs.

This nightmarish process repeated again and again. The skeleton would scoop more crimson gemstones into whatever openings it could reach, increasing its strength and restarting its regeneration, before tearing the newly made flesh from its bones, shattering its own knees, and crushing its own internal organs. It was like witnessing the cruel punishments of hell, and the sight rendered me speechless. I couldn’t quite piece together how this had all come to be, but it was clear who was behind it.

*Rolo.*

**“RRRAAAAAHHH! RUHHHHHH... GAAAAAAGHHH—UHK!”**

Again and again, Holy Mithra wailed. Lamentation, torment, humiliation, and terror all mixed in screams that shook the earth. The cries would stop when the monster crushed its own throat, then return louder than ever as the crimson gemstones started a new wave of regeneration.

“I can tell what you’re thinking: ‘How is this weak, tiny, *insignificant* creature doing this to me?’ In truth, I don’t know either. Does it frustrate you that you can’t do anything to stop me? It does, doesn’t it? Well, I understand the feeling. How were my kin wiped out by something as worthless as you? That’s what I’m thinking right now. From the bottom of my heart.”

Then the young boy who had orchestrated this unbelievable scene turned away from the monster, leaving it to continue its self-mutilation.

“Let’s go, Ines. We can’t beat that thing.”

My shock prevented me from speaking right away. And when I did at last find my words, the most I could muster was “Rolo...? Go...where?”

In contrast to my strained response, Rolo spoke with calmness and composure. “I was listening to that abomination’s heart from the very



beginning. It might look like it's hurting itself right now, but none of the damage it's doing will reach its true self. It's afraid of Noor, though. It fears his sword. Unless we use it, we won't be able to win."

"His...sword...? You mean...the Black Blade?"

"Mm-hmm. That's why we need to return to the surface—to reunite with Noor and the others. *Then* we'll put an end to that thing."

Now that Rolo was facing me again, I couldn't sense any of the harshness that had taken him earlier. But that didn't mean the timid child I was so used to had returned. The eyes of the boy before me housed quiet determination.

"All right," I agreed at length. "This might not be the smoothest way to ascend, but please follow my lead."

"Okay. We should hurry. I don't think I'll be able to control that thing again. It only worked this time because I caught it by surprise."

Using my sword of light, I tore open the dungeon's ceiling. All we had to do now was head for the surface.

## Chapter 92: Reunion

“I seriously thought I was dead...”

Thanks to the gigantic skeleton that had very conveniently broken my fall, I was now safely on solid ground. I took a moment to catch my breath, then looked around the Cathedral; the interior was falling apart, and a group of terrified people sat cowering on the smashed-up floor. As I searched the crowd for anyone I might recognize, I couldn’t help wondering what had happened.

“Pile Driver... What *was* that?”

A voice called out to me from behind, and I turned to see a man clad in familiar-looking armor. “Oh, Sigir,” I said to him.

“I’m fairly certain I told you to stay down below. Why, then, did you just *fall out of the sky*?”

“I’m as confused as you are. It was like I blinked, and then suddenly I was high up in the air.”

“Utter nonsense...but I suppose it doesn’t matter. You have my thanks for saving us from that abomination. Would you happen to know what it was? How did such a monster even end up in our holy city?”

“Honestly, I couldn’t even begin to tell you.”

Astirra had told me the monster was “definitely a skeleton,” but the creature I’d seen just a moment ago had been draped in flesh. I was far from an expert on the subject, though, so I wasn’t sure what to tell Sigir.

“Ugh... I thought I was going to die...” groaned a voice.

I turned to look and saw someone else I recognized—a woman this time—crawling out of the giant hole in the floor. It was Astirra, and she seemed to recognize me at the same moment. She stood up, brushed the dust from her clothes, and made her way over to me.

“Noor...? What *was* that just now?” she asked. “Why did you suddenly fall out

of the sky? I was *this* close to being crushed by that thing.”

“Sorry...” I said. “I was kind of occupied with bigger problems.”

“I seriously thought I was done for when I saw it falling from above. It was only by a stroke of luck that I managed to leap aside in time.”

“Oh, right—Sigir, *this* is the person you should ask about the monster. She knows far more about it than I do.”

Astirra turned to the man I was addressing. “Sigir, was it? My name’s—”

Before she could finish, Sigir and the soldiers with him went down on one knee. “Your Holy Highness,” he said. “I am glad to see that you are safe.”

“Um... Are you talking to me? I don’t even know who any of you are...”

“You jest, Your Holy Highness. You are our one and only liege.”

Astirra looked bewildered by the soldiers’ deference, but Sigir seemed to pay that no mind.

“Your Holy Highness,” he continued. “First, allow me to give you my report. We, the Sinistral, were outmatched by the man you directed us to apprehend. As much as I regret having to admit it, we have returned without fulfilling our duty. You have my deepest apologies.”

Sigir and the other soldiers pressed their heads to the stone floor and awaited a response.

“Um...” Astirra turned to me, bewildered. “What’s going on, Noor?”

“There’s no point asking me,” I replied, matching her look. “I don’t know either...”

“Pardon my interruption, Sigir,” someone else interjected, “but I should be able to clear up everyone’s confusion.”

I was certain I recognized the voice—and sure enough, when I turned, I saw Holy Prince Tirrence approaching us. Lynne was following along behind him.

“Instructor Noor,” she said. “It’s good to see you safe.”

“Same to you,” I replied.

Sigir raised his head. “Your Holy Highness Tirrence. Excuse my impertinence, but did something happen to Her Holy Highness? She seems somewhat different from her usual self.”

“Your senses haven’t failed you,” Tirrence said. “As a result of certain circumstances, my mother is a little confused at the moment.”

“Huh? Your mother? *Me?*” Astirra cocked her head. “I don’t remember having a child...”

Tirrence sidled up to the bewildered woman and whispered into her ear, “My apologies, *mother*, but please play along. I’ll explain later. If we make it through this, that is.”

“I might not grasp the details, but...the overall idea is that you’re my son, right?” Astirra replied in an equally low voice. There was a distinct undercurrent of excitement as she spoke.

“Yes. You are my ‘mother,’ the high priestess who reigns over the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. Given the circumstances, I think this little act will prove most beneficial for us all.”

“High...priestess...? Right... I still don’t really understand, but leave it to me! I’m quite the talented actress, I’ll have you know!” In full view of everyone around, Astirra gave the holy prince an energetic thumbs-up.

“Right... Well, *mother*, would you be so kind as to grant me the authority to command our holy knights?”

“Oh, um, of course. *Ahem.*” Astirra cleared her throat before addressing Sigir and the other soldiers. “Um, my memories are a little hazy right now—I bumped my head in the dungeon, you see—so for the time being...Junior here is in charge of everything!”

“‘Junior’...?” several confused voices muttered. The six soldiers were busy exchanging looks.

“I see... Her Holy Highness truly is confused.” Sigir turned to Tirrence. “Your Holy Highness, what happened down there?”

“We have a true crisis on our hands,” the prince replied. “The Dungeon of



Lamentation is active again, and monsters are spewing forth at an unprecedented rate.”

“The dungeon is...? But that cannot be. Her Holy Highness conquered it centuries ago.”

“Forgive me, but the explanation will need to wait. The monster you all just saw was the Dungeon Master, and it likely won’t be long before it returns. We need to be ready for when it does. What are our numbers like? How many are still able to fight?”

Sigir turned to another soldier clad in silver armor. “Raiva. The soldiers here were under your command.”

The large man stepped forward and took a knee before Astirra. “Your Holy Highness, I kneel before you having failed in my duty to apprehend the princess. I await whatever punishment you deem suitable.”

“Those orders have already been rescinded, Raiva,” Holy Prince Tirrence interrupted. “Isn’t that right, mother?”

There was a drawn-out pause before Astirra realized *she* was the one being spoken to. “Huh? Oh, um, right. Rescind the, uh, thing. Also, Tirrence will give you all your orders from now on. Don’t worry about asking me—I’ve, um, forgotten everything.”

“As you will, Your Holy Highness.” Raiva, still kneeling, turned to the holy prince. “At present, not a single member of our force has sustained severe enough injuries to prevent them from moving under their own power. About four hundred of our holy knights are in optimal condition to fight. What is your command, Your Holy Highness?”

“Gather everyone who is able to fight and encircle the Cathedral,” Tirrence ordered. “They’re to exterminate the monsters that will inevitably spill out. Anyone *not* able to fight should evacuate the citizens of Mithra from the city. Get them as far away from here as possible.”

“*All* of the citizens, Your Holy Highness?”

“You saw that monstrosity—it’ll return before long leading a veritable tidal wave of monsters. We need to get the people to safety *now*. Raiva, I want you

to oversee the operation.”

“As you command. But what will you and Her Holy Highness do, my prince?”

“My mother and I will stay here and keep the monsters at bay. Once the citizens are safe, we’ll evacuate too. Now, make haste. Don’t waste a single moment.”

“As you command.”

Barely a moment after Raiva departed with a host of soldiers in tow, the Cathedral began to tremble at short intervals, causing sections of the roof to crumble inward.

“What’s that...?” I mumbled.

The vibrations seemed to be coming from down below. From the deepest depths of the hole the monster had collapsed into, heavy impacts resounded again and again, each one rocking the entire building and making the fissures in the floor even larger. Ornamentation fell from the ceiling, and the state of the walls looked awfully precarious.

Everyone had evacuated the Cathedral at the holy prince’s orders. Well, almost everyone. Sigr’s group and ours had stayed behind, but I was starting to wonder if we should have retreated.

We continued to watch the hole, merely waiting as the noises grew louder. Then, out of the blue, two people came flying out: a woman with golden hair and silver armor, and a boy with pale skin.

“Ines, Rolo!” Lynne called out. “Thank goodness you’re both unharmed!”

“My lady,” Ines replied. “Vast swarms of monsters are spilling from the dungeon’s depths. I’ve been cutting them down without fail, yet there seems to be no end to them.”

“Yes, I saw. I only recently ascended from the depths myself.”

“Moreover...one of the monsters is especially formidable. My sword of light hardly affected it.”

“The abomination’s going to be even stronger when it shows up again,” Rolo said apologetically. “Sorry. It’s because I made it eat so much.”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a ghastly moan echoed out from deep within the hole, loud enough to shake the ground. The sound grew nearer with each passing moment, and the vibrations caused the half-ruined Cathedral to slant dangerously. Something large was climbing up from below us...and I had a good idea of what it was.

“The fate of our country rests on this fight,” Tirrence said, his voice strained. “Quite honestly...I doubt we have a chance of victory. Lynne, you should take your companions and make your escape.”

“And make our...?” Lynne frowned. “But...that would mean you—”

Her words were drowned out by the loudest rumble yet. The last remains of the dome-shaped roof crumbled apart, revealing a sky stained a dark, almost blackened crimson.

“I cannot express how much you’ve done for us, Lynne,” Tirrence said. “If not for you, the outcome of this tragedy would have been much worse. In the end, however, this is our country’s burden to carry. I cannot ask any more of you...nor of you, ‘mother.’ You should all escape while you still—”

“Tirrence,” Lynne interrupted. “It would appear I was mistaken about you. Do you recall my words to you before? That I would assist you only as a neighbor and only for as long as it benefited my kingdom. By that rationale, you would be correct, and there would not be a reason for us to stay any longer. From here on, however...I wish to assist you as your *friend*.”

“Lynne...?”

“That being the case, don’t worry about imposing on us. Let us fight with you. We aren’t the kind of people who would abandon their friends and run. Isn’t that right, Instructor Noor?”

“Staying to help was pretty much what I planned to do from the start,” I agreed.

“Sorry to have dragged you into my personal circumstances again...”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. More importantly—it’s coming.”

There was a booming *crack* as the stone floor beneath us shattered and

something massive shot up from below. This was the final straw for the Cathedral, which began to collapse around and under us. Amid the falling rubble, we stared up at the monstrosity that had risen up from underground.

The skeleton was a size or two larger than when I'd seen it a moment ago. In fact, I wasn't sure I could even call it a skeleton anymore; its bones were fully encased in bulging, swelling flesh, making it look more like... Well, no comparison came to mind. Countless massive wings unfurled atop the weirdly shaped monstrosity's back, and—





**“KKKRRROOOOOOAAAAARRR!”**

Gaping maws opened up all over its body, releasing a guttural screech that was equal parts ominous and seemingly not of this world. The monster hung above us, eclipsing the sky.

## Chapter 93: Empathy

With the Cathedral now completely destroyed, floor and all, we found ourselves falling through the air with its shattered remains. But before we could collide with any of the debris or experience a nasty landing, Astirra conjured a platform of air that slowed our descent, allowing us to touch down safely.

“Hey, isn’t this...?”

I recognized where we had landed: it was near the entrance to the Dungeon of Lamentation, where Sigr and his compatriots had taken me not too long ago. There was an enormous hole in the ground—probably made by that monstrosity during its climb to the surface—but no further damage anywhere else that I could see. The floor must have been pretty sturdy.

*It’s a good thing we didn’t fall too far.*

Unfortunately, I was allowed only a short moment of relief; our foe flexed its massive wings and descended on us at blinding speed. A mass of hands extended from all over its fleshy, distended body, stretching across the sky...

**[BLACK BOLT]**

And then fired an immense black lightning bolt.

[Parry]

I swung my black sword just in time to catch the crackling projectile. It was *beyond* heavy. I’d expected as much, having recognized at a glance that the attack was far more potent than any of the monstrosity’s previous lightning bolts, but not even my full strength would allow me to support it for much longer. My limbs—no, all the muscles in my body—screamed out in pain as they were torn apart; then my arms were blasted out of the way.

“[Divine Shield].”

Ines had at some point readied herself behind me, and the black lightning bolt connected with the massive bulwark of light she had created at the very last

moment. The projectile rebounded and shot up into the air before finally detonating. Our view of the dark sky above vanished behind a burst of pitch black, and after a pause, we were all subjected to a deafening *crack*. Despite how high the bolt had climbed, the shock wave it produced was still strong enough to blast away all the rubble on the surface.

“That was insanely strong...” I grunted. “It was nothing like the attacks we faced earlier.”

“Instructor Noor.” Lynne was staring after the bolt in blank amazement. “Did...did that monstrosity fire that lightning...?”

“Yeah. It was only one move, but look how beat-up I am.”

I showed her my palms. They were charred black and smoking, even though my sword had only made contact with the lightning bolt for a fraction of a second. It was nothing I wouldn’t be able to fix with my [Low Heal]...but I wouldn’t be able to survive a volley of attacks like that one.

Still supporting the weight of my sword with my arms, which were now partially numb, I stared up at the monstrosity above us. Its body wasn’t the only thing that had grown tremendously—its power had too. How were we supposed to win against such a formidable opponent...?

“Prepare yourself, my lady. A swarm of monsters is closing in from below.”

I turned in the direction of Ines’s warning to Lynne and saw that she was right: a teeming wave of shapes was spilling out of the dungeon’s entrance and rising from the massive hole in the floor. Were those *all* monsters?

The swarm surged up the piles of rubble and debris, and in the blink of an eye, we were surrounded. I considered it lucky that each of the monsters comprising the mass was smaller than a common goblin, but still—there were an awful lot of them. The flying monstrosity had seemed like a big enough handful on its own, so our current situation was no joke.

“I’ll thin their numbers a little,” Lynne said. “Ines, cover me.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The two got straight to work laying into the monsters, cutting swathes into

their formation, but the gaps were filled so quickly that it was hard to say they were making any headway. If anything, the swarm seemed to be *growing thicker*. Wave after wave, our enemies just kept coming.

“Well, this isn’t good,” I mused aloud. “We need to figure out a way to deal with both of our problems at the same time.”

“You’re right...” Lynne turned a critical eye to our surroundings. “We need to form up and work together; otherwise, we’re going to be wiped out.”

That was an ominous proclamation if ever I’d heard one, but she wasn’t wrong about the severity of our situation. As much as Lynne and Ines were barely breaking a sweat as they tried to stem the tide of monsters, a short distance away, Sigrir and his knights were on the back foot. They were covering for their compatriots who had sustained injuries during the earlier impact, but it looked like they could be overwhelmed at any moment.

The soldiers fighting alongside Tirrence and Astirra seemed to be doing fine. The problem was those scattered among the swarm.

“It might be a good idea to hurry over there and help them...” I remarked.

“You’re right, Instructor...but the next attack from above is coming.”

The airborne monstrosity’s many eyeballs swiveled in our direction, and I looked up just in time to meet their uncanny gaze.

## **[INFERNO]**

All of the monster’s hands extended downward, and from them erupted a torrent of destructive fire magic. This was *very* bad news. I suspected these were the same flames we had seen it use before, which meant they would cling to our bodies and stubbornly keep burning. But much like the lightning bolt it had just released, their size and potency were of a much greater scale.

The fiery maelstrom covered the sky, and the rubble on the surface began to char and melt. If the flames reached us, there wouldn’t be anything we could do to survive them.

“[Windstorm]!”

“[Storm Wall]!”



Astirra and Lynne immediately cast wind magic to force the whirling flames back up into the air, but—

**[BLACK BOLT]**

Another massive jet-black bolt shot forth, piercing the flames on its way down. This monstrosity really wasn't giving us any breathing room, was it? Still...

[Parry]

“[Divine Shield].”

I'd dashed up a mound of rubble and slammed my black sword into the lightning bolt, killing its momentum. Ines, who was standing behind me, had then seized the opportunity to deflect it.

I was no match for the monstrosity on my own, which was why I was so glad to have Ines fighting with me. Lynne and Astirra too—their spells had forced the inferno high up into the air, where it was now incinerating its creator. For a while there, I'd feared for our lives, but now I was starting to believe we'd somehow pull through.

Still, the end was nowhere in sight; the monstrosity up above could cast spells whenever it pleased, and the waves of monsters coming out of the dungeon were endless. For all my optimism, I was also a little anxious.

My only option was to do what I could, while I was still capable.

[Parry]

Given our current standoff against the flying monstrosity, I couldn't help everyone struggling with the swarm. Instead, I settled for assisting those I could reach, parrying the fangs and claws of the monsters around them. It wasn't much respite when the creatures were returning in such great numbers, but it was better than nothing. The soldiers would have a much safer time fighting monsters that had been defanged and declawed.

Was I just delaying the inevitable? At the rate things were going, the soldiers would still be overwhelmed before long. Those thoughts came to mind unbidden—and then a bright light swallowed our surroundings.

*Not good.*

I looked up, having sensed that something was coming, and saw the monstrosity diving straight toward us, still wreathed in flame. It was going to crush us with its immense weight and then char what remained.

Or so I'd assumed.

In what seemed like no time at all, the monster was right above our heads. But rather than continuing its charge, it stopped some ways above us, raised its massive, flaming fists, and then started slamming them down on us.

"[Divine Shield]."

Ines put up her shield without missing a beat. It weathered the storm of blows, but the sheer force of the impacts broke the earth beneath her, and she began to sink into the ground.

"Ines, are you all right?" I called out.

"Yes, an attack of this caliber won't break my defense. That said...I don't expect us to survive much longer."

I'd never heard such uncertainty in her voice before. And in truth, she was right to be worried. Now that she was having to focus on the monster above us, the swarm was gaining momentum.

But as Ines alone weathered the flying monstrosity's assault, sinking deeper into the ground all the while, Rolo spoke up from behind us. "Ines. Can I ask you to do something for me?"

"Rolo?"

"Could you stop using your shield? Just for a moment."

"Do you...have a plan?" Ines's reluctance was clear on her face.

"Mm-hmm," Rolo said calmly. "It won't solve our problem, but I can stop its movements for a little while and buy us some time. Then we can regroup and give ourselves a better chance of defeating it. You can manage that, right, Lynne?"

"I can," Lynne confirmed. "And we *do* need the breathing room if we want to

form up. But...how are you going to stall it?"

"Don't worry—I won't do anything too rash." Rolo retrieved a small leather pouch from his jacket pocket and held it out for us all to see. Whatever it was, it was enough to convince Lynne and Ines of his plan.

"Very well," Lynne said at length. "Ines, can we ask that of you?"

"Understood," she replied. "I'll keep an eye out for the right moment. Rolo, be ready."

"Okay."

Ines studied the monstrosity's movements carefully. Then, when there was a brief lull in its assault, she launched her huge shield of light upward, thrusting our greatest threat higher into the air.

"Rolo, I'm withdrawing my shield," she said.

"Mm-hmm. Thank you."

The radiant barrier disappeared, giving us a better view of the battlefield. It was surreal—the small figure of a boy stood facing the gigantic monstrosity above him. Even as the swarm of monsters surged toward him, Rolo didn't hesitate in the slightest; his eyes locked on his airborne opponent, he said in a calm, quiet voice, "Hey. *You*. You can hear me, can't you?"

The monstrosity froze in midair, and every massive eyeball on the squirming flesh that was its body swiveled to focus on Rolo.

"I knew it. You *can* hear me. That's good, because *I* can't hear *you* anymore."

We all watched in stunned silence as Rolo spoke to the monstrosity. It even ceased its assault for some reason, simply listening to what it was being told.

"I still understand you, though—you're thinking things shouldn't have turned out like this. You've desperately closed off your heart to stop me from peeking into it and taking control of you again, right? It must have been so very scary what happened earlier. That's why you can't bring yourself to get any closer to us, even though you consider that the best way to finish this. *You're afraid*. Am I wrong?"

**"AGH... AHHH... AGHHH. AUGHHH-AAAAAAGHHH! AAAUUUGGGHHH-**

**GHHH-GHHH!"**

The monster started to writhe, and the wails it released caused deep fissures to spread through the ground. Great chunks of earth came apart and started to sink, but not even that bothered Rolo, who simply continued.

"I get it. You're strong enough that you could wipe out the entire city in an instant if you so wished. But you haven't. How strange. It's almost like you *don't want to*."

**"AAAGH. AAAUUUGHHH. AAH— AAAUGGGHHHHHHHHH!"**

A barrage of black lightning bolts shot from the monstrosity's arms, smashing apart buildings throughout the city—an obvious outburst of anger. Both its form and power swelled to new heights.

"You can't make up your mind," Rolo continued. "You don't want to lose all the food you spent so long cultivating. That's why you're resorting to *half-hearted* attacks. Isn't that right? How deeply unfortunate that you can't eat what you want to."

**"GUAHHH... AGHHH... AAAUUUGGGHHH!"**

Black lightning struck the spot right in front of Rolo, sending up a small shower of debris that struck him in the head. The projectile's potency had clearly been weaker than before.

"Mm-hmm. I get it," Rolo said, unfazed. "Compared to us, you have a very, very long life span. Starting over is always an option, so part of you wants to wipe us all out and be done with it. But...would that really be okay? Would that *really* satisfy you?"

Surrounded by a swarming horde of monsters, we all held our breaths as we watched the boy say his piece.

"It wouldn't, would it? There's a *feast* like me right in front of you, and the very idea of giving it up is unthinkable. Didn't you want my blood? It's supposed to be the greatest delicacy in the world for you, right? For all those years, you've put up with your hunger, and now you're even stronger than before. So are you really okay with giving up so easily?"

**“AGH. GUAAAGHHH— AGH!”**

With each bellowing moan, the monstrosity exuded an even greater presence. More arms sprouted from its body, and potent black lightning coiled and danced around its fleshy limbs...but Rolo's calm was unaffected.

“Still, you ‘don’t have a choice,’ do you? I’m surrounded by nuisances who won’t let you have me. And you’re so scared that you won’t even try to fight them. You’re thinking that if you don’t do everything in your power to wipe us out here and now, there’s no knowing what we’ll do to you. *So you’ve given up on having me.* You’ve been using such limited spells because you’re not sure you can beat us otherwise. Because you’re scared. Because as much as you hate to admit it, you’ve realized you’re *weak*. I know exactly how that feels. I’m weak too, after all.”

The airborne monstrosity went completely still.

“But it’s okay. You don’t need to keep away from us anymore. Because...”

The next moment, Rolo leaped up into the air, heading straight for our foe.

*“I’ll come to you.”*

## Chapter 94: Rolo's Friend

I leaped straight toward the monster I'd just taunted. In response, it splayed the fingers of its innumerable hands, launching more black lightning in my direction.

**[BLACK BOLT]**

The attack grazed me and nothing more; it had swerved at the very last moment, instead slamming into and reshaping a distant mountain ridge. The accompanying windstorm buffeted me, but apart from a minor burn on my skin, I was unharmed.

*It looks like I won this gamble.*

Despite viewing me as prey, the monster hadn't known whether to kill me or capture me alive. However, once I'd separated from Noor and the others, it had finally made up its mind. As I continued straight toward it, using flying debris as footholds, it stared me down with its many writhing eyeballs.

**"AAHHH... AHAAA HA HA HAAA!"**

As soon as I was within the reach of its tentacle-like appendages, the monster cackled in delight. It thought of me as nothing more than a tiny, powerless morsel that had served itself up to be eaten. I couldn't do anything to resist it now that the annoying obstacles in its path were gone, so it ridiculed my stupidity.

The monstrosity was right to laugh; I was just as weak and powerless as it thought. I couldn't even hold a sword properly, much less hold my own against such overwhelming strength. I'd managed to control my opponent before, but that was because I'd taken it by surprise; without that advantage, it would easily snatch me up and toss me into its gaping maw.

I wasn't under any delusions about my situation. In the eyes of my foe, I was nothing more than food—but that also made me perfect *bait*.

**"AAHHH!"**



The monster opened its many mouths wide and shot its thick arms out, trying to grab me. I didn't try to dodge them; I wasn't able to while I was in midair. But despite my weakness, there was one thing I *could* do: keep it laughing.

**“AAAHHAHAHAHA! HAAAAAA! AAAAAHHH! AAHAHAHAHA!  
HHHAHAHAHA!”**

I couldn't hear the monster's thoughts anymore, but I knew it was laughing from the bottom of its heart. It was so eager to consume my flesh and blood that, at this moment, it had completely forgotten about everything else.

As roars of delight that shook the earth spilled from the monster's mouths, I couldn't help but laugh as well.

“Ha ha...”

I was done. I'd drawn the monster's attention, causing it to waste precious moments focusing on me. Though it didn't seem like much, in this situation, it was priceless. It would give Noor, Lynne, and the others enough time to regroup and get into a more advantageous position for the upcoming battle.

Even though I was weak, I'd managed to help my friends. That thought alone had caused me to let out a small burst of laughter. By doing nothing and allowing the monster to eat me, I would buy my allies even more time. Maybe that was the best course of action; as a member of such a widely detested race, meeting my end now was probably a good thing. I could declare that I'd served a worthwhile purpose—something I'd always wanted to achieve before I died.

But strangely enough, I wasn't able to think that way anymore. Even as the monster's arms were about to seize me, I was surprisingly calm.

I wasn't going to die—or perhaps it was more accurate to say that I couldn't. After all, I'd promised Mianne and the others that I would share another delicious meal with them. So many people were doing their best to ensure I returned alive, including Lynne, Ines, and Noor, who were watching over me from below. The three of them were so kind; they would hate for me to receive even a single scratch. I'd grown to love them—and because of that, I couldn't bear to think about betraying their faith in me.

For that reason, even though I'd decided to act as bait, I hadn't done so

intending to die. I wasn't going to give up on life just yet.

"Sorry..." I murmured to the monster, which was still in the throes of delight. "I can't let you eat me." I could make it laugh, though, giving my friends a few crucial moments to prepare themselves.

The monster's appendages finally reached me. At the same moment, I retrieved the magician's ring from the leather pouch Oken had given me, slipped it onto my finger, and spoke *her* name.

"Come, Rala."

The crimson manastone inlaid into the ring shone with harsh light, and a deluge of mana erupted from it, flooding my immediate vicinity. In the blink of an eye, I devoted the entirety of my focus to manipulating the vast flow of power.



*There's nothing to worry about. I just need to do what I did in training.*

To achieve my aim, I would need to work with this much mana only for a moment—but it would still be an insanely tough challenge. Oken had told me that the slightest mistake could result in the mana detonating or killing me by flooding through my body.

Still, I could do this. All of my training with Oken had been dedicated to this single feat.

I directed the torrent of mana around the exterior of my body before channeling it back into the magician's ring, all without letting a single drop escape. The mana swelled as it flowed in and out of the manastone like a heart pumping blood. This cycle repeated until the ring's power increased dramatically, and its appearance changed to that of a swirling, blinding vortex.

I was attempting to perform summoning magic. By using a magic tool—the ring—I was going to call forth the monster within the manastone.

From what I'd been told, summoning magic was no small feat. And the more formidable the sealed entity was, the more power was needed to summon it. But long ago, before the term “demonfolk” had even been used, the people known as the Lepifolk had shown tremendous talent for this kind of thing. I was reasonably confident I could manage it, for I had the same blood flowing through my veins.

“You can come out now,” I murmured.

I channeled every last drop of the amplified power into the ring and activated the summoning magic, calling *her* forth from the crimson manastone. There was an explosion of mana, and with a searing magenta flash, a colossal black figure appeared from the “gate” I'd created, blanketing the sky.

Rala—known only as the Dragon of Calamity before Noor had named her—immediately snapped her mouth shut, crushing every one of the monster's appendages trying to grab me.

**“GRRROOOOOOAAAAARRR!!!”**

**“AAA-AAUUUUUUUGGGHHHHHH!!!”**

With a deafening roar, Rala tackled the flying monster. She tore into its swollen flesh with her mighty jaws, then struck it from below with the long tail she took such great pride in, sending it higher up into the sky.

**“GGGRRR—”**

There was the beginning of a throaty rumble as Rala unleashed her vaunted breath weapon, the Light of Destruction. The radiant pillar she created swallowed the monster entirely before punching a hole in the sky above, momentarily banishing the darkness that had enshrouded the world. Then a thunderous blast and violent gale swept over the city of Mithra.

Even as the powerful winds threw me through the air, I watched Rala. She roared and spread her wings in satisfaction, casting an enormous shadow over the city. Seeing her in the flesh again, I was impressed that a creature so large had managed to fit inside such a tiny stone.

*It must have been cramped in there. Sorry.*

According to Oken, the small, transparent crimson gem on the magician’s ring I was wearing was a fragment of the Demon’s Heart he’d once inherited from a close friend. Rala had been sealed inside it this whole time. It must have been awfully claustrophobic in there for her, but she had willingly endured it to help us.

Ever since the Magic Empire’s invasion, Rala had remained in the Kingdom of Clays, where the two of us had grown closer. Many were cautious of the great danger she represented, but for some reason, she saw Noor as her lord and master. Ever since I’d passed along his message—that it would be best for her to calm down and stop attacking people—she had remained entirely obedient.

These days, Rala resided in an unpopulated area not too far from the royal capital. I was the only one who could communicate with her, so it was my duty to attend to her needs. Once a week, I accepted the commission issued to me by the royal palace and delivered to her an unfortunate group of cows and pigs for her to eat. That was enough to sate her, it seemed; despite her colossal size, she didn’t need much food.

On occasion, I would “speak” with Rala while she ate. She was as wise as her long life span would suggest and knew all kinds of things. Few people could

actually communicate with her, she had told me, which was why she was the first to spark many of our conversations.

Noor was one topic Rala was always eager to focus on, no doubt because she had deemed him worthy of being her lord. She spoke at great length about how fierce their one-on-one clash had been, how much her heart had throbbed in anticipation when she had discovered that a creature so small could repel her claws, and the overwhelming surprise she had felt when her esteemed breath attack was deflected. Regarding that last point, she had since concluded that the feat wasn't surprising at all—who could expect less from a man so immensely capable?

Rala frequently told me that meeting Noor must have been the reason for her existence. She would proudly show me the cracks in her massive claws and regale me with tales of their battle. It was kind of like speaking with an infatuated lover.

For the most part, I just listened, responding now and then when she asked for my thoughts. But there were still occasions when I took the lead, such as when I'd mentioned that Noor had saved me. Rala had naturally wanted to hear more, and she'd growled with enthusiasm as I'd recounted the story. Even now, she asked me to repeat it again and again.

I only had so much time with Rala each week, and in truth, our conversations were somewhat repetitive. That never bothered me, though. For three months, we had told the same few stories—but we had grown much closer as a result.

Despite her borderline obsession with the man, Rala hadn't seen Noor in quite some time. She had outright told me that she wanted to meet with him, which had made the situation even more peculiar; as I understood it, dragons were creatures loyal to their own desires. But then she had elaborated. In her words, although she wanted to see her lord, she was okay with decades—or even centuries—passing between their visits. She'd been very disappointed when I'd noted that humans didn't live such long lives, but still, she had said she was willing to wait if that was what her lord wished. I'd thought that was a surprisingly principled response. She was a little savage, given that she was a dragon and all...but she was very kind once you got to know her.



And according to Rala, I was “a rare individual who understood the way of the world, despite being so small.” She saw me as a kindred spirit, since we were both “loyal retainers who respected their lord.” Therefore, when I’d borrowed Oken’s strength to seal her into the magician’s ring, she had acceded to my request without a second thought.

*“For my lord, I would be glad to help.”*

As I spun through the air, blown away by the shock wave of Rala’s Light of Destruction, I jerked my head to look below me. On the ground, the others were already regrouping and preparing to fight back against the swarm of monsters.

Mithra’s soldiers had distanced themselves and reorganized into a battle formation. The high priestess was protecting them while hindering the teeming waves of monsters. Ines was cutting through swathes of opponents with each swing of her sword of light. And as for Lynne and Holy Prince Tirrence, they were issuing commands together, ensuring that everyone worked in perfect harmony. The group’s teamwork meant they were making a much larger dent in the horde than before; from the look of things, they’d managed to secure a lot more breathing room.

Lynne must have noticed that I was looking down at them. She gazed up and met my eye, and at once, her thoughts streamed into my head.

*Wow, I thought. She’s already managed to get everyone in position.*

As I’d expected—no, even faster than I’d expected—Lynne had brought some semblance of order to our chaotic situation. Not only that, she had also managed to interpret my actions and signals and weave them into her battle plan. I’d mentioned that the monster was afraid of Noor’s Black Blade mere moments before leaping toward it, yet she had already found the best way to assemble our forces and determined our next moves. All the rest of us had to do now was obey her.

Only one word came to mind when I thought about what Lynne had accomplished in such a short time: *awe-inspiring*.

Rala was hanging in the sky, her wings happily splayed as she enjoyed the open air—but when I used my “voice” to relay Lynne’s plans to her, she plucked

me out of my fall and descended to Noor and the others. So extreme was her enthusiasm that the ground caved in where she landed. The aftershock caused everyone to fall over and the buildings in the area to collapse, but even then, Noor came over to greet us.

“That was amazing, Rolo. You think that might’ve taken care of the monster?”

“No,” I replied. “You’re right that it was amazing, but it looks like it didn’t have an impact at all.”

Noor stared up at the sky in surprise while Rala let out a grumble of dissatisfaction. But when the two saw the monstrosity coming back down looking no worse for wear, they raised no objections to my report.

**“GRRR...”**

Rala sat on her hind legs in front of her lord, whom she’d desperately wanted to see, before resting her long neck on the ground and letting out a low growl. She sounded very content.

“Noor, Rala wants you to get on her back,” I explained.

He considered the request briefly. And then: “Why...?”

“She wants you to smack that unpleasant thing out of the sky with her.”

“Right. And that would mean...going all the way up there, wouldn’t it?” Noor had a sincerely uneasy look on his face as he gazed up at the monster.

“You don’t need to worry. She won’t shake you off or anything.”

There was a drawn-out pause before Noor finally said, “I see. But, well, there are all these monsters down here too... Maybe I should—”

“That’s okay. I’m pretty sure we can handle them ourselves.”

“Oh... Still. Sorry... To be honest, high places are kind of—”

“Plus your sword is the only thing that can defeat that monster, Noor.”

He stared uncertainly at the Black Blade in his hand. “Are you...sure...?” It seemed to me like he wasn’t very fond of Rala’s suggestion—no, like he was terrified of heights. There was no helping it, though; he was the only one of us who could defeat that monster.

Together with Rala, I was able to drag Noor onto the dragon's neck. "Sorry..." I said. "But...please. It's all up to you."

**"GRRR."**

"Hold on," he said. "I'm not mentally prepared ye—"

**"GRRROOOOOAAAAARRR!!!"**

Positively delighted to be carrying her lord, Rala, once known as the infamous Dragon of Calamity, let out a mighty roar and ferociously beat her wings. The pair launched into the air, where a monstrosity awaited them.

## Chapter 95: A Stone Coffin

Immediately after Rala's takeoff with Instructor Noor, we were treated to an unbelievable spectacle playing out in the sky above us. The dragon's colossal frame blurred as she banked, ascended, and dived through the air with frightening speed, periodically blasting the monstrosity with her Light of Destruction. Her foe unleashed countless bolts of black lightning in response, each one packed to bursting with power, but Instructor Noor repelled them all with his Black Blade, sending them crashing into the plains and mountains in the distance. Each impact caused the earth to rumble and a thundering echo as obsidian light carved away the horizon.

From time to time, Mithra brought its ludicrous strength to bear by blanketing the sky with flames. Astirra and I managed to push them back by the skin of our teeth, shaping them into a searing fireball that Rala sent crashing into the monstrosity with a single mighty beat of her wings.

Mithra recoiled in response to the attack, creating an opening that Rala refused to ignore. She poured more of her destructive breath weapon into the mass of wriggling flesh, not letting up until the dark crimson sky had turned a blinding white. A brief moment later, the shock wave reached the earth, collapsing buildings and stone statues alike.

In the midst of the incessant, deafening noise and tempest of all-consuming flame, Instructor Noor and Rala continued to fight.

"Incredible..."

The fierce battle on the surface hadn't let up in the slightest, but I was unable to tear my eyes away from the grand display above. It was like watching the gods of myth and legend in a fight to the death.

Indeed, I was witnessing a clash between superior beings. The fight had already advanced into territory inviolable to us mere mortals. But as my thoughts were snatched away by the war in the heavens more fantastical than even the wildest daydreams, I caught sight of Rolo beside me and immediately

returned to my senses.

“My apologies, Rolo,” I said. “I didn’t want to force Rala into this...but I couldn’t think of anything else that would work.”

“It’s okay. She *wanted* to contribute. I mean, look at how much fun she’s having.”

“I suppose you’re right. Still...at this rate, seizing victory won’t be easy—not even for Instructor Noor.” Despite the ferocity of the battle and the bath of searing flame it had endured, the monstrosity seemed no worse for wear.

Just as Rolo had said, Mithra was clearly wary of Instructor Noor’s Black Blade. Having seen the weapon crush the monstrosity’s fingers, I could understand why—it was capable of dealing actual damage to our enigmatic foe. I’d allowed Rolo to read my intentions specifically so that he could send my instructor up into the sky with Rala.

Rala’s Light of Destruction was powerful enough to level entire cities with a single blast, yet it could only burn away trivial amounts of the monstrosity’s flesh. If we wished to seize the upper hand, we would need to contribute more of our fighting strength to the battle above—someone capable of breaking the stalemate.

“Ines, can I ask that of you?”

She turned to look me in the eye, still scything through the oncoming monsters. “Are you certain of this course of action, my lady?”

“Yes. We can keep the horde in check on our own.”

“But...”

The unease was clear on Ines’s face. I already knew what she wanted to say. As it stood, she was most of the reason why we were managing to suppress the monsters. Since we had regrouped into a proper battle formation, she was able to swing her blade in broad, lethal sweeps, optimally decimating the enemy line. We had consequently secured enough breathing room to tend to our wounded.

It stood to reason, then, that losing Ines here on the ground would turn our

entire situation on its head. The battle would grow so fierce that we would end up without enough leeway to even speak.

“I know, but Instructor Noor needs your strength most right now,” I said. “Go to him. And give it your all.”

Ines took a moment to contemplate before she eventually replied, “Understood. But please, my lady—prioritize your own safety first. It would be a grave failure of my duty if you were to get injured.”

“The sentiment is mutual, Ines. Be careful.”

“Of course. But before we part...” With a single swipe of her shield, Ines bisected every monster as far as my eye could see, reducing them to nothing more than a mountain of corpses. “Be safe, my lady.”

Using a staircase of small, luminescent shields, Ines ascended into the sky and out of sight. She was headed straight for the fight in the heavens above. It seemed almost comical that *she* was concerned for *my* safety when she was about to face a greater threat than anything we were having to deal with on the ground.

Still, I’d needed to ask Ines to go; she was the only one of us capable of tipping the scales of such an intense clash. But now we were without our strongest “shield.”

“This marks the end of our breather!” I called out to everyone around me. “Are you all ready?”

“Yeah,” Tirrence replied. “Thanks for buying us so much time, Lynne.”

“Everybody’s back on their feet now, if not better than before,” Astirra added. “That lady was amazing. ‘Ines,’ was it...?”

Behind me stood only Rolo, Holy Prince Tirrence, Astirra, and the six knights of the Twelve Sacred Envoys’ Sinistral. There were no other people in sight. The group of soldiers that had accompanied us had sustained numerous casualties during the chaotic free-for-all, so after patching them up with Astirra, I’d sent them all to assist with the evacuation of the citizenry. Keeping them here would only have resulted in a slew of pointless deaths.



The oncoming battle was going to be between us—a mere ten people—and an unending tide of monsters. I'd personally selected those who would remain here with me, and Holy Prince Tirrence had entrusted me with the right to command. All that remained was to carry out the scheme I'd devised.

But of course, there were some among us who had their doubts. Miranda of the Twelve Sacred Envoys still looked skeptical of the explanation I'd given everyone before. "This is insane!" she cried. "Does the Clays princess really expect to do anything to all those monsters with only the ten of us?!"

"Mind your tongue," Sigir chastised. "The high priestess and holy prince have commanded us to obey her. Do you mean to forsake your loyalty now, of all times?"

"B-But the plan she described is just—!"

"Sorry, Miranda, but I put Lynne in command for a reason," Tirrence interjected. "She's much better at this sort of thing than I am. If you have any complaints, then criticize me as much as you wish."

"Y-Your Holy Highness?! I-It wasn't my intention to—!"

"Then be silent and follow your orders," Sigir cut in.

"Ugh! F-Fine!"

I could sympathize with her concerns; even I was feeling whispers of doubt in the face of the oncoming monster horde.

"Well, if that's settled... Miranda, Petra, please help me create the barrier," I said.

As much as I wanted to wait for Miranda to calm down, we didn't have that kind of time. Ines had exterminated every single one of the monsters around us, but more were already spilling from the dungeon's entrance. It wouldn't be long before they reached us; we needed to make our preparations with haste.

"H-Hey... Are we *really* doing this?!" Miranda asked. "I mean, I get *why* we are, but that means we'll all—"

"We do this to protect the citizens of Mithra," Petra interrupted. "Do your part."

“B-But—!”

“A *princess from another country* is risking her life for us. Is the significance of that not clear to you?”

“Ugh! O-Of course it is! I’m Miranda of the Sacred Scripture, member of the Twelve Sacred Envoys! I can’t get cold feet while an outsider shows me up!”

“Then get to it already. We don’t have much time. Focus.”

“I *know*! Don’t rush me!”

Despite how flustered she sounded, it took Miranda only a single breath to regain her composure. She began channeling her magic, ready to cast the spell we were about to perform.

“*There*. I’m done,” she announced. “Come on, let’s do this already. Ugh...”

Petra nodded and said, “I am also ready.”

Miranda of the Sacred Scripture and Petra of the False Scripture—these two young women couldn’t have been much older than me, yet they were magicians of the highest caliber. I joined them in preparing to cast the spell.

“All right,” I said. “Begin.”

The three of us synchronized our breathing and then invoked our magic with a loud shout:

“[Stone Wall]!”

There was a series of booming tremors as massive chunks of rock jutted up toward the sky, forming a thick stone wall that completely surrounded us. Though this had been my idea to begin with, I recoiled in fear at the sight of them.

The city’s buildings were no longer visible; all we could see now were the stone walls, piles of debris, and the monsters swarming out of the dungeon’s entrance. Our foes wouldn’t easily be able to traverse the barricade around us—and nor would we, for that matter. There were no ways for any of us to escape.

“Ugh... I know this was the point, but we’re completely trapped now! We’ve

erected our very own coffin!”

Miranda was accurate in her assessment: this massive work of magic, which I’d needed to borrow her and Petra’s power to create, was more or less a huge sarcophagus. Henceforth, the ten of us would take on an unending tide of monsters in this hell from which there was no escape.

I’d known this plan was reckless from its conception, and remorse ate away at me for having forced Miranda into it. But we no longer had Ines or Instructor Noor with us—people who were outliers on the strength scale. In a head-on fight, the rest of us wouldn’t have been able to suppress the growing tide of monsters for long. Some would eventually have slipped past us into the city.

Though the order had been given to evacuate Mithra’s citizens, there were bound to be any number of stragglers who had yet to reach safety. Letting the monsters surge into the city would result in so many deaths—an outcome to be avoided at all costs—but the resources we had on hand were limited.

One of my ideas had been to forcibly seal the dungeon’s entrance and trap the monsters inside, but it seemed foolish to believe they would stay contained for long. We would only be delaying the inevitable. I’d then considered simply continuing to fight, but our foes would end up leaking into the city sooner or later.

Between those two options, which were we to choose? The answer was surprisingly straightforward: *both*. We would trap the monsters with us, then reduce their numbers while they were unable to escape.

“I see...” one of the other Envoys muttered. “Even if we all perish here, we should secure the citizenry enough time to evacuate. What an ingenious plan!”

“This is no time to be impressed, Gergnein!” Miranda snapped. “As *ingenious* as this idea might seem, only an especially reckless band of fools would go through with it!”

“As long as the people’s safety is guaranteed, I could not ask for anything more.” Gergnein, the man known as Strong Spear, held an impressively large weapon at the ready. Though a helmet kept me from seeing his face, something told me he was smiling. “Given the situation, this should reduce casualties to the bare minimum.”

“Yes, but no sane person would ever think of trapping themselves in a veritable *tomb* with all these monsters! I *knew* that barbarian princess was out of her mind!”

“Nonetheless, it was originally *our* duty to come up with a countermeasure for an emergency like this. If ever there was a time when it would make sense for us to put our lives on the line, this is it. Am I wrong, Sigir?”

“Not at all. His and Her Holy Highnesses have deigned to fight by our side.” He looked straight at Miranda. “Receiving the chance to die here is a holy knight’s greatest honor.”

“Ugh! I was an idiot for ever thinking I could get you lot to see reason!”

Just as the knights of the Sinistral were trying to explain, we were entering a life-and-death battle—a race to see whether we or the oncoming horde would crumble first. If fate was unkind, the massive stone walls that had severed our escape routes would double as our headstones.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” I tried to reassure Miranda. “I didn’t suggest this plan with the intention of us sacrificing ourselves.”

“R-Right. You wouldn’t have proposed it unless there was a chance we could win.”

“Indeed. However, in the worst-case scenario, we may need to bring the walls down on the monsters *and* ourselves. I apologize in advance if we end up in that situation.”

Miranda let loose a high-pitched whine of terror.

“If you don’t want that to happen, then fight like death is nipping at your heels,” Sigir said sternly. “You’re a member of the Sinistral. Don’t disgrace yourself.”

“I... I get it, okay?! And it’s not like I’ve got a choice! Ugh!”

I was about to console Miranda again when Astirra chuckled and placed a gentle hand on the Envoy’s shoulder. “You can rest assured, Miranda. Though I may not be worth much, I’m going to be right there with you.”

“Y-Your Holy Highness?!” Miranda fell onto her backside in shock when she

saw who was touching her. Then she frantically started muttering under her breath, interspersing her rambling with incoherent noises. “H-Her Holy Highness touched my shoulder?! A-A-And she even said my n-n-n-name?! Ha-wa-wa-wa?!”

“This won’t be my first brush with death—far from it,” Astirra continued with a tender laugh. “The number of times I’ve had monsters swarm me just because a certain *someone* carelessly reached for a trapped chest... I’ll admit, my scrapes never got *this* bad, but I should still be able to carry out my role.”

All six knights of the Sinistral stepped closer to Astirra and knelt, lowering their heads in deference.

“We are honored to fight alongside you, Your Holy Highness.”

“The feeling is mutual, Sigir, everyone. It looks like we’re in for a rough time...but for now, let’s just do our best!”

“Your words are too kind, Your Holy Highness. We are not worthy.”

Astirra’s kind words and gentle smile had worked wonders on the knights. They all seemed more at ease, and their morale was higher than ever.

After a moment, I said, “We should get into formation. The monsters will soon be upon us.”

I’d already briefed everyone on my idea, so we formed up without the slightest hesitation. Astirra and Holy Prince Tirrence each had three members of the Sinistral around them. I was standing between the two groups with Rolo behind me.

To be honest, I’d agonized until the last second over whether Rolo should even be here with us. Amid all this chaos, however, it seemed a bad idea to separate from him; he was the only one of us who could communicate with Rala. I’d put him at great risk by asking him to support us, and while I intended to do everything I could to keep him safe...

“The coming battle is going to be fierce,” I said to Rolo. “We’ll be pushed to our utmost limits. There’s a chance I won’t be able to protect you.”

“That’s okay. I’m not sure how much I can contribute to the fight, but I’ll do

my best not to die.”

“I’ll consider that a promise. And I’m sorry.”

The swarm of monsters grew denser with each passing moment, pushing up against the walls as it surged toward us. I thrust my sword into the ground and raised my voice so that everybody could hear me.

“The first wave is coming! Stay in formation as best as you’re able! They’ll overrun us otherwise!”

“Got it!”

“Understood.”

“Ugh... Like I care what happens anymore!”

We all readied our weapons as the monsters approached, their stampeding limbs sending violent tremors through the ground. My heart was in my throat, but I took a deep breath and prepared to use the advanced work of magic Instructor Noor had taught me: [Fusion Magic].





My version of the skill was a simple mimicry of what my instructor had shown me. I could still cast only seven spells at once, and my degree of mastery came not even close to the artistic perfection he had displayed in that chamber beneath the royal capital. Yet even if my magic was incomplete—even if my technique was lacking—I needed to do this. The fact that I *could* use it to bolster my strength was enough.

As those thoughts ran through my mind, the monsters continued to approach. “It’s time,” I said. “[Hellflare].”

The flames I unleashed tore into the horde. They reduced the first few hundred monsters to ash and charred remains...and *only* the first few hundred. As I’d already suspected, I was a far cry from the likes of Ines and Instructor Noor. Waves of monsters that had escaped the flames clambered over the burnt corpses, still advancing.

“[Hellflare].”

I continued launching fireballs at the monsters swarming out of the dungeon’s entrance, doing my best to ignore those I’d missed. The Sacred Envoys were dealing with any that leaked through. I watched them out of the corner of my eye as I poured my all into performing my role.

Our formation seemed to be working well, but this was only the beginning. It wouldn’t be long before we truly descended into hell.

Astirra gave a chuckle. “Looks like we’ll need to put our backs into this one, Tirrence.”

“Indeed, mother.”

No sooner had their murmurs reached my ears than the deluge of monsters swallowed us whole.

## Chapter 96: The Fruits of One's Training

I was shooting up into the sky atop the back of a dragon, having not even had a chance to prepare mentally. The sheer force of our rapid ascent almost caused me to pass out, but I desperately clung to consciousness. The monstrosity was closing in; this was no time to black out.

**[Black Bolt]**

[Parry]

Our opponent had greeted us with a huge bolt of pitch-black lightning. I'd caught it with my sword, but now I couldn't shake the feeling that my entire body might succumb to its strength.

I just barely managed to redirect the attack to a distant plain, where it blew a massive hole in the earth. A direct hit risked throwing me into the sky. Worse still, there was a chance it would fatally wound the dragon I was riding—and if she got hurt, I wouldn't have any means of staying in the air. It would mean a quick and messy trip back to the ground.

In conclusion, I could not, *under any circumstances*, allow this dragon to get hurt.

**[Black Bolt]**

Unfortunately for me, Rala was maneuvering through the air at a frightening speed, sometimes advancing toward the monster by choice. Our foe showed no mercy and continued to assail us with its powerful thunderbolts.

[Parry]

I desperately crawled along the dragon's back and swung my black sword. Because I'd used [Physical Enhancement] to improve my speed, I was able to stop the attack from reaching its target. I'd acted in the nick of time—but before I could even sigh in relief, the monster redoubled its assault.

*Crap.*

## [BLACK BOLT]

Even at a glance, I could tell this strike was the most powerful one yet—it overwhelmed my vision and covered up the sky. I wouldn't be able to stop it; my only option was to let it char me. My thoughts blanked as I tried to come to terms with my impending death—

[Parry]

—and then my body moved on its own. Before despair could take me, I smoothly turned the huge thunderbolt away from the dragon and me.

*What just happened...?*

I'd swung my sword without meaning to. It was a strange sensation, to say the least, but it also reminded me of my training with Gilbert. He had always struck too keenly and incessantly for me to rely on my eyesight alone. Only by eliminating all unnecessary movements and *tapping* his spear away instead of smacking it with my full strength had I managed to keep up with him.

I hadn't needed to put all of my might into those parries—not when I could change the trajectory of any oncoming attack with a simple nudge. Maybe my reliance on that technique had spoken to my own limitations more than anything else, but in the end, I'd still managed to guard against my opponent's spear.

## [BLACK BOLT]

There was a deafening *crack* as the monster fired another bolt of lightning. It was a terrifying attack; watching its approach was like staring death in the face, and the lack of solid ground beneath me only amplified that intimidating aura. A wave of pure black covered my vision in the blink of an eye, like an all-consuming terror bent on reducing Rala and me to ash. And as if that weren't bad enough, this bolt looked *even bigger* than the ones before it.

Still, when I took a moment to consider my situation, I realized something important: Gilbert's spear had been much faster.

[Parry]

Having remembered the feeling of parrying those attacks, I used exactly the

same method on the monster's lightning. The strain that had worried me before disappeared in a heartbeat, allowing me to deflect every one of the bolts with ease. They soared toward the horizon before blasting apart chunks of a distant mountain range.

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

The monster continued to barrage us with lightning bolts, refusing to surrender, but not even this tempestuous storm was enough to faze me. It was kind of disappointing. Before, I'd genuinely considered these attacks a threat. Now, I was parrying them as easily as if they were feathers. Rather than catching them head-on, I could simply *nudge them aside*.

I'd practiced these movements so many times that my body now repeated them on instinct. And though the monster poured even more strength into its next frenzied onslaught...

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

I carefully watched the trajectory of each bolt and parried it aside when it reached me. From time to time, I saw Rala's contributions to the fight—she assailed the monster with her mighty breath weapon and sent back the fireballs it created with a strong beat of her wings. It was an astounding spectacle. The sky vanished behind a raging inferno, lightning struck the earth with earsplitting *cracks*, and the mountains in the distance changed shape before my very eyes.

Part of me was tense, of course—a direct hit from any one of those lightning bolts would be the end of me. But the strength of the monstrosity's attacks was inconsequential when I could just send them careering into the distance. My fear of the lightning had disappeared; I would manage just fine no matter how much it sent at me.

In fact...now that I was calmer, the sight of the ground far below was *way* more terrifying than anything my opponent could produce. Even though I'd spent all this time trying not to look down, I couldn't ignore the truth any longer.

Rala was smart, and she was doing her best not to throw me into thin air, but I was struggling to cope with how fast she was moving. Each sharp bank made me worry I might pass out. Then again, as long as I could endure that, I probably wouldn't need to worry about dying anytime soon.

*Still, there's no end to this.*

The monster was unbelievably tough. Despite all the formidable spells it had cast, it showed no signs of tiring. And though Rala had charred it with her breath attack, cloying the air with the stench of burnt flesh, it didn't look much worse for wear.

*How are we supposed to beat this thing?*

Were skeletons supposed to be this strong? I'd seen neither hide nor hair of a bone for so long now that I'd started to suspect it wasn't a skeleton at all.

"[Divine Shield]."

I was drawn from my thoughts as, out of nowhere, a colossal pane of light came into existence. It seemed to cleave the sky as it shot upward, rending flesh from the monster's bones in the process. The thick lump of meat fell through the air—

"GRRR!"

—and was reduced to cinders by Rala's incendiary breath.

"Was that...?" I murmured.

Gingerly, I angled my head down to see where the light had come from. A golden-haired woman clad in silver armor was ascending into the sky with blinding speed, using tiny luminescent shields as footholds. The orderly manner in which she was arranging them made it look like she was climbing a staircase of pure light.

The woman bounded through the air before leaping onto Rala's back. She was the picture of composure, and seeing her up close confirmed my suspicions: Ines had come to help me.

"Sir Noor. Please excuse my lateness."

"You came..." I replied. "Thanks. I can't really do anything against that

monster on my own.”

“I am here at Lady Lynneburg’s request. Before we do anything else, could you ask Rala to fly higher? For safety’s sake, I think we should put more distance between our fight and those below.”

“Sorry, but I can’t communicate with her. We’d need Rolo for that.”

“I see. In that case, there’s no helping it.”

I almost blacked out in terror as, without a moment’s hesitation, Ines leaped into the open air. Falling wasn’t my only fear; I was just as afraid of seeing other people plummet from high places.

*Wait, no.*

This wasn’t the time to be lost in thought—Ines was heading toward the ground at a breakneck pace. I needed to swallow my vertigo and save her, but *how?*

Then, as I was caught in the grip of confusion...

“[Divine Shield].”

Ines broke her fall with a massive shield of light.

I breathed a sigh of relief. It had probably been silly of me to worry about Ines in the first place, considering her talents, but I still wished she had warned me. A shock like this wasn’t good for my heart.

“Does she mean to use that as a floor...?” I mused aloud.

The surprising scene below had captivated me. Ines’s shield—which she had created in an instant—covered the entire city of Mithra, bringing to mind the image of a barrier neatly separating heaven from earth. Rala immediately made her way toward it, and the two of us landed at our companion’s side.

“Wow, Ines—you threw this up in no time. And it covers so much ground. I didn’t know you could do things like this.”

“I do not mean to impose, but I must ask that we fight like this for the time being. We can’t let the monster’s magic reach the city below.”

“That’s okay. This setup works better for me too.”

I wasn't sure why Ines was so apologetic; I was overjoyed that I didn't need to worry about falling anymore. Part of me wished she'd made her shield a little less see-through...but to say that out loud would just be greedy.

"Oh, I should mention..." Ines said. "There won't be any more reinforcements coming. The outcome of this battle depends entirely on the two of us."

"We're more than enough, aren't we? And don't forget about Rala."

"You know...I suppose you're right," Ines replied with a slight smile. "Prepare yourself. Here it comes."

The monster appeared to have lost its balance—no doubt because of the large chunk of meat Ines had cut away from it before—but I could tell it was on the verge of unleashing another powerful spell. Not even its fresh wound seemed to bother it. The appendages it had lost had already regrown, and there was still flesh aplenty clinging to its frame.

"Sir Noor, may I entrust our defense to you? If I have to sustain our footing while I carve away our foe's flesh, I won't be able to cover Rala as well."

"No problem. If the monster's lightning is the most I'll need to deal with, then I'll manage."

There was a beat before Ines said, "I see. In that case, I'm counting on you."

No sooner had we finished our conversation than the monster shot another thunderbolt in our direction. I wasn't the slightest bit scared of them anymore.

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

I'd been stumped before, since I hadn't been able to deal with the monstrosity on my own, but now I was here with Ines. Her arrival alone had washed away what remained of my concerns, and the feeling of solid ground under my feet was infinitely more reassuring than when I'd needed to fight atop a speeding dragon. On top of that, Ines—who always looked so stern—was wearing a smile that said it would take far more than this to worry her. Her composure was the complete opposite of the panic that had overtaken me earlier.



I thought I'd grown a little stronger now that I could follow Gilbert's spear, but seeing Ines—whom I was pretty sure was Lynne's family maid or something—made me realize I was still a long way from being strong enough to make a living as an ordinary adventurer.

"[Divine Shield]."

"GROOOAR!"

My companions and I quickly fell into our respective roles: Ines tore through flesh, Rala incinerated it, and I parried the oncoming lightning. Meat fell from the monster's bones with ease now that Ines was with us. The sight amazed me, even as I parried every single one of the black bolts trying to run us through.

I was attentive enough to realize what an awe-inspiring sight our battle must have been. It was like something out of a fairy tale. And in this unbelievable tale, my role was a simple one: parry everything that came at us. I'd started to worry when Rala had abruptly taken me up into the air, but now that I knew exactly what I was capable of, all that remained was to put in the work. And thankfully...

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

It was true what they said: practice made perfect.

Rala's and Ines's attacks continued to carve chunks out of the monstrosity's flesh. As things stood, it wouldn't be long before it was back to its original, skeletal form.

## Chapter 97: Luminescent Dance

[BLACK BOLT]

[Parry]

As I watched the man in front of me deflect a bolt of lightning with his Black Blade, I couldn't help but think what a strange situation this was. It had always been my duty to stand in the vanguard and protect those behind me, but now the roles were reversed.

Ever since I was young, my Gift—[Divine Shield]—had given me access to strength beyond the realm of human ken. Some people avoided me for it, even branding me a monster, and who could blame them? I was not misunderstood or anything of the sort; my weapon was omnipotent, capable of rending the hardest metals and most enormous living creatures with a single sweep. There was no limit to how many screens of light I could manifest, nor were there any restrictions on how large I could make one.

In simpler terms, I possessed the means to devastate *an entire country* in one swing.

King Clays had warned me of the danger I posed when I was only a child, and the thought of the destruction I could cause had given me many sleepless nights. The power I'd received was far too great for any one person to bear, let alone someone so young. The mere potential that I possessed made me a threat to humanity—an anathema of the very worst kind.

A single misstep in how I used my Gift would bring about calamity. That was why my foster parents, the Six Sovereigns, had taught me to regard it as a shield and named it accordingly, even though its uses were far from being so limited.

I'd accepted my lot in life and spent my days training to protect those around me. Yet the more I'd used my Gift, the more people had come to fear me. Perhaps that had always been inevitable, but I'd pressed on nonetheless. This power had been given to me so that I could defend the weak, and unless I

proved that to the world, I would never be recognized as anything more than an abomination.

No matter what others thought of me, I needed to protect them. Because they were *weak*. That was how I'd come to terms with my abnormal power, but when I saw the scene playing out before me...

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

I couldn't help feeling like I was the weak one.

[Divine Shield]

Despite my slight inner turmoil, I remained fully dedicated to my role, rending the flesh of the giant monstrosity above. There was nothing my luminescent blade could not cut; in careless hands, it would turn into a wellspring of collateral damage, tearing through buildings, carving through mountains, and altering the landscape.

My overwhelming strength harbingered disaster, so I always exercised the utmost caution and unwavering discipline. No matter the situation, I needed to remain composed and unshaken by my emotions. Acting as I was now—using my Gift purely to cause destruction—had always been a last resort. Drawing too much attention to my strength would only invoke a fresh wave of terror in those around me, leading to even more accusations that I was a “monster.”

I'd spent my entire life on my toes, fearing the worst. Yet as I watched the spectacle before me, I could not help but wonder...had that really been the right choice?

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

I was in the presence of a man who defied all comprehension. Common sense held no sway over him, and his absurdity knew no bounds. He had a dragon under his command and could fight our monstrous opponent on equal footing. Though we had known each other only for a short while and the details of his provenance were unknown to me, I was already comfortable entrusting my

back to him. King Clays and my lady had come to trust him completely in barely any time at all.

Would using my Gift without restraint really cause everyone to shun me? The man now protecting me made my strength seem trivial, yet he swung his sword without the slightest concern of how others might perceive him.

Just who was I afraid of? No...why was I afraid at all?

A strange sensation welled inside me until, all of a sudden, I was quietly chuckling.

*I see now.*

Everyone was fighting with their lives on the line...yet I was *laughing*. It was inconceivable; I never laughed, even at the best of times. Still, as I watched the spectacle before me, I could not suppress the urge.

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

Indeed, what *had* caused me so much anxiety? Why had I ever felt the need to *act human* around the man before me? My role as a shield, my duty to protect others—none of that was necessary here. I didn't even need to think about my own safety. There was no point in shackling myself with such meaningless restraints.

At some point or another, a smile had crept onto my face. I heard the sound of something inside me *break*, and a moment later, my thoughts and movements accelerated.

[Divine Shield]

A blinding light swallowed my surroundings as countless radiant strands covered the sky above, forming a crisscrossed web that sundered the giant monstrosity's flesh.

Had.../ done that? It must have been me. We were the only ones here.

I continued to wield my "sword," the rending light shooting from my hands coming together in a surging maelstrom that consumed our opponent, tearing into it. The thought of attempting such an attack had never even occurred to

me, but here we were. My body was moving faster and with more delicate control than I'd ever thought was possible.

And for all that...I didn't feel any strain. Something told me I wasn't even scratching the surface of what I could do. I was moving even faster than before, and my body was as light as a feather.

**[BLACK BOLT]**

A streak of lightning headed straight for me. But...

[Divine Shield]

My sword of light severed the bolt—and the sky along with it.

*Aah. So I can cut lightning too.*

It seemed absurd...but I supposed you never knew what you were capable of until you tried.

[Divine Shield]

I proceeded to mince the flying monstrosity's flesh, allowing it not even a moment to regenerate. Severed chunks dropped from its body and turned to ash as Rala incinerated them with her breath. Our foe was growing smaller before our very eyes.

My body moved so fast that my thoughts struggled to keep up. But even then, I'd yet to reach my limit. *I could still go faster.*

**[BLACK BOLT]**

[Parry]

[Divine Shield]

Before, I'd struggled to follow Noor's movements with my eyes. But now, little by little, I was actually catching up to him.

*What's happening to my body?*

The feats I was performing would only cause more people to label me a monster, but that was far from the most important thing on my mind—I'd just taken my first steps down the path that would guide me well and truly beyond the scope of humanity. Yet strangely enough...my heart wasn't heavy. I was

starting to think it didn't matter if others called me a monster...though I wasn't sure *why*. As I pondered the question, the monstrosity changed its approach.

**[[[BLACK BOLT]]]**

It extended its countless thick, ghastly arms and unleashed a barrage of pitch-black lightning at us from every direction. Only, its attacks were in vain.

[Parry]

Noor deflected every bolt with a single swipe of his blade, keeping the dragon and me safe. I watched him out of the corner of my eye even as I severed all of the monstrosity's outstretched arms.

[Divine Shield]

The understanding that eventually dawned on me was equal parts reason and instinct. It wasn't being labeled a monster that had worried me—it was isolation. And as for *how* I'd realized that... Standing here, fighting shoulder to shoulder with a man who could only be described as "monstrous," I didn't feel any discomfort at all.

My own foolishness exasperated me. I'd spent my entire life trying to keep my Gift in check, and for what? Far from being "the Kingdom of Clays's strongest shield," I'd acted more like any little girl one might come across on the street.

Yet...wasn't that exactly what I'd once been, before I'd allowed the power bestowed upon me to control my every waking moment? My strength had been lauded and feared in equal measure, but *I* was the one who had assumed it made me special. I'd even twisted that assumption to fuel my fear of rejection, using the power I'd received merely by chance to justify my own insecurity. Just thinking about it made me fed up with my own weakness.

The man before me would never have let such trifles sway him; he existed in a world of his own, absurd and without limits. If he had cared about what other people thought of him, he would never have reached the heights he now stood at.

[Parry]

[Divine Shield]

I moved faster than I could properly comprehend and continued to accelerate. Noor was parrying the oncoming lightning bolts, while Rala spewed even more of her flames. Together, we were stripping the flesh from the monstrosity's bones.

Soon enough, I was traveling so fast that not even my thoughts managed to keep up. My body was as light as ever, but my heart felt even lighter. I gave in to its whims and allowed my instincts to control me.

I couldn't help but feel strange. This was a far cry from how I usually fought—and from any combat style I'd ever learned, for that matter. But for this particular battle, there was no time to think; even the lightest fetters would cause me to lag behind.

[Divine Shield]

For too long, I'd allowed my insecurities to restrain me without even knowing they were there. I cast them aside and moved in accordance with my body. One step forward, then another. Each flourish of my sword caused a sensation like something inside of me was breaking...yet the feeling was strangely satisfying.

The more I gave in to my instincts, the lighter my body became, and the faster I moved. It almost felt as though I were dancing instead of doing battle, though I wasn't sure about the accuracy of my comparison; I'd always been divorced from the performing arts, and *true* dancing was something I'd never done before. Still, as I unleashed more slashes than I cared to count, my feet moving elegantly along the stage of my own creation, I thought this *must* have been how it felt.

Amusement took me once again, and I chuckled.

*Dancing, hmm? I can't say it suits me.*

Though it was my own creation, the comparison was too much for me. The corners of my lips began to rise, despite our circumstances—and with that, my body became even lighter.

[Divine Shield]



I cut into the flying monstrosity and continued to slice away its flesh, a smile on my face all the while.



## Chapter 98: Sigr's Twin Blades

Titans of supreme power clashed in the sky above us: Noor, Rala, Ines, and their foe. The incessant, thunderous sounds of their battle shook the earth, creating fissures and cracks with each vibration. But even as our footing came apart beneath us, we desperately continued to fight.

Trapped within walls of stone and facing an infinite horde of monsters that threatened to overwhelm us, we had somehow managed to survive.

"[Hellflare]!"

Lynne hurled a massive fireball, purging a swathe of monsters. She had secured us a short moment to breathe, but nothing more than that; there really was no end to them. Even as we desperately cut into their numbers, each one we killed was replaced just as quickly. In fact, their ranks were swelling—almost as if responding to the emotions of the monstrosity in the sky.

Although the dungeon's monsters physically resembled those found on the surface, they were creatures of an entirely separate kind. I'd tried to "speak" with them a number of times already, attempting to stop their movements, but they had no "hearts" that I could reach. Even though everyone was putting their all into the fight, my only options were to run and evade. I was still doing everything I could, though, diving into the monsters' ranks again and again to lure their attention away from Lynne, Miranda, and the others who couldn't move.

"Hey, kid," a voice suddenly called out from behind me. "Your movements... What are you trying to accomplish?" It was Sigr of the Twelve Sacred Envoys—one of the people who had stayed to fight with us.

"Huh? I'm...running," I replied. "Sorry. It's the most I can do."

"You're deliberately charging into the horde, and you call that '*running*'? If you're going to play the fool, then get to the back and stay there."

"But...I'm being serious. Besides, I don't think it'll make much of a difference

where I am.”

In the time we’d stopped to talk, a pack of monsters had come up behind us, ready to strike. I dodged their charge by leaping over them—and while they were focused on me, Sigir decapitated them with the pair of swords he was wielding.

“If you can move like that, kid, then why don’t you fight? Where’s your weapon? Did you lose it?”

“I don’t have one. That is, I can’t use one.”

“What do you mean?”

I rolled my sleeve back, revealing the bandages wrapped around my arm. Here and there, countless scars peeked through the gaps between them, almost forming a pattern.

“Are those...old wounds?”

Sigir seemed to catch on quickly. Because of the torment I’d endured since I was small, the strength in my hands was no better than that of a child. It wasn’t that much of an obstacle in my everyday life, but the old and deep damage done to my muscles meant I couldn’t carry as much weight as a normal person. There wasn’t even a chance that my body would one day recover; according to Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation, it considered its current state to be natural, so trying to heal the damage by force would only make it worse.

The most I was capable of wielding was a small, light wooden sword. Such a weapon wouldn’t be of any use in a real fight, though, and with my muscles in such bad shape, it wouldn’t take much to knock it from my hands. I couldn’t even use an undersized bow because of my lack of grip strength.

“In that case, try this,” Sigir said and tossed something at me.

“Huh?” I caught the item, which turned out to be one of the gauntlets he’d been wearing. “What’s...?”

“That’s a piece of magical equipment enchanted to improve its wearer’s grip strength. I doubt it’s your size, but it should at least make you able to hold a shortsword.”

“But...why—?”

I wasn't sure how to respond. I was one of the demonfolk, a race hated and hunted down by the people of Mithra. Before I could finish my question, however, Sigir interrupted me.

“You demonfolk are evil. History has demonstrated that much.”

His words only intensified my confusion, but he continued.

“Your kind was the source of so much disaster and calamity. The town I was born in was once razed to the ground. Its inhabitants were slaughtered and its land made barren, all by the demonfolk. The devastation they caused made the region—my home—one where starvation was common and agriculture was impossible. The natural conclusion is simple: evil runs through your people's veins.”

Sigir stopped in place and turned to face me. “But you, kid...? I don't know what to make of you. Why are you here?”

“Um... What do you mean?” I repeated, unsure what he was getting at.

“Don't play dumb. *You* summoned the Dragon of Calamity, didn't you? If you're so powerful, why aren't you using it for your own sake? You could have mounted it and escaped at a moment's notice, yet you haven't. And why are you trying to help *us*? We're knights of Mithra—your enemy. Even to this day, we hunt down your people. There's no better opportunity for you to make an attempt at revenge. Yet you've stayed behind to fight with us, even going as far as to intentionally charge into danger. So I ask...*why*?”

His interrogation had me at a loss, but he wasn't done yet.

“You're a demonfolk—a being of evil—yet I struggle to see you as one of the villains I am duty bound to slay. My mind isn't made up about you...but at the very least, I think someone who's chosen to stay here on this battlefield deserves more than a sudden, ignoble death.”

I stared at Sigir, unsure what to say or how to take his words. That didn't matter, though; before I could even try to respond, another voice cut in from behind, shrill with indignation.

“Hey, Sigir! Why are you standing around when the rest of us are fighting?! I’m working myself to death here! Don’t think you’ll get away with trying to sneak a break!”

The outraged cries had come from a masked woman—Miranda. The tide of monsters was on the verge of reaching her group. Sigir glanced at her predicament, then offered me one of his shortswords.

“Take it, kid. Prove to me you’re not evil. For now, at least, we’re on the same side.”

Again, I stared at Sigir. I couldn’t see his expression under his mask.

“What are you doing?” he pressed. “Hurry up and take it. We don’t have time to waste.”

“O-Okay...”

I put on the gauntlet he had given me and took one of his twin blades. Despite its size, the former was a surprisingly comfortable fit.

First, I tried to flex my fingers. I could actually feel the strength in them now. It was a strange sensation—one I’d never experienced before—but the sword Sigir had given me was firmly in my hand.

“Wow...”

This was the first time I’d ever properly held something. I’d already managed to grip a sword; maybe I’d even be able to swing one. As I appreciated its weight in my hand, however, I saw the pack of monsters close in on Miranda’s group.

“Let’s go,” Sigir said. “You can get used to it while you fight.”

“Mm-hmm.”

We broke into a sprint at almost the same time. Sigir moved so fast that my eyes could barely keep up with him, but I tried to match his pace all the same, holding my shortsword so low that its tip very nearly trailed along the ground.

I was hot on Sigir’s heels as he charged into the pack of monsters. Even with a weapon in my hand, I doubted that I’d be able to put much strength into my swings, so I stayed close to the ground and targeted the monsters’ legs.

*As long as I can sever a limb...*

I swung with all my might—and to my surprise, my shortsword went straight through a monster’s leg. Not only that, but its wide arc caught and severed the legs of several other monsters around it, all with barely any resistance at all.

I squeezed my hand, testing the strange, lingering sensation of each swipe as I stayed close to the ground and severed the legs of any monsters in my way. Eventually, I made it through to the other side...and immediately toppled over. Behind me, the monsters had all collapsed, their heads no longer attached to their bodies.

Before I realized it, Sigir was beside me. “Is this your first time properly using a sword, kid?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“That was a good show, then,” he said, giving me his hand and pulling me to my feet. “But having a weapon doesn’t give you free rein to recklessly charge ahead. In a group battle, always be conscious of where your allies are. You’re not fighting alone, remember. The moment you start acting like you are, you’re dead.”

“O-Okay.”

“That’s rich coming from you, Sigir,” Miranda interjected. “You *always* charge ahead without telling us!”

“That’s enough out of you, Miranda,” Sigir snapped in response. “Shut up and keep casting. If you don’t want to die, your hands need to be moving faster than your mouth.”

“I won’t tolerate *those* words coming out of *your* mouth! And why did you give that kid your weapon?! Isn’t that one of the masterwork blades Her Holy Highness bestowed on you?! You’ve never even let me *touch* them!”

Despite her complaints, Miranda continued to launch spells in quick succession, tearing into the monsters’ ranks. And she wasn’t alone.

“[Hellflare]!”

There was a brief pause before Lynne’s fireball shot straight into the

monsters, eradicating everything in its path with all the strength of a blazing sun. Not even Miranda's spells were that powerful, and she was said to be a magical prodigy in her own right.

"That girl is ridiculous..." Miranda grumbled. "Her spells are more potent than anything a dozen magicians could manage together, and she's already cast that one more than fifty times. How is she still standing...?"

Lynne hadn't stopped casting her fireballs, every single one of which culled a thousand monsters. And unlike the rest of us, who were able to regather ourselves in the wake of each attack, she didn't even get a second to catch her breath. The potency of her fireballs hadn't even diminished; the fiftieth tore through our foes just as well as the first.

Still, while Lynne's strength remained the same, she was starting to look more haggard. She didn't have the leeway to speak even a single word. I could tell that she was quickly approaching her limit—and if she went down, the rest of us wouldn't stand a chance.

Lynne's breaking point was getting closer. I took a deep breath, trying to make the most of the brief respite she had given us.

"Hey, kid. Her Holy Highness bestowed these twin blades upon me. Make sure to return that one."

"Okay. I will."

"The next wave's coming. Get ready."

Once again, Sigir and I plunged into the monster horde, each swinging one blade of a pair. Each burst of combat made me more used to my sword, and the number of monsters I slew with each swing increased. It wasn't long before the tide seemed to shrink, but just as I started to believe our situation was taking a turn for the better...

"What...is *that*?" Sigir muttered.

The monstrosity above us began to swell, blanketing the ground with its ominous black shadow. And as though in response, the dungeon spewed more monsters than ever before.



# Chapter 99: Swift Black Lightning

Mithra gazed out at the world from within its ever-expanding mass of black flesh, unable to fathom what manner of creature was using the Black Blade against it. Not even the greatest strike—no, *strikes*—it had ever unleashed put a single scratch on him. Mithra had surpassed its limits with each fresh bolt, maintaining its greatest offensive to date. Moreover, after ravenously devouring so much demonfolk blood, it had experienced a burst of power far greater than anticipated.

And yet...*why*?

[[[[[**BLACK BOLT**]]]]]

[Parry]

The lightning it unleashed was a flawless crystallization of all its might—the strongest, most lethal strike it had ever manifested. Yet the man brushed the attack aside with ease. And the next. And the *next*. And *even the next*.

[[[[[**BLACK BOLT**]]]]]

[Parry]

Again. Again. Again and again and again. No matter how potent, every cast of [Black Bolt] was redirected. Mithra’s attacks weren’t posing the slightest threat to the man—and to make matters worse, that wasn’t the only issue. Though his prowess had placed him at a lofty height, *there was someone catching up to him*.

[[[[[**BLACK BOLT**]]]]]

[Divine Shield]

She attacked with luminescent swords that tore through Mithra’s flesh. Not even its limitless regeneration was able to keep up with how quickly its matter was being carved away. Mithra was already a size or two smaller and shrinking by the moment.

Of course, this had no effect on its true self, but it was still an annoyance.

Just who were these people? More than two hundred years had passed since Mithra had escaped the blue crystal in which it had been sealed for so long—before its power had been completely drained, by a stroke of good fortune. In all that time, not a single person had proved themselves to be its match. It had not even *heard* of anyone who might have been a worthy opponent. Years of gathering information had produced a single conclusion: the only rivals it faced were fellow transcendental beings in the realm of the gods and the gods themselves. That was why Mithra had assumed it would win—why it had assumed that once it regained its body and the strength it had possessed during its prime, it would turn this world devoid of enemies into its very own paradise.

Mithra could not comprehend what was happening. It had ascended to the point that it could now rival the strength of a god, so why—*why*—was it helpless in the face of such insignificant specks? It was not humiliated about being toyed with so much as it was simply confused. The little creatures it had thought were so inferior were brushing aside the greatest attacks it could muster.

It wasn't that Mithra was weaker than its past self. If anything, because of the Demons' Hearts it had spent such a long time gathering, its strength had reached an unprecedented peak. Not only that, its body was *still* developing, and its power reserves were already far greater than when it had been in its prime.

Yet that was all meaningless in the presence of that man.

Every single one of Mithra's attacks was invalidated. No, *countered*. The man's pet dragon was sending Mithra's own flames back at it, and the raging inferno was eating into its flesh. It was a great inconvenience, but what was there to do? Mithra had no greater means of attack, so it merely repeated the same spell again and again, all the while feeling the unrivaled depth of its power and a sense of confusion as to why it could not destroy the little creatures before it.

[[[[[**BLACK BOLT**]]]]]

[Parry]

The mightiest bolt it could produce was easily turned aside. It was far from the first time, but on this occasion, something within Mithra changed.

*Aah. This is futile. I cannot crush him like this. In that case...*

Hidden within its protective flesh, Mithra began to ruminate. It could not avoid the truth any longer: its opponent was *strong*. Stronger than any foe that had ever crossed its path. Stronger than the gods it had fought during the age of myth. Far, *far* stronger than the humans who had once banded together and conspired against Mithra and its kind, sealing them away in blue crystals that had drained their strength in the most devious ways.

Mithra's assessment of the sword-wielding man had changed: *he was the greatest nuisance it had ever faced*.

Perhaps a new approach was necessary. Now that it had correctly determined the balance of power and recognized that it was being driven into a corner, Mithra gave up on crushing its opponents with brute strength in favor of calmly observing the *threat* it was facing. It felt as though it were a weakling in a battle against someone stronger, desperately searching for a weakness to exploit. The very idea was shameful, but Mithra refused to hesitate—it was already too late for that.

Despite its embarrassment, Mithra analyzed the situation with calm detachment, observing every movement its opponents made. It continuously regenerated its hundreds of eyeballs as they were torn apart by a sword of light and reduced to nothing by the dragon's breath, committing every detail of their battle to memory. Its arms were severed in the hundreds, only to grow back even stronger. The most potent attacks it had ever managed were rendered utterly useless. It cast aside all else and thought, searching for a way to seize victory.

And at last, Mithra found the path it had been looking for. An idea formed within its mind, and with it, conviction: it *could* defeat its opponents.

**“AH...”**

Hundreds of mouths opened across its fleshy black mass and laughed. The foes it faced were mere humans. Their strength, regenerative potential, and reaction speed certainly were abnormal for their kind, but in the end, there was

nothing more to them. As long as Mithra could surpass them in those regards and make it past that nuisance of a sword—even if only for a moment—consigning its opponents to oblivion should finally be possible.

No, not “should.” This was a simple task for a being of Mithra’s extreme might. It needed only focus the vast power it had obtained into a single moment—and for that sake, it was prepared to abandon all else. It would devote its absolute all to destroying its foes.

**“AH...HAAA...”**

In response to its owner’s newfound determination, Mithra’s black flesh began to change. Its intent had mutated, charting a new course for its body’s composition. This metamorphosis was a first for Mithra; it was going to *evolve* toward the ideal state it envisioned. Pain racked its skeletal body as its bones creaked and grated...yet the sounds were music to Mithra’s ears.

*Yes. This is what I needed.*

It rejoiced in its own transformation, trembling with joy at the realization that it had yet to reach its limits. It could go further beyond what it had originally thought possible, and with that in mind, it poured every last bit of the strength it had stockpiled into the reformation its body was going through. Its already massive frame became even larger, then contracted. Power condensed deep within its bones.

**“GUH... AHHH... AAAHHH... AH...”**

As its new potential came closer to its reach, Mithra found a sense of composure. It realized that the vast amount of blood it had guzzled down earlier had gone to its head.

*In the end, the battle comes down to only one thing.*

The Black Blade, made of Ideal Matter. Even without its former power, it posed a genuine threat to gods such as Mithra. As soon as it was removed from the equation, the rest would merely fall into place.

The weapon’s strength came from the fact it was unbreakable, at least by the merits of their reality. It had sustained damage during ages past but only because its opponent had come from another world. Otherwise, the blade

could not be tampered with, not even by Mithra and its kind. Transcendent though they were, they were still of their world, meaning they could not hope to leave even a hairline scratch on it.

However, only the blade was indestructible. Only *it* posed a threat.

The Black Blade, a cursed heirloom left behind by unimportant schemers after the gods destroyed the old world, represented the greatest nuisance to Mithra and its kind. That was all it was, though—a nuisance. There was nothing else that could determine the outcome of their battle, not even the man using it. He was abnormal in his own right, but he was far from invincible; to remove that irksome weapon from the fight, Mithra needed only to destroy *him*.

To leave victorious, Mithra would need to endure the blade only for a moment—no, for the barest fraction of one.

**“AH...”**

No sooner had it reached this conclusion than its body once again began to morph. Its fleshy armor, an unsightly crutch born from fear, immediately started to dissolve. There was no reason to keep it; the woman would only have sliced it apart, and even if she did manage to strike Mithra’s true form, she would achieve nothing. The problem was the man—the *sword*.

One moment—that was as long as Mithra would need to endure the Black Blade. And in the meantime, it would tear its wielder limb from limb.

The man was fast enough to react to the lightning bolts thrown at him. That was fine, though; Mithra just needed to be faster. An even greater pain shot through its body as its flesh continued to change, obeying this new purpose...but Mithra took genuine pleasure in the feeling.

Before, there had been traces of hesitation in how Mithra had wielded its power. It had feared destroying the city below. It had accepted the risk of a few casualties, but it hadn’t wanted to surrender *everyone*; replacing them all would take far longer than it was willing to wait.

But now... Now there was a *shield* protecting them. Because of the shining barrier the woman had created, separating the sky from the earth, Mithra could use its power to the fullest. It was thankful, really. The woman’s hard work

would protect the precious morsels it had cultivated so carefully.

**“AHHH... AH... AH!”**

As its body metamorphosed, Mithra’s heart was filled not with fear or confusion but with delight. It was grateful for the nuisances standing in its way. Because of them, it had managed to ascend to even greater heights. It also wanted to thank the people of the Holy Theocracy who were running around in a panic so far below.

*Thank you for giving me this opportunity to grow. And thank you for existing to nourish me.*

Victory was close at hand—Mithra could almost see it. Deep emotions flooded its heart, and it relaxed, confident in its decision.

*Aah... At last, that irritating curse on us gods, left behind by the humans of old, is going to be lifted.*

In fact, it would do more than that. By *obtaining* the Black Blade, not simply dealing with it, Mithra would cement its superiority over the other gods, who were potentially sleeping in the depths of other dungeons.

Mithra’s mind was made up: it would eradicate the man before it and stash the Black Blade somewhere only it could reach. There it would stay forevermore, the last threat to a mighty reign. Mithra would remain unopposed, having reached the pinnacle of the world.

**“AH... AH... AHHH-AH!”**

Mithra basked in its own certainty. It had been right—this *was* a day to be commemorated. It would go down in history as a blessed achievement, and the time for a celebratory feast was nigh. It would defeat that man, then devour its fleeing morsels to its heart’s content.

Mithra pictured the coming feast, caught in the throes of delight as its body metamorphosed into black lightning.

**“AGH!”**

The pitch-dark flash tore through the sky—a devastating projectile headed straight for the person it had recognized as a threat.

## Chapter 100: The Princess's Gamble

After purging a swathe of monsters with another great fireball, I sensed a disturbance in the sky above. I gazed up...and reflexively swallowed my breath.

“Is that...? But...it couldn't be...”

The monstrosity's black form was changing. Flesh made way for bone as it returned to its original state.

My body started to tremble, so thoroughly shocked that even words failed me. I was reluctant to believe my eyes, for the form it was taking looked *exactly as I'd predicted*.

“Finally... It made up its mind.”

The monstrosity was changing shape for a single reason—to reach its maximum speed. In all likelihood, it considered Instructor Noor's Black Blade its greatest threat—the only thing that could cause it any harm. Not too long ago, Instructor Noor had landed a blow driven by the fearsome momentum of a precipitous free fall, and not even that had damaged the creature's bones.

By my reckoning, the monstrosity's flesh had cushioned the blow. For as long as that writhing exterior existed, its bones—its true body—would be protected from harm. Thus, our greatest obstacle was its ever-expanding mass, something the abomination had surely realized.

However... *However...* If we could make the creature think its flesh no longer served a purpose...

That was why I'd sent Ines and Rala to join the battle raging above us. The former severed the monstrosity's flesh while the latter incinerated it. On top of that, our foe's attacks were doing nothing to slow Instructor Noor. If we allowed that to continue for long enough, the monster's body would start to shrink—and when that happened, how would our opponent retaliate?

The crux of the battle was the Black Blade, the *only* threat to that monstrosity. It could repel every means of attack at the creature's disposal. As

the fight went on, our foe's thoughts would inevitably lead to a single conclusion: Instructor Noor was the only one who could wield it. Thus, he would need to be destroyed *by any means necessary*.

Of course, that was much easier said than done. Instructor Noor could move at absurd speeds; for the monstrosity to land a calculated, finishing blow, it would need to cast aside the flesh slowing it down. It would act with as little armor as it needed to endure an attack from the Black Blade.

That was the gamble I'd made. And from the look of things, I'd guessed correctly.

Of all the variables in my calculations, one had stood out to me most: would the monstrosity stay to challenge Instructor Noor or run away? The latter would have been the worst-case scenario for us. It would have given our opponent time to analyze our potential, make whatever preparations it needed, and then strike at its most opportune moment later down the line.

Nonetheless, I'd never expected our opponent to choose that path. As for why...

It—this monstrosity—was High Priestess Astirra.

I wasn't sure why that thought ran so clearly through my mind, but I didn't doubt it for a second. I'd stood face-to-face with the high priestess. I'd seen her greed, so profound that she considered everything in the world to be rightfully hers, as well as her arrogance, so great that she would trample or toy with anything for the sake of her benefit. I'd even sensed the vanity in her heart, so inherent that she believed every living creature should serve and worship her.

It was because I'd seen the monstrosity's true self that I'd gathered our opponent would never retreat—and as I witnessed the transformation happening above us, I knew that I'd guessed correctly. Instructor Noor, Ines, and Rala had driven the monstrosity into a corner, forcing it to attempt one final confrontation. Its last hope was to defeat my instructor, who wielded the greatest threat to its existence in the form of the Black Blade.

Shock coursed through me; I'd predicted the events of this battle so closely that it was frightening. This was no time to rest on my laurels, though—the most crucial moment was upon us.



Assuming I wasn't mistaken, the monster hadn't realized it was on the verge of making a truly catastrophic mistake: Ines's [Divine Shield] and Instructor Noor's Black Blade were distracting it from what the shield was hiding on the ground. I sincerely hoped that I'd read the situation correctly because the real reason we'd needed to strip away our foe's flesh was *down here with us*.

"I'll be using your lucky charm now, Instructor Oken..." I murmured.

Before I'd departed the Kingdom of Clays, my magician instructor had given me something to hold on to—a charm of sorts that, on my command, would unleash a single attack far exceeding the monstrosity's expectations. It was a miniature, portable version of the Keraunos, God's Lightning.

Instructor Oken, the Spell Sovereign, had made even further developments to the technologies we'd received from the Magic Empire to fashion this one-of-a-kind piece of magical equipment. Embedded in its small frame was a sizable manastone that Instructor Oken cherished greatly. It was a Demon's Heart of the highest quality—the greatest there ever was and ever would be, he had told me.

By activating this charm, even someone of my humble talents would be able to unleash tremendously powerful magic. Though it *was* only single-use.

I'd gambled everything on this item. In many senses of the word, it was our only hope—once I poured all of my mana into it, we wouldn't be able to use it again. Even if using it a second time had been an option, we would have lost the element of surprise, making it so much harder to land a hit.

One attack and the outcome would be decided. We weren't going to get any second chances; this gambit was putting everything on the line.

I'd used the lives of all those who had chosen to stay behind as betting capital. That fact alone was enough to give me the pangs of nausea and vertigo—but as far as I was concerned, we had no better hands to play. Instructor Oken had given me the greatest trump card we could ask for, almost as though he'd predicted that something like this might happen. The only question was whether I'd succeed in using it.

Truly, my battle plan could only be described as a gamble.

It hadn't been guaranteed that everything would go as I'd predicted, so I was fortunate to have made it this far. Everyone had exceeded my expectations in carrying out their roles. Not even Ines, who knew the plan from top to bottom, had given anything away with her actions. She was slowly leading the monstrosity above the stone *markers* we had constructed on the surface.

Indeed, we had erected not walls but a gigantic landmark meant to coordinate our efforts in the sky and on the ground. For that purpose, I'd refrained from moving even a single step from my designated mark as I'd awaited this precise moment.

Now, at long last, everything was in place. Everyone had worked desperately to get us to this point, and we wouldn't find ourselves in a better position.

*The rest is all on me.*

I needed to carry out my role. Then, Instructor Noor would seize the opening I'd created and use the Black Blade to secure our victory. Our odds weren't favorable, but we had a chance—and that was the most we could ask for.

This *had* to be enough. My trust in that fact had driven me to devise and then enact this reckless plan. Thus, I couldn't fail. I couldn't afford to.

As the pressure of my duty crashed down on me like a great wave, my breathing became heavier.

*I will succeed. My aim will be true.*

Everyone had carried out their roles to perfection. Now I just needed to land my shot. To calm my nerves, I gazed upward to take a deep breath and—

A chill shuddered through me, and my steeling resolve gave way to a sea of doubts. The next thing I knew, I was trembling.

*I'm supposed to hit that? But...how?*

My doubts quickly turned into despair. The monster was enormous, but it moved through the sky as though it were lightning. How was I ever supposed to land my shot...? The battle being fought in the sky surpassed the limits of my imagination.

My naive plan—and it really was naive—had fallen apart at the eleventh hour.

I was going to fail. My scheme depended on the impossible, and as that harsh reality became clear to me, my true thoughts—my weakness—began to show on my face.

“No...” I whispered, doing everything I could to oppose my inner voice.  
“Impossible or not, I *need* to do this.”

I couldn’t let my weakness stop me now—not when everyone had worked so hard to get us this far. I mustered the last dregs of my courage as I raised my hands skyward, took a deep breath, and issued my final command to those around me.

“I will no longer be attacking the monsters on the ground. The rest is in your hands.”

It wasn’t an adequate explanation, by any means. Nobody who wasn’t already in the know would understand what my intentions were. But in my current state, I was lucky I’d managed to say even that much.

“Huh?! What’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

Miranda’s panic was only natural; I’d elected not to tell her or any of the others the whole truth of my scheme in case the monster noticed something was amiss. That...had been a mistake, in hindsight, but I no longer had time to allay their concerns.

“Understood,” Sigir called out. “You can count on us. Everyone, form up around the princess!”

“W-Wait! What on earth is going on?!”

“This is the climax,” Holy Prince Tirrence explained. “The moment of truth.”

“Fear not,” Astirra added. “Things will all work out in the end. You’ll see.”

Despite my decision to leave them in the dark, Sigir, Tirrence, and Astirra had all deduced what I was about to do. My scheme had teetered on the edge of disaster, but their decisive action was now keeping it steady. The rest of our struggle on the ground was up to them; I needed to focus on my next move.

Indeed, everything we had done thus far had been for the sake of this one, conclusive attack.

The battle in the sky was developing at such a blinding speed, but Ines was still managing to use her shield to lure the monstrosity directly above me. In a dozen seconds or so, it would be in the perfect spot. I would need to unleash my attack at that precise moment, and with as much strength as I could summon.

Failure wasn't an option. I needed to steady my nerves. So...why was I continuing to tremble? The more I tried to control it, the worse it became.

*I don't understand...*

It made no sense, I thought...but then the obvious truth dawned on me. My next move was a gamble in the truest sense—an act of sheer recklessness no matter how one considered it. I understood that fact better than anyone, which was precisely why my body refused to obey me.

My aim was to replicate what Instructor Noor had shown me in the chamber below the royal capital: a tenfold casting of [Fusion Magic]. I would enhance my miniature Keraunos to its absolute limit, creating a weapon with enough destructive potential to strip the monstrosity's bones clean in one fell swoop. That was my estimate, at least. Enacting this plan was why I'd devised this situation in the first place.

This arrangement was more likely to give us the upper hand than any other. If every single one of our pieces fell into place, there was a chance we would actually be able to seize victory.

I shook my head, reluctant to feel too optimistic. Even in the best of circumstances, our odds of turning the tide would be painfully slim. Determination alone wouldn't be enough for what I needed to achieve. I could say that with all certainty because not a single one of my earlier attempts at tenfold casting had ended in success. Each time, I'd concluded that I simply wasn't good enough to step into that realm...yet that was exactly what our victory now hinged on.

I'd already known that I was being reckless—that the foundations of my scheme were shaky at best—but I'd pressed on nonetheless. This method would pose the least risk to the people of Mithra, I'd thought...but that had just been a noble-sounding excuse.

In truth, I'd been greedy. I'd reached far beyond my station. There were countless examples throughout history of the few being cast aside for the sake of the many. As mere mortals, we could not hope to gain without giving something in return. Yet I'd wanted a pleasant ending for everyone.

Humans weren't omnipotent gods. Members of the Clays royal family were taught from a young age that a ruler needed to be strong enough to make unpleasant decisions. It was a notion I'd always agreed with...yet consistently refused to follow. I could not bear the thought of allowing even a single person to die, so I went to extreme lengths to avoid any such scenarios. Anytime a hard choice had to be made, I would search for an alternative as though I could simply bend fortune to my will. I would sincerely believe that I might stumble upon some other, overlooked solution that would satisfy everyone.

That was the kind of nonsensical fairy tale I pursued in my daydreams.

This gamble was the result of my delusions. I was a child caught up in her own naive fantasies, fated never to be as pragmatic as my brother. Maybe that was the reason I would die here. The foolish gamble of a careless girl was about to doom her and the companions who had put their faith in her ideas.

Still, I'd always known it would end like this. I'd gone over our situation time and time again, and this was the only approach I could stomach. The danger I'd thrust upon Ines, Rolo, Instructor Noor, and everyone else who had agreed to follow me weighed heavily on my conscience, but at the same time, even if my venture ended in failure...this method would cost the fewest lives.

Even in the worst-case scenario, only I would die. Even if my [Fusion Magic] ended up being too much for me to control, I was sure I would still manage to point the resulting catastrophe in the direction of our foe. Nobody else would pay the price, and in that sense, my decision was perfectly rational. I supposed that I really had made the best choice.

Having doubled down on my conviction, I sharpened my focus. Letting this moment escape me was out of the question. I wouldn't get a second chance.

And with that thought, at long last, my body started to listen to me.

"[Magic Barrier]."

I cast a protective layer around my hands, plying it with multiple applications of [Reflect] and [Reflect Magic] in preparation for the impact. Then, while overlapping the spell formulas to maximize the output, I cast [Condense] to focus every last drop of mana within me into my hands and got ready to discharge it.

The plan I'd devised would expose those around me to danger. Thus, reserving *any* effort for my own sake was impermissible. It didn't matter if this attack reduced me to little more than a husk; I needed to go through with it.

My resolve steeled, I cast [Enhance], [Charge], and [Burst], amplifying my mana to its utmost limit. Then...

"[Hellflare]."

Carefully, I created ten condensed cores of mana around my hands. This was nothing I hadn't managed in practice. The hard part was fusing them all together.

I needed to do this. Only then would my magic be potent enough to incinerate the flesh on the monstrosity's bones. But...what if my hard work ended in failure? Even if my spellcasting succeeded, I would still need to hit my target. The thought made me tremble, and my control over my limbs started to ebb as if they were gaining a mind of their own.

No, what was I thinking? These were fears I should have overcome by now, and yet...

*Ahh... I knew it.*

I was going to fail. The despair I'd thought was locked away inside of me broke free, now more certain than ever, and my mana began to dissipate.

"Lynne."

For a moment, I was too surprised to react. "Rolo...?" At what point had he moved to stand next to me?

Rolo studied my expression in silence. He looked concerned, most likely because he could hear all of my thoughts.

"I'm sorry..." I muttered, my voice trembling so pathetically. "I really mean it,

Rolo. I'm...sorry."

Tears welled from my eyes, and anger surged within me for even daring to shed them. This was no time to be weeping like a child. Getting emotional would only ensure Rolo's death as well as my own. My composure unraveled even further, and more of my mana scattered.

"It's okay..." Rolo assured me. "Let's do this together."

Rolo touched my hand, and my erratic mana stabilized in the blink of an eye. It came together exactly as I'd wanted and then encircled me, somehow even more potent than before its dispersion.

"Rolo...?"

A memory came rushing back to me: Instructor Oken had said that Rolo was a marvel. Being a demonfolk meant the boy was unable to wield magic, but his talent for manipulating mana was the best my old mentor had ever seen. I'd *known* all this, so why was it only now becoming clear to me? Perhaps, somewhere in my mind, I'd still seen him as someone who needed to be saved.

I sighed at my mistake. I'd misjudged the strength of a vital ally. Yet with that realization came the return of my composure.

"My apologies, Rolo," I said. "Please help me."

He supported my outstretched arms with his hands, and a frightening amount of mana started to pulse through me. As quickly as it arrived, however, it relaxed into a gentle stream.

Just like that, my endeavor was complete. It had seemed so daunting when I was facing it alone, but Rolo was reading the smallest fluctuations in my heart and mind and using them to guide my mana for me. It really had been foolish to think I would need to tackle this challenge on my own. Thanks to my companion, that much was now clear to me.

Instructor Noor stood in a realm beyond the reach of even my imagination—if my time with him in the underground chamber hadn't made that obvious, there was no avoiding it now that I was imitating his magic and experiencing it firsthand. Even so, for this brief moment, Rolo's strength had allowed me to venture inside that realm. More mana coursed through me than I'd ever

experienced before; I needed only to direct it, and it would move exactly as I wanted.

All of a sudden, the weight on my heart vanished, allowing me to see my circumstances from a fresh perspective. How had I been so narrow-minded...? I was surprised and ashamed, but also enlightened. No wonder despair had overcome me so easily and pushed me to the brink of abandoning hope.

I'd never needed to feel so cornered. It was true that I couldn't keep up with the battle unfolding above me and that I wasn't the slightest bit sure I could *follow* our foe, let alone strike it, but what did that matter? If matching its speed was out of the question, then I simply needed to *make it stop*.

"Honestly..." I said. "I never thought I was the kind of person to be so forgetful."

I reached into my hair and plucked out a magical ornament, which I then cast up into the air. I'd created several before our journey to Mithra for the purpose of neutralizing barriers, but my tools were fully capable of *creating* barriers too. After all, creation and neutralization both came from the same underpinning theory—as I'd discovered during an attempt on my life, when a barrier had been used to restrain me in front of a rampaging Minotaur.

In essence, the purpose of the formula was to manipulate *time*. It was a specialized, highly advanced technique that involved freezing a fixed amount of space—and anything within it—while using mana as an activation source. It operated under a separate theory from skills, so analyzing it had taken me longer than I'd expected. But in the three months we'd had before our journey to Mithra, I'd taken it and made it my own.

This entire time, I'd neglected to even consider one of the best cards available to me.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I overwrote the spell formula contained within my hair ornament, which was still airborne. It didn't matter if the strain caused it to explode; my only focus was activating the formula, even if only for a moment. Then I could stop the monstrosity in its tracks.

I completed the last of my preparations just as I sensed that the monster was almost directly above me.



Ines's shield—if one could even use that term for the tremendous barrier covering the sky—disappeared at last, reconnecting heaven and earth. I wanted to say everything was going to plan, but that wasn't true at all; we were doing far *better* than my reckless, uncertain daydream had predicted.

“Now.”

I gazed up at the sky and unleashed everything I'd prepared in a single strike, invoking my barrier in concert to hold the monstrosity in place. The Keraunos released a column of light that shot straight up and pierced through our foe.

The intense heat of my attack singed my fingertips, having seeped through the multilayered defensive spell meant to protect them. It also burned my face and eyes, robbing me of most of my vision, but I refused to look away—our victory depended on this single blow. Even if the Keraunos's light cost me my hands and swallowed my forearms, I couldn't allow the power I was channeling to weaken.

Another moment passed, and the rest of my vision disappeared. Maybe this attack would permanently disable me. If so—if this really was the point of no return—then I would pour absolutely everything into it. I reached for the ten spells I'd fused into a single composite and invoked it.

“[Hellflare].”



I unleashed the flames I'd surpassed my limits to create at the monstrosity above me, and it burned. Its flesh turned to ash, but I couldn't let up until its bones were completely bare. If that meant putting my own body through the same fate, so be it. I didn't have anything to lose. If we allowed our foe to escape us now, we wouldn't have another chance to stop it.

In a heartbeat, my impromptu barrier was relieved of duty. The monstrosity had torn through its brittle restraints. Capturing it for barely an instant had drained every ounce of strength from me, meaning there was no longer anything I could do to stop it.

For a moment, time had seemed to stand still—but no longer. The monstrosity was free, unfettered, and able to move faster than I could ever hope to follow. But before it could act...

*Instructor Noor moved first.*

[Parry]

Even with my vision in such a terrible state, I could guess what was happening. Somewhere high above me, I heard the sickening crunch of bones being shattered, and the sky suddenly seemed to get brighter. The stampeding limbs of the monster horde no longer shook the ground, and silence reigned...but only for a moment.

My ears were shot, but I could make out the sound of cheering somewhere nearby. Something like snow had started to rain down on us.

I collapsed on the spot, my body exhausted and covered in burns. But before I could crumple to the ground, something—*someone*—caught me tenderly in their arms. The feeling sent a wave of relief through me, which I allowed to carry me into unconsciousness.

My dangerous gamble had ended in success.

## Chapter 101: Reunion

As I approached the ground on Rala's back, riding tandem with Ines, I realized just how bad the damage was below. Every building in sight had crumbled apart, and the monsters that had come pouring out of the dungeon now lay heaped in a veritable mountain of corpses. I saw no signs of movement; the once beautiful city of Mithra was now little more than a blasted ruin.

We spotted Lynne and Astirra waving to us from below, so Rala touched down right beside them. Ines and I entrusted the dragon to Rolo, then went to reunite with the others. I was on the verge of calling out a greeting when I saw what a sorry state Lynne was in and paused, allowing Ines to beat me to the punch.

"I have returned, my lady."

"Ines..." she replied. "Well done. Truly. And you as well, Instructor Noor. Are you hurt?"

"No, I'm basically fine," I said. "*I* should ask *you* that, if anything. You...don't look so great."

Now that I was seeing Lynne up close, I was kind of worried about her. I couldn't see any injuries on her face or arms, but her white dress was torn, and there were what appeared to be burn marks all over her hands. It hadn't been long since we'd last seen each other, but the look on her face was one of absolute exhaustion.

"I was somewhat reckless," Lynne admitted, "and sustained some minor injuries as a result. Astirra was kind enough to heal them for me, though, so there's no longer any cause for concern."

"That so?" I turned to Astirra, who was standing beside Lynne.

"No, not quite..." the woman replied, slowly shaking her head. "'Minor' is the *last* word I would use to describe those injuries. I was able to patch her up in time, but goodness knows how. I really wasn't convinced she was going to make it."

“I’m so very sorry for all the trouble I caused you...” Lynne said. “All of you. I put your lives at risk.”

“What in the world are you saying?” Astirra asked, incredulous. “You’re the reason we’re all still alive. You should be proud of your actions, not apologizing for them. Shouting about your accomplishment from the rooftops, in fact. Though...I *will* admit you were being a little scary at the start.”

“About that... I want to apologize for keeping my scheme a secret from you.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. If not telling me contributed to your success, then that little scare was a small price to pay! Now...you deserve a good, long rest. You’ve done so much for us all.”

“Yes... But first, Astirra... Thank you. Truly.”

The woman chuckled in response. “That should be my line!”

As the pair exchanged smiles, I wondered when they had become so close. I was still a little concerned about Lynne, but given how overjoyed she looked right now, I figured she was going to be fine. I used the opportunity to take a short breather—and then a voice spoke up from somewhere behind me.

“Your Holy Highness.”

It was that guy in strange armor—Sigir. His five companions were standing behind him.

“We have inspected the surrounding area as per your instructions,” he continued. “The situation looks rather grave, I’m afraid. Every building in the city has been leveled. There is some good news—almost every citizen was able to evacuate, and there are no signs that monsters will pose a further threat—but there might be people trapped under the rubble. So, if you would allow us, Your Holy Highness, we of your Twelve Sacred Envoys would appreciate the order to begin search-and-rescue operations.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Astirra remarked. “Go ahead, Sigir. Don’t let me keep you!”

“You have our deepest gratitude, Your Holy Highness.” Sigir bowed, then hurried away with his companions.

“My lady...” Ines said. “I shall check whether our belongings are safe. My apologies, but you might need to make do without a change of attire until I can locate them.”

“Thank you, Ines,” Lynne replied.

Ines then took her leave as well, at which point Lynne and Astirra returned to their conversation. It sounded like they were getting along really well. I was standing to the side, using the time to take a breather, when a familiar-looking boy finished giving hurried orders to a crowd of soldiers and headed straight for me.

“You must be the esteemed Noor,” he said.

“That’s my name.” He was this country’s prince, right? Yeah, Holy Prince Tirrence. That was it.

“Then I must extend my apologies. Those of my country have acted discourteously toward you several times over. It must have been unpleasant.”

I thought about it for a moment. “Uh, no, not really.”

“As the acting representative of my country’s government, I must request your forgiveness. Your heroism saved us during a time of crisis. No amount of gratitude or apologizing could ever equal what we owe you.”

“You think? Both sound pretty unnecessary to me...”

“No, I cannot allow someone to whom we owe so much to go unrewarded. I shall ensure that this debt is one day repaid. I swear it.”

The prince then gave me a deep bow. He was making a much better impression than yesterday—his expression was more sincere, for one thing. But at the same time, he was starting to sound a lot like Lynne and her family. As a certain father came to mind, I had the alarming suspicion that unless I put my foot down and made it abundantly clear that I didn’t need a reward, the situation would only deteriorate.

Before I could act, however, the boy turned to Astirra and studied her face closely. “Now, Lady Astirra—or is it presumptuous of me to address you as such?”

“Oh, there’s no need to be so formal,” she said. “Just plain ‘Astirra’ is fine. Besides, shouldn’t I be the one fretting about respect right now?”

“So it doesn’t end with your appearance; even your name is identical. Does that mean you’re the real...?”

She huffed in amusement. “Real or not, there’s only one of me. Astirra, member of the Philosopher’s Goblet, at your service. Though, um...so much time has passed that I imagine the party has long since been disbanded.”

Astirra examined our surroundings. There was nothing in sight that could even generously be described as a building—it was basically all rubble—but there was curiosity in her eyes nonetheless. I recalled her saying she had been inside that strange blue crystal space for a very long time.

“Now that I think about it, how long *were* you in that crystal, Astirra?” I asked. “You said you’d been trapped this whole time.”

“I don’t have a clue... It was hard to keep track on the inside. I didn’t have anything to do, so I mostly slept. I think it was at least a few decades, though...”

“‘A few decades’?” I repeated.

“No...” Holy Prince Tirrence said with an inquisitive look at Astirra. “I think that might be an understatement. I don’t mean to alarm you, but I can almost guarantee you were trapped in the dungeon for over two centuries.”

“Huh?” Astirra’s cheek twitched. “Two *centuries*?”

I was just as surprised.

“Yes. The Holy Theocracy’s history books state that our country was founded more than two centuries ago, after the high priestess conquered its dungeon. I believe you were trapped even before then.”

“Two hundred years...” Astirra let out a long breath, then gazed up at the sky. “I became an old woman without even realizing it.”

“*That’s* what bothers you?”

“There’s a lot more to be said, I know. It’s just... Right now, that’s the most I can process.”

I decided to take her word for it. I'd never gone through anything of the sort, so I couldn't even begin to imagine what it was like. But people weren't supposed to live for more than two hundred years, were they...?

"Wait..." Astirra frowned. "But you told me Oken's still alive, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said. "He's pretty old, though."

"He must not be the person I'm thinking of..."

"No, I suspect he is," Lynne interjected. "Instructor Oken reached the age of two hundred a very long time ago."

"He... What?! Oken's lived for *two hundred years*?!" Astirra exclaimed, staring at Lynne in surprise.

"He's really that old...?" I asked, similarly confused.

"Indeed," Lynne said. "This isn't public knowledge, but Instructor Oken claims to be around two hundred and eighty."

Astirra considered that for a moment. "How is he still alive...? I thought he was human."

"You can say that again," I agreed. "Anytime I see him, I wonder how he hasn't kicked the bucket yet. Well, there's no better way to get an answer than to ask the man ourselves, is there?"

"I...suppose that's true. Yes, right you are." Astirra gave a small nod as though she'd made up her mind about something. "In that case, I know my next destination."

"And where's that?"

"Isn't it obvious? I'm going to the Kingdom of Clays. I don't think sticking around here would be a good idea, in any case. I'd need to keep pretending to be someone I'm not. It's a stroke of good fortune that a friend I can rely on is still around. Once I'm there, maybe I'll even settle down for a while."

"Yeah? How about traveling with us, then? I'm pretty sure we have room in our coach." I glanced at Lynne, seeking her confirmation.

"I don't have any issues with it," she said. "There should be plenty of room,



assuming that Ines actually finds the carriage intact. That said, there remains the matter of..."

Lynne turned to Tirrence, who then stepped in front of Astirra so that they were standing face-to-face. "Thank you, Lynne. I'll take it from here," he said. "The truth is, I have a request for you as the Theocracy's prince. If you are willing...could you remain here?"

"In this country?" Astirra asked.

"Yes. It pains me to be so presumptuous, given that you have no ties to this place, but the high priestess was the core around which our entire country revolved. It is no exaggeration to say that she established it all on her own. As the dust settles, the citizenry will find themselves exhausted and destitute. If we were to lose the heart of our country now, it would result in all sorts of chaos."

"I...see..."

Astirra was nodding along with Tirrence's explanation, but from the look on her face, I guessed she didn't really understand what he was getting at. I was just as unsure, to be frank, but I could tell that he was very serious about it.

"Oh, I get it..." Astirra's eyes finally lit up in recognition. "In short, you want me to keep pretending to be your mother, right?"

"To be blunt—yes. I would like you to act out the role of our Holy Theocracy's high priestess. I'm well aware what an unreasonable request that is, but right now, our country truly needs you."

"Right... Hmm... Okay. So that's how it is. No, wait... There are parts I still don't really understand. But even so..." Astirra studied Tirrence's face for a while, then nodded, having apparently come to a conclusion. "All right. Noor, it looks like I'm staying here after all. Could you extend my well-wishes to Oken?"

"Yeah? Sure thing. I'll do that the next time I see him."

Astirra looked at me for a moment, her lips twisted into a slight pout. "You accepted that a lot more easily than I thought you would... Well, in any case, I'm counting on you."

“Yeah. I won’t forget.”

She sounded a little displeased with my reaction, but who was I to weigh in on such an important decision? Everyone was free to make their own choices.

For some reason, Tirrence looked taken aback by Astirra’s response. “Truly?” he asked. “You would stay?”

“Mm-hmm,” she replied. “Oh, but I don’t know a single thing about politics... Is that okay?”

“Of course. Most of the actual governing will be done by the administration and me. Attendants will see to your daily needs, and all we ask in return is that you make the occasional public appearance. That alone should ensure our people’s salvation.”

“Hmm?” Astirra blinked. “Just a few public appearances? And you’re going to keep me fed...?”

“Of course.”

“Will you put a roof over my head too?”

“Yes. The high priestess has a number of residences befitting her station. You may use whichever one you wish.”

“And say I’m struck with the urge to go shopping or something for a change of pace... Am I allowed to go outside?”

“Yes. Aside from when you’re participating in essential ceremonies and attending certain diplomatic events, you may come and go as you please.”

“I see... I see!” Astirra grinned and nodded emphatically. “In that case, there’s no reason for me to go anywhere! I should thank you, even!”

Tirrence paused. “Are you...certain? It would mean a rather substantial restriction on your personal freedoms, especially when our country is none of your concern.”

“Hmm... I wouldn’t go as far as to say it’s *none* of my concern...”

“What do you mean?” Tirrence asked with a frown.

“Well, I can’t say for certain...but I think it was because my party—the

Philosopher's Goblet—ventured into the depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation that that monster made it out into the world in the first place. In fact, no—I *can* say for certain. We created the opportunity it used to escape, so there's no way I can say this is none of my business. I *was* trapped in the dungeon immediately afterward, though, so I can't pretend to know what actually happened. I never would have expected a whole city—um, country—to pop up as a result."

"I...suppose I can't refute that logic..." The prince nodded, deep in thought.

"Plus..." Astirra smiled widely. "There's one other reason I'm not unrelated to your Theocracy. *You*, Tirrence."

"Me...?"

"Yes. You're a half-elf, aren't you? Like me."

"I... I am, yes."

"Well, as it so happens...you're the only other one I've met. As far as I'm aware, at least. I've never even heard of another elf venturing outside their forest home."

"Yes... My experience has been the same."

"Right? That being the case, it doesn't feel right to treat you like a stranger. It isn't an airtight reason to claim we *actually* have a connection, but we must share the same blood, if nothing else. I would even go as far as to say that I've felt a sense of kinship between us since the moment we first met. It was like reuniting with long-lost family."

"I... To tell you the truth, I felt the same way."

Astirra chuckled. "Well, there you have it!"

The two continued their conversation eye to eye. They shared a close enough resemblance that I thought there had to be *some* truth to what was being said. Tirrence was supposed to be the son of the mean Astirra, so to someone who didn't know any better, he and this Astirra would appear to be mother and son.

"Deep down, I actually *wanted* to stay with you," Astirra confessed. "I thought it would cause you too much trouble, though. I mean, I'm the main reason that monster was unleashed. Imagine the outrage if people found out."

“I...don’t think you need to worry about that,” Tirrence said. “In fact, if your suspicions are true, then *you* were the catalyst for the very founding of our country. It only makes sense that you should be its centerpiece.”

“So...does this mean it’s okay for me to stay?”

“Of course. In my full capacity as the prince of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, I humbly request it.”

“You mean that I should stay here as your *mother*, right? From here on out? *Forever*?”

“Yes, if you are willing. For as long as it remains feasible.”

“I see... I’ve got a request of my own, if that’s all right. I don’t consider it mandatory or anything of the sort.”

“Go ahead. I shall do what I can to give you whatever you desire.”

Astirra giggled. “‘Whatever I desire,’ hmm? Well, now that you’ve gone and said that...” Her lips curled into a confident smile as she held out her arms. “Go ahead. There’s no need to hold back. Jump into my arms!”

I couldn’t really tell what was going on. I exchanged a look with Lynne, thinking she might have a better idea, but she seemed just as lost as I was.

There was a confused expression stuck on Tirrence’s face. “Um...” he said sheepishly. “What are you...?”

“Oh, is this new to you?” Astirra asked. “It’s, um... You know. That thing characters in plays always do. Anytime two long-lost family members reunite, a really emotional scene plays out, and they always hug. I’ve...dreamed about having a moment like that for as long as I can remember. I never thought I’d get the chance to have a child of my own. I also didn’t expect to be part of a family again. But it’s something I’ve always wanted, so...”

Astirra’s eyes were gleaming with excitement, and she was breathing heavily through her nose. Her outstretched arms reminded me more and more of a bear challenging someone who had intruded on her territory.

“Pretend or not, we’re going to be a family...” she continued. “You’ll be my son—and what a splendid, smart young man you are! I’m not going to let this

opportunity slip through my fingers, so go ahead. Don't hold back! I'm your mother, and the strength of my hug will prove it. Now come on, Tirrence! Jump into my arms! Ready...go!"

Astirra lowered her arms a little and took a wider stance, now looking even more like a mother bear protecting her den. Tirrence simply stared at her, silent and unmoving...and in truth, I couldn't really blame him. A monologue like that would put anyone at a loss. I was feeling kind of awkward, and I could tell that everyone else in earshot shared the sentiment.

A short time passed when nobody said a word. Tirrence merely continued to stare at Astirra. She must have understood the reason for his reaction because she finally lowered her arms, losing her resemblance to a bear.

"Aha ha... I guess that was kind of unreasonable of me, huh...? Yes, of course it was. You might have said that I could request whatever I desired, but you're not some little kid. I just got a bit carried away." Astirra cast her eyes down and scratched her cheek, blushing. "Could you maybe, um, pretend I never said anything?"

"Mother." Even though Astirra was no longer holding out her arms, Tirrence approached her and quietly buried his face in her chest. "I... I've always wanted to meet you. Always. Ever since I was a child."

Astirra pulled him into her embrace. "And I've always wanted to meet you, Tirrence! From now on, we're family. Okay?"

For a while afterward, the only sounds that could be heard were someone's gentle sobs.



## Chapter 102: Journeying Home

“Looks like we’ll be out of the city soon,” I said. We were heading home aboard our coach, which had miraculously survived the chaos.

“Indeed,” Lynne replied. “Our stay was brief, but it felt much longer.” She had changed out of her torn white dress into the new clothes Ines had brought her and then gotten some rest, so she looked much better than before. Some of the exhaustion was gone from her expression.

Lynne, Ines, and I were returning to the Kingdom of Clays aboard our coach, but Rolo was riding atop Rala. I’d assumed the dragon would simply return to her red gem, but as it turned out, none of us were powerful enough to put her back inside.

Rolo had asked me whether I wanted to ride with him, and of course, I’d responded with an emphatic “no.” Our fight against that bag of bones had required so much of my attention that I’d almost forgotten about my intense fear of heights, but without any such distractions, I would pass out in an instant.

In truth, I was feeling a little guilty about my answer. Rala was very disappointed, according to Rolo. I couldn’t help having a phobia, though.

“Was it really okay for us to just pick up and go?” I wondered aloud. “We could have helped them clear away the rubble or something.”

The city of Mithra was a mess of collapsed buildings and torn-up streets. As I peered out the window of our coach, I saw people gathering in one of the large plazas and setting up camps—their only option for shelter tonight, no doubt.

Lynne shook her head. “I share your desire to help out, but we have the reconstruction of our own city to think about. Besides, they’re more than capable of managing without us. Tirrence is exceptional; I doubt we have any reason to worry.”

“Good point,” I replied.

“And...this is an important time for my friend,” Lynne said merrily. “I wouldn’t

want to get in his way.”

“‘An important time,’ huh?”

Pretty much the first thing Astirra had done was dash into the city to heal the injured, pulling Tirrence along with her. Each time she had come across someone who looked downcast, she had taken them by the hands and confidently assured them that everything would be all right—that as long as they were still alive, they could work things out. Her words must have worked, because the people now looked strangely at peace despite all the destruction around them.

Anyone who had seen the spectacle might have thought that Tirrence was simply being dragged around, but he had been issuing orders to his subordinates the entire time. Moreover, he hadn’t looked as opposed to spending time with Astirra as the situation might have suggested. The two of them worked well together.

“So they really aren’t related...?” I asked Lynne.

“It would appear that way.”

“Does that mean they’ll need to keep up their act forever?”

“Circumstances would require as much. I don’t believe the truth will come to light anytime soon, if ever.”

Astirra would pretend to be the high priestess for the foreseeable future. That was probably for the best, considering that her predecessor had eagerly agreed to be eaten by that skeleton for reasons I still couldn’t understand. Tirrence hadn’t appeared to have had the best relationship with his mother, but seeing her die before his very eyes couldn’t have been pleasant.

I wondered whether Astirra would manage with all the new duties being thrust upon her. She had sounded convinced of her own acting skills, but to be honest, she was nothing like the previous high priestess. As much as they had looked exactly the same, the other Astirra had been much colder, and the ways she’d spoken and acted hadn’t even been comparable to her far sunnier replacement. It would only be a matter of time before people discovered the truth.



“Still, I guess it’s not really my business...” I muttered with a shrug. “If she says she’ll manage, then that’s that.”

“Indeed,” Lynne agreed. “The most we can do is pray that everything works out for them.”

“Yep.”

There was nothing more to be said about the matter.

Our trip to Mithra had reminded me just how ignorant I was of the wider world, not to mention my immediate surroundings. The two people sharing this coach with me were but one example. They were both incredible people.

Ines, who was currently at the reins, had surprised me all over again during our fight against that fleshy skeleton. Trying to parry its lightning had pushed me to my absolute limit, rendering me so desperate that I’d struggled even to find the space to breathe... Yet she had accepted the challenge with a smile, like she was actually enjoying it. On top of that, she’d gotten faster and faster, eventually reaching a speed that I’d only barely been able to keep up with.

Then she’d cut *lightning*.

I’d almost dropped my sword out of shock, but it hadn’t stopped there—she’d gone on to perform feats so extraordinary that I’d ended up speechless. Splitting lightning with a grin, mincing that giant fleshy monster as though it were a mushy vegetable. I’d shivered in awe just watching her.

More than once, I’d wondered whether I even needed to parry the skeleton’s attacks; Ines had seemed more than capable on her own. Only my faith in Rolo’s claim that the monster was weak to my weapon had encouraged me to stick it out until the very end. No matter how hard I tried, I didn’t think I would ever come close to matching Ines’s skill.

“Is something amiss, Sir Noor?”

Ines had turned around. She must have felt my stare boring a hole in the back of her head.

“Oh, no. Don’t worry about it.”

Ines gave me a curious look but said nothing else. She merely turned around

again.

I returned to staring at the back of my companion's head. It wouldn't matter that I couldn't catch up to her—not as long as I stayed on her good side. I remembered her monstrous grin and the short work she had made of that skeleton's flesh and vowed then and there that I would never make an enemy of her.

*The world sure is full of sensational people.*

An unconscious sigh escaped me. I was still thinking about Ines's awe-inspiring performance. Her smile had revealed a side of her that I'd never expected, but more than that, I now understood why Lynne put such unbreakable faith in her.

On that note, Ines wasn't the only one worth mentioning in this coach; despite her short stature and delicate frame, Lynne, the girl sitting next to me, had also demonstrated great potential. It hadn't even crossed my mind at the time, but *she* had created the tremendous beam of light that had mercilessly swallowed our foe. One moment, I'd noticed a glint below me. The next, our fleshy opponent had been reduced to its original, bony form. I'd almost died from the shock.

Our battle hadn't ended there, though. The monstrosity had shot toward me at an unbelievable speed.

Fear had seized my legs, and my footing—that is, Ines's platform of light—had suddenly vanished. But then I'd mustered as much strength as I could out of sheer desperation and, by complete luck, managed to land a hit on the skeleton.

Our opponent had been more fragile than I'd expected. It had shattered as easily as glass and then vanished without the slightest trace of resistance. I'd considered the whole thing a little anticlimactic, to be honest. It had almost disappointed me how weak it was.

Later, when I'd asked about the battle, I'd been informed that everything had gone according to Lynne's plan. The skeleton and I had been playing into her hands the entire time. I still wished she would have told me what she was scheming, though...

It was thanks to Lynne that this whole debacle had concluded with the fewest possible casualties. If she was already this great a leader at her young age, then I didn't doubt she would grow up to become someone truly monumental. It was almost scary to think about.

And...she wasn't the only one.

Rolo had seemed entirely helpless the first time we'd met him, but he'd since transformed into someone truly unbelievable. These days, he was instructing a titanic dragon as though she were his pet, though it was far more accurate to describe the two as friends. They completely understood one another.

According to the stories about her, Rala had enough strength to destroy an entire city in one fell swoop. It made me wonder how much Rolo's talents would develop as he grew up.

No matter which way I cut it, I was blessed with the company of the most incredible people. I'd grown as well, by my own estimation—being able to parry lightning was a step in the right direction—but looking around the coach reminded me that it wasn't anything to brag about.

*Yeah... I've still got a long way to go.*

Now that I thought about it, that skeleton had been something of a pushover—not that I thought I could have defeated it on my own. I'd relied on the help of so many others, not to mention my sword. The whole experience had convinced me to make my training regimen even stricter when I got back. Gilbert would be indispensable in that regard, but whether he would even give me the time of day was another story. He had a full-time job, after all.

Still, that could all wait until we were back in the royal capital. For now, I would just sit back and enjoy the rest of our trip. I watched the passing scenery from the coach's window...and then realized that I'd forgotten something critically important.

"Oh, darn..."

"Instructor...?" Lynne peered at me, concerned. "What's the matter?"

I hadn't meant to let my thoughts leak out like that. It wasn't a big deal in the grand scheme of things—it really wasn't—but it was still important to me. And

though it wasn't something I wanted to bother Lynne about, I worked up my courage and decided to come clean.

"I don't mean to trouble you, Lynne, but there's something I want to ask of you."

"Of course," she replied. "What is it?"

"Could we stop by a town somewhere on our way back? I...forgot to pick up souvenirs."

Back in the capital, my coworkers at the construction site had asked me to bring them back something from my trip. I'd told them I would and even made sure to bring enough money with me, but with everything that had taken place, it had completely slipped my mind. Mithra would have been the best place for souvenirs, but we were already heading home, not to mention the current state of the city. My only options now were the towns we would pass on the way back.

"Ah, I see." Lynne nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem at all. We were in quite a hurry on our way to Mithra, so why don't we take the scenic route for our return?"

"I'd appreciate that."

"In that case—Ines, could we ask that of you?"

"Certainly, my lady."

Ines's grip on the reins slackened, and our coach slowed to a pace only slightly faster than a leisurely stroll. The scenery had been a blur before, but now I could see it more intimately. I hadn't even noticed the flowers in full bloom that decorated the grass below.

"Since the weather's so pleasant," Lynne said, "why don't we open the windows?"

She did exactly that, and a gentle breeze drifted into our coach, carrying a single tiny leaf that came to rest on my knee. "I've never seen a leaf of this shape before..." I mused, studying it between my fingers.

"That doesn't surprise me; there aren't all that many of them in the Kingdom

of Clays. That one in particular is from the skystar tree, which seldom grows in this area. In fact, it's a rare breed in general."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. I've never actually seen one before—what I'm about to tell you comes entirely from books I've read—but skystar trees have very long life spans. It is said that catching its leaves can bring about good fortune—because they induce mild euphoria when placed in the mouth, one theory suggests. They can be brewed into a mellow-tasting tea that is all the rage with enthusiasts, so they fetch a shockingly high price on the few occasions they actually appear on the market. That scarcity was the reason for their nickname: phantom tea leaves. According to one history book, nobles of ancient times would—"

We were once again glimpsing Lynne's vast wealth of knowledge, and all because of a single stray leaf. It was amazing how much she knew, but at the same time, she went into such meticulous detail that it all started going in one ear and out the other.

"I guess I'll take it back with me..." I murmured. One leaf wouldn't make a suitable souvenir for any of my coworkers, but still—I could keep it for my own collection.

It was only a leaf, but I enjoyed making little discoveries like this. Unseen cities and towering structures were all well and good, but finding out about new animals or plants really made me feel that I'd come to lands unknown. In that sense, this little leaf was the perfect memento of everything we'd experienced on this journey. It wouldn't be any trouble to carry home with me, and as long as I was careful, it would probably keep for quite a while.

*Oh. Now it's starting to feel like a real adventure.*

I gazed out the window, watching the scenery while passively listening to Lynne's passionate lecture.

## Chapter 103: Return to the Royal Capital

“We’re finally back.”

As the royal capital came into view through the morning mist, I was overcome with the strangest sensation: relief. It was good to see some familiar sights again.

“We are,” Lynne replied. “You must be tired, Instructor, after everything we’ve been through.”

“Yeah. It was a short trip...but so much happened.”

On our way back, we had stopped at a town in the mountains and spent the night at an inn with a hot spring. It hadn’t been far from the royal capital, so we’d enjoyed a reasonably short journey after departing the next morning.

As we passed through one of the city’s gates, I started to feel something I hadn’t felt in ages: the sense of comfort that came with finally returning home. At some point, I must have begun to think of this place as my own.

“Could you let me out here?” I asked when we reached the city center.

“Of course.”

I stepped out of the coach and stretched my legs. “There. A job well done, if you ask me.” I’d agreed to accompany Lynne to Mithra and back, and with this, my work was complete.

The satisfaction of completing my task wasn’t the only thing I experienced when I once again set foot on the city’s soil; I also noticed a vague, fresh sense of ease. This must have been what returning from an adventure felt like. I’d gone through a lot of emotions related to travel, be it from our rush to Mithra or our charge into the Empire on the back of a dragon, but this... This was a new one. Something akin to delight welled within me; I really had completed a journey out into the world.

“Indeed...” Lynne was looking down at me from her seat in the coach. “Thank

you—for everything. Your presence truly was invaluable, Instructor.”

I smiled up at her, matching her gaze. “I should thank *you* for giving me such a valuable experience.”

And what an experience it had been. I’d gone through so much and made so many new discoveries. Through our battle against the skeleton, I’d witnessed my own growth and realized just how much further I’d yet to go. I could return to my everyday life and training tomorrow with a deep sense of satisfaction.

It really had been a wonderful journey. I’d even enjoyed the coach ride back. It was enough to make me feel guilty that I was getting money for it all.

“Before we part, however...” Lynne’s words took on new weight; I could practically feel the sincerity in them. “Would you mind accompanying me back home, Instructor?”

“Hmm? But we’re back in the royal capital. Isn’t my commission done?”

“It is, which is why I mean to present you with a token of my gratitude.”

“A token of your...? Aren’t I already getting paid for this?” In fact, I was pretty sure I’d received some of the money in advance. I was starting to get a bad feeling about this.

“That is correct. In regard to the payment you agreed upon prior to our departure, the remainder should come to you shortly through the Adventurers Guild.”

“That’s plenty enough already.”

“But...as matters escalated so far beyond our initial expectations, I ended up having to rely on your strength. I am sure my father will want to present you with something in person.”

“No, that’s all right. I appreciate the thought, but there’s nothing I want. If you wouldn’t mind, could you pass that message on to him?”

As much as it pained me to refuse Lynne outright, something told me her father would once again try to force me to accept land, a house, or treasure I didn’t need. I wasn’t *certain* he would, but I was sure enough that I didn’t want to risk it.

“B-But, with everything that happened—”

“It’s fine; I really don’t want anything. Really.”

“B-But...!”

Lynne wasn’t backing down, but I’d already expected that much; I was getting used to this particular aspect of their culture. It was just a matter of working out how to refuse her nicely. I was racking my brain for any ideas when a voice I recognized called out from behind me.

“Oh? Is that you, Noor?”

I turned around to see one of my coworkers from the construction site. “Hey. Long time no see,” I said.

“So it *is* you! The foreman told us all you’d gone on a journey to chase your dreams. He was real put out about it for a while. Back in town, I gather?”

“Yeah, I’ve finished my business. Here. I got you a souvenir.”

“Oh, thanks. You really didn’t need to... Hmm? What’s this? Some kind of wooden figure? Is it a monster or something?”

“No, it’s a bear.”

During our journey back to the royal capital, I’d been on the lookout for anything that might make a good souvenir for my coworkers—and what had caught my eye were these wooden bears. They were small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand and posed as though they were trying to scare away intruders, which had immediately brought to mind Astirra’s attempt to hug Tirrence.

The street-side vendor selling the bears had told me they were protective charms, and since they’d reminded me of such a memorable part of my adventure, I’d spent all of my money to purchase every single one. I now had so many that I would probably be handing them out for a long time to come.

“O-Oh. A bear, huh?” my coworker asked. “Well...thanks. My kids’ll probably like it.”

“Treat it well. I was told it’s a protective charm.”



“R-Right... Oh, Noor—on the topic of my kids, do you remember the promise you made?”

I paused in thought. “The promise I made...?”

“Forget, did you? I told you how much my kids loved your story about the massive goblin, and you told me you were keen to think up a new one. Ring any bells?”

He was right—I really had made a promise along those lines. “Now that you mention it... Sorry. I completely forgot.”

“Don’t sweat it. I thought you might. That said...I told my kids your plan, and they’ve been asking about it ever since. They make me play ‘goblin’ with them every time I come home. The same game, over and over again. I don’t actually mind it—I enjoy it, even—but it’s taking up my entire vacation. This is, what, day seven...? No, eight, I think. Ha ha ha...”

The man’s eyes were looking bleaker by the second.

“Oh, wow...” I said. “How about I drop by and tell them a story, then?”

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Of course. I made you a promise, remember? I can even come right— Oh.”

I’d just seen Lynne out of the corner of my eye. Remembering my vow to my coworker had caused me to forget something else.

“Sorry about this, Lynne,” I said. “Forgot about a prior engagement.”

“A...prior engagement?”

“Yeah. You probably heard, but I promised to tell a story to this guy’s kids, and it seems they’ve been waiting for quite a while. Three months, by my count.”

“I won’t keep you, then,” Lynne replied. To my astonishment, she was smiling.

“Are you sure...?”

“You promised them first, did you not?”

“Sorry again. Send your father my regards.”

“Of course. Now, if you don’t mind, I think Ines and I will excuse ourselves. As for your well-deserved reward, we’ll need to settle the matter another time.”

I waved to my two companions as they departed in our coach. Lynne’s parting words were still preying on my mind...but I decided to pretend that I simply hadn’t heard them.

“You sure this is okay...?” my coworker asked. “Those were your clients, weren’t they? I didn’t mean to intrude or anything.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I’d just finished my commission for them.” I was actually thankful for his timely appearance, not that I would do Lynne the disservice of admitting it.

“That so...? I guess that’s all right, then.”

“Now, about that promise...”

“Right. Hmm... I wonder what kinda story they’d wanna hear. Got any recommendations, Noor? Anything new?”

I wasn’t sure about calling it a “recommendation,” but there *was* a tale that came to mind. It had just happened, so I wouldn’t have trouble remembering all the details.

“I could tell you a story about a skeleton. How does that sound?”

“A skeleton? Like, the monster everyone knows about? Bones from head to toe? Is it a good story?”

“Yeah. I think I can make it interesting.”

“No kidding? How does it go? Don’t hold out on me.”

“Well, let’s see...” I started to tell my story—that is, I summarized what we’d experienced yesterday. “Turns out, actual skeletons aren’t the slightest bit like we all assume.”

“Yeah?”

“I used to think they were just bones that could move around, but that was far from the truth. To start, the one I met was dozens of times my height.”

“Starting big from the get-go, huh? This really is one of your stories. Go on,

then.”

“Another thing about skeletons: they eat people by swallowing them whole. And when they do, they make their victims’ flesh their own. It starts growing on their bones.”

“Flesh...on a skeleton? Well...sure, I guess. What happens then?”

“Once they’ve become a huge mass of writhing flesh and bone, they grow countless arms and hundreds—no, *thousands* of eyeballs, which all spin around like they’ve got minds of their own. On top of that, mouths open up all over their bodies.”

“Hey...this isn’t a *horror* story, is it?”

“Well, to be honest, it *was* pretty scary. And that wasn’t even the worst part. As it turns out, despite their size, skeletons can *fly through the air*! They can also shoot fire and lightning. That sure surprised me.”

“They can...fly? And shoot fire and lightning?”

“In the end, it transformed and shot through the air faster than a lightning bolt.”

“Are you *sure* this thing was a skeleton???”

“Well, that’s what I was told...”

Being honest, I couldn’t say for sure. Astirra was a veteran adventurer, in her own words, so I didn’t *think* she was wrong... Given what she was like, though, she could easily have made a mistake.

Still, our opponent had *clearly* been an animated skeleton to begin with. It might not have been a *skeleton* skeleton, but it must have been close enough.

My coworker gave an exasperated shrug. “Your stories are always larger than life, aren’t they? I guess that’s what makes them good, though.”

“So, what do you think? I’m sure I can make it enjoyable.”

“It sounds fun...but don’t you think it’s a little too scary? Not all of my kids are old enough for that kinda thing...”

“Fair enough,” I said. The story involved people being eaten and Ines making

mincemeat of a mass of squirming flesh and eyeballs; it probably *was* too much for little kids. “In that case, how about the time I fought a dragon one-on-one in this very city? I know the whole thing by heart.”

My coworker looked conflicted for a moment, then said, “Yeah... That might work.”

“Is something wrong?”

“I doubt you’ve heard, but the Dragon of Calamity flew near the city yesterday. Sent shivers up my spine, it did, and scared my kids something fierce. It was all a big hubbub.”

“No kidding?” That must have been Rolo and Rala returning ahead of us. The latter had done a great deal of damage to the city during the Empire’s invasion and was extremely intimidating on top of that, so it didn’t surprise me that people were still afraid of her. “Then maybe I should tell a story about how that dragon isn’t so scary after all.”

The look on my coworker’s face brightened at once, and he let out a chuckle. “That’d work! Your tales are always a good laugh!”

“Let’s go with that, then. The story of how, after my battle with the dragon, she became a much gentler soul.”

“Great. Make it as ridiculous, fantastical, and over the top as you always do, yeah? My kids’ll love that.”

“For the record, it *is* a true story.”

“Oh, of course. That’s how you always start ‘em, right? ‘This is something that actually happened to me.’ The line’s practically burned into my memory. My kids know too—I’ve told them all about what a joker you are.”

“Yeah...?” He clearly didn’t believe me, but, well...as long as people liked my stories, that was enough. “So, how many kids am I gonna be speaking to?”

“Just my three. Oh, but we could spread the word around the neighborhood. I’m sure we’d get an even greater turnout then—fifteen kids at least.”

“That many?”

“Yeah. That story of yours about the huge goblin went down really well with

the kids, and it's still doing the rounds! You'll have a full house as soon as people know you're coming."

"Go figure. That sounds like fun."

As a kid, I'd always loved my father's tales of the unknown. It was strange to think that I was now in his shoes, sharing my stories with the local children. Strange, but not bad. I'd actually come to enjoy it.

"Let's head over there, then," I said. "I shouldn't keep them waiting."

"Right. Sorry for the trouble."

"And while we're at it, I might as well hand out more of these bears."

"That's... Well... I don't know about that..."

And so I went with my coworker to see his kids, racking my brain for how best to tell Rala's story.

## Chapter 104: The Prince's Resolution

"A perfect outcome...if one considers only the result."

Alone in his office, Prince Rein was mulling over the report he'd received from his sister upon her return from Mithra. His gaze was fixed on an object left in the corner of the room: a charred and shredded silver dress.

"Just how fierce was the fight in Mithra...?"

He had never expected the mithril dress he'd given Lynne to return in such a state; the custom-ordered garment was made of the finest materials imaginable, having been worked on by the best craftsmen of not just the Kingdom of Clays but also the neighboring Magic Empire. Rein had requested the single greatest piece of defensive equipment in the world, so both mithril and orichalcum thread had been woven into the dress without reserve. It had also been adorned with intricate pieces of jewelry, each a high-grade magical item in its own right. The garment had taken almost three months of ceaseless work to complete.

The end result had been an armored dress that boasted almost excessive defensive potential while looking entirely like an ordinary ball gown. It was a work of perfection that rivaled the greatest dungeon relics known to mankind, born from the prince's desire to do everything he could for his sister, whom he was sending into danger.

The dress's production cost had surpassed the Kingdom of Clays's budgets for defense and foreign affairs combined, so the prince had secretly sold many of his personal assets—from treasures to mansions to land—to make up the difference. The exorbitant fee had left him with almost nothing to his name...but the final product had been well worth the investment.

Lynne's journey to Mithra would be fraught with danger, but with such a remarkable dress, not even the Dragon of Calamity's claws would pose a threat to her. That was what the prince had thought, at least.

“What kind of monster must she have fought for *this* to have happened...?”

Rein’s brow furrowed as he studied the mithril dress, though it now resembled an old rag. From his sister’s cheerful demeanor when he’d seen her earlier, he was almost inclined to believe that nothing had occurred. But the sight before him now revealed the truth—as well as just how reckless she must have been.

According to Lynne’s report, her dress had sustained nary a scratch before she had used the magical weapon Keraunos, a final trump card given to her by Oken, the Spell Sovereign. In short, that one brief act had caused *this* much damage.

“It is hard to even imagine such a potent spell...”

Ines had not witnessed it firsthand, but she had it on good authority that Lynne’s attack had cost her the use of both arms as well as her vision. One wrong move and her body might have been blown to pieces.

Then again, from another perspective, that meant the dress had just barely kept Lynne alive. If not for its protection, she would have been vaporized by her own magic. Even with an exceptional healer immediately on hand to treat her, she had gone to such great lengths that her life had teetered on the brink.

If the word “reckless” did not describe her actions, then what did...?

Lynne was the prince’s sister; she must have had a thorough understanding of the risk she was about to take. Yet she had chosen to be reckless nonetheless. It was an occasional habit of hers to cross the line that kept normal people in check and foray into danger. Still, Lynne was no fool. The situation must have been a delicate balancing act for her, having to put her life on the line without surrendering it entirely. In that sense, she might have seen her actions as a dangerous gamble more than anything else—not that such nuances had allayed the anxieties of those who had fought with her.

Under normal circumstances, Lynne would never have gone to such extreme lengths. Her decision to cast aside her usual restraint was a testament to how formidable her opponent must have been.

According to the reports, Lynne and the others had faced a monstrosity in the

form of a colossal skeleton. It had come from within the core of the Dungeon of Lamentation, which should already have been long dead. The weight and shock of that revelation had made the prince deeply uncomfortable.

“In other words...our kingdom has misjudged its neighbor for over two centuries...”

The information Lynne had received from Holy Prince Tirrence revealed that the monstrosity had shared a mind with High Priestess Astirra and actively manipulated the country’s political sphere. On top of that—though this ventured into Tirrence’s guesswork—the Holy Theocracy had seemingly been established not by the high priestess who had conquered the dungeon but by a monstrosity for its dark designs. If that was true, then the Kingdom of Clays had been dealing with a false veneer for over two centuries, blind to the deception as it participated in sincere diplomatic relations with the *monster* lurking in the depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation.

The thought was enough to send a chill down the prince’s spine. Both he and Lynne had studied abroad in the Holy Theocracy as children. Not only that, he had given the order for Lynne to be evacuated there when the Kingdom had entered a time of crisis.

“I almost do not want to believe it...”

A country founded by an evil monster, where the people lived in ignorance of the truth—such a thing belonged to the realm of nightmares, not the real world. But when Rein considered the facts—the discovery of a woman called “Astirra the adventurer” within the dungeon’s core and the testimony she had given—he could not deny that Holy Prince Tirrence’s conjecture was correct.

Ever since he was a child, Tirrence had harbored doubts about the monster acting the part of his mother. He had feigned ignorance his entire life...until the perfect opportunity had arisen. By pretending to be smitten with Lynne and align his goals with the high priestess’s, then inviting the princess to Mithra in a way that seemed openly hostile, he had managed to ask for help.

Tirrence had celebrated his coming of age just the other day, meaning he was only a year older than Lynne. For him to have managed so much nonetheless spoke to his great skill, remarkable character, and meticulous nature. Rein



regretted that he had ever misjudged the boy so severely—rather than a superficial flirt brandishing his mother’s authority, Tirrence was painted in Lynne’s report as someone sharp and quick-witted.

According to Lynne, Holy Prince Tirrence planned to install the Astirra they had discovered deep below the earth as the high priestess and rule over the Holy Theocracy with her. In practice, that would place the reins of power to a major nation in his hands alone. It would mean a great upheaval in his country’s political structure, the aftershocks of which would no doubt be felt the world over.

Rein’s thoughts had yet to catch up with it all, but there was one thing he could say for certain: “No matter how this situation proceeds, it will be of great benefit to our kingdom.”

Tirrence and the “ruling” high priestess had proposed an alliance between Mithra and the Kingdom of Clays. Though a formal written agreement had yet to be exchanged, the plans were all but set in stone. The alliance would inspire a complete about-face in the Kingdom’s position, especially when considered alongside the recent changes in the Magic Empire. Clays would soon be on excellent terms with two of the region’s three great nations, to the east and west.

This was a historical milestone for the Kingdom of Clays, and perhaps the first time since its founding that it could rest easy in regard to its neighbors. On top of that, as reparations for the recent incident, Holy Prince Tirrence had agreed to share the barrier techniques that Mithra had previously monopolized. Before now, that would have been unthinkable.

On an even more excellent note, there were signs that one of the more complicated issues behind the recent mess would soon be resolved. King Clays’s declaration that the Kingdom would take Rolo, a boy from a race despised throughout the world, into its care had caused no end of problems, but that would change practically overnight.

Rolo had arrived in Mithra with the ring of summoning donated to him by Oken. Then, when the fighting had started, he had unleashed the Dragon of Calamity stored within. Many had witnessed this epic display—understandably

so, for it had taken place at the very heart of the city—and the ferocity of the subsequent battle was burned into their minds.

As terrifying as it must have been for them, the people of Mithra had seen Rolo take on the monstrosity that had plunged their country into crisis. This had done plenty for the boy's reputation, but not as much as the high priestess's formal declaration that Mithra, a country relentless in its persecution of demonfolk, had ultimately been saved by one.

In the near future, Astirra would proclaim the Holy Theocracy's age-old war against the demonfolk to be over, using recent events to call for an end to the race's persecution. It was the perfect opportunity—for as long as Mithra stood on the world stage, the appeal would reach not only those living within its borders but also the people in other countries under the Church's sway. The impact would be immeasurable, and the changes it brought about would go down in history.

The prejudice against the demonfolk ran deep—the resentment born from losing one's home and country was not an easy thing to part with—so the high priestess's announcement would surely lead to discord. At the same time, however, it would make the Kingdom's decision to harbor Rolo all the easier to explain. The boy had exceeded all expectations and accomplished a momentous feat, proving his talents beyond a shadow of a doubt.

"I could never have foreseen any of this..." Rein muttered. Would anyone have believed the world could change so drastically in the span of a few days?

The prince had reckoned that the Kingdom would only face greater hardships in the future. His sister's invitation to Mithra had soured the relationship between their two countries, and all signs had suggested the Kingdom would soon be drawn into war against a major nation. How could any other conclusions have been drawn when his father had refused the high priestess's ultimatum?

It would not have been strange for Lynne's entry into Mithra to have represented the end of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom and the Theocracy. In the worst-case scenario, the latter might have closed its borders entirely. It was because he'd anticipated such a future that the prince had given

Ines and Rolo such dangerous orders to venture into the depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation.

But in the end, there hadn't been anything to worry about.

"To think the situation was resolved so quickly..."

Using the intelligence he had received from Carew's subordinates stationed in Mithra, Rein had devised a plan to use his sister's entry into the Holy Theocracy to obtain proof of the atrocities it was committing—namely, how it was manufacturing its Demons' Hearts. By bringing such details to light, he would have undermined other nations' criticisms of the Kingdom for harboring Rolo, forged stronger ties to the nations with a less than harmonious relationship with Mithra, and strengthened its stance in preparation for the future.

In essence, Rein had been ready to fight an extremely drawn-out war—one that might have lasted decades. His resolve might have been considered reckless in times past, but since the Kingdom now had a favorable relationship with the Magic Empire, the prince had felt more comfortable starting a war of attrition and had given orders to enact the aggressive plan accordingly.

He had acted not because the Kingdom wanted to win but because it needed to *survive*.

Ever since the king's decision to accept Rolo, war against Mithra had seemed inevitable. The Kingdom would never have stood a chance alone, so Rein had planned an intense mudslinging campaign to draw other nations to his side. His sister's invitation to the Theocracy had come as an excellent opportunity to secure the evidence they would need, but even so, his scheme had amounted to little more than a pessimistic gamble.

Still, his fears had not been necessary.

The prince sighed, feeling as though a tremendous weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "From beginning to end, it was by the grace of others that we were saved..."

Despite his authority and thorough understanding of the situation, Rein had never expected reality to stray so far from his reckoning. It was a testament to his shortcomings. He hadn't gathered enough information or acted quickly

enough, and as a result, his sister had been exposed to threats he hadn't even known about. There were so many more examples he could draw from, but they all pointed to the same conclusion: he was a complete and utter failure of a man.

And yet, even with the prince's failure weighing them down, Lynne and her companions had done a magnificent job of resolving the situation. Their deeds had far surpassed his calculations, and they had come home with a victory he hadn't dared even dream of.

"Though, on the topic of saviors...I cannot neglect that man..."

The list of what Lynne and the others had achieved in Mithra was impressive, to say the least, but their successes had depended on one person more than any other: the man Lynne had so desperately wanted to bring along. The role he had played could not be ignored.

"Noor."

Rein hadn't shut down his sister's request, but he *had* found it unnerving. Noor exuded a rustic simplicity that made him easy to read—one of many reasons his father and sister had grown so attached to him—and that was precisely the issue; though the prince had nothing against Noor, the man didn't seem like someone who knew how to act around nobles and royalty. His combat prowess was undeniable, but to send a person like him into the Theocracy when things were already so tense... It had seemed impossible to predict what kind of trouble he might cause.

And in the end, he *had* started trouble—in the best possible sense.

Noor had apparently crashed through the heavily reinforced barriers the high priestess had erected in the Dungeon of Lamentation's depths and rescued the adventurer Astirra, who had ultimately been key to resolving the situation. At the same time, he had faced off against the monstrosity lurking in the dungeon's core, eventually securing victory with his Black Blade.

In all likelihood, without Noor's involvement, the battle in Mithra would never have turned out so favorably. The outcome would most likely have been more akin to the prince's imaginings of the worst-case scenario, if not even worse. And most worrying of all, Lynne would surely have...

“My debt to that man is so great that I doubt I will ever be able to repay it.”

Rein hadn't underestimated Noor. Though few knew about him, the man was a true hero as far as the Kingdom of Clays was concerned. He had saved Lynne on many an occasion, and it was no exaggeration to say that his presence had ensured her safe return from Mithra. For those reasons, the prince was more grateful to him than he could put into words.

“Yet...I cannot get a read on him at all.”

In all truth, the prince's discomfort eclipsed his gratitude. The more he investigated Noor, the less he understood the man's thoughts and intentions.

On the surface, Noor was “only” an adventurer—and a poor one at that, according to official Guild documents. E was supposed to be the lowest rank one could obtain, yet this man had received a special designation that was even more inferior: F-rank. “Strange” didn't even begin to describe it; with his current strength, Noor fully deserved to be an S-rank adventurer.

But alas, Rein had no right to question such things.

For generations, the Clays royal family had respected the Adventurers Guild as an independent body and refrained from intervening with its management. Adventurers' ranks were the purview of the Guild and no one else. The prince had courted a breach of this arrangement only once, when he had indirectly and out of sheer curiosity asked the royal capital's guildmaster about Noor's rank. The response he had received only made him more confused.

*“I don't rightly understand it, but...it's what Noor wants.”*

As if the situation hadn't been perplexing enough, Noor was an F-rank adventurer *by choice*. What did a man of his strengths gain from that arrangement? It suggested that he had some other goal in mind...but every single report the prince had received on Noor's daily routine was commonplace and unremarkable. He would clean drains or work on a construction site, bathe, go through his personal training routine, and then sleep. On occasion, he would also eat at food stalls with his coworkers or play with children in the street—the prince had seen as much with his own eyes. It was baffling.

Rein found it hard to believe that someone with such immense strength

strove for nothing more than the life of an ordinary citizen. He couldn't even uncover why such a man was residing in and allying with the Kingdom of Clays in the first place. Noor didn't seem particularly loyal to the Clays royal family and even refused the veritable fortunes the king had tried to give him.

Nonetheless, it wasn't like the man made *no* requests. That was what Rein found most disquieting.

In hindsight, it wouldn't have been inaccurate to say that Noor's recent request had caused the incident with Mithra. He had turned down rewards of every kind and then made a single, spectacular plea...which the king had naturally accepted. By asking the Kingdom to harbor Rolo, he had dropped it straight in a thorny web of problems.

By refusing the king's other rewards, Noor had gained leverage over the sovereign of an entire kingdom. It beggared belief, but...had that been his intention all along? Though the prince couldn't be certain, he felt a tinge of concern over what the man might ask for next.

"I'm just paranoid. That must be it..."

Nevertheless, Noor's current serenity seemed almost like a harbinger of whatever upheaval was to come.

A sudden knock interrupted the prince's vague sense of disquiet, and a calm voice said, "Prince Rein." Standing silently in the doorway was none other than the Sovereign of Shadows.

"Carew?" the prince replied. "Enter."

The man did as instructed, carrying a large stack of documents under his arm.

"What are those?" Rein asked.

"Letters. They've been arriving in droves. We've yet to sort through them all, but these are addressed to the princess."

"To Lynne?" The prince was drawn from his brooding as Carew placed the stack of papers on his desk. "Concerning what, exactly?"

"Most of them are personal, handwritten letters from other countries. As for their contents, well... They're love letters."

For a few moments, Rein remained completely still. “*Love letters?*” he repeated at length.

“Yes. The princess put on quite a display in Mithra, and it would appear to have made her rather popular. Her mithril dress must have played a part in that.” An amused smile was visible beneath Carew’s mask as he picked up and once again presented the letters. “Feel free to use [Clairvoyance] to inspect them. They’re all very...*eloquent*. Some even ask for her hand in marriage from the outset.”

In stark contrast to the Sovereign of Shadows, Rein was wearing a sour frown. “Don’t tell me the senders are...”

He examined the wax seals on the letters, and sure enough, they formed a laundry list of all the nobles who had until just a few days ago been pressuring the Kingdom of Clays to comply with the Holy Theocracy. Now that the dust had settled and the Kingdom had come out on top, they were shamelessly attempting to curry favor, acting as though they hadn’t recently refused the prince’s entreaties for cooperation.

There was being two-faced, and then there was this. As the prince followed Carew’s suggestion of using [Clairvoyance] to read the correspondence before him, his growing headache only became worse. These really were love letters, each one such an affront to good writing that it induced nausea. In a sense, he had to respect their authors’ mental fortitude.





“Have you shown these to Lynne?” Rein asked.

“Given the recent incident, I thought it best to check them for anything dangerous,” Carew explained. “I planned to give them to her as soon as I was finished, but when I saw their contents, it seemed wise to consult you first. How should we proceed?”

“Throw them all in the fire and return the ashes to their senders...is what I dearly *want* to say.” The prince took a deep breath and shook his head, trying to do away with his frustration, before handing the letters he’d finished reading back to Carew. “We would only be wasting Lynne’s time with these. Let us use them to our benefit. Make a list of everyone who has written to her and get our intelligence operative to write them all responses. We shall seize this opportunity to lure them in and discover their weaknesses. It should give us plenty to bargain with down the line.”

“Understood. Should we...inform the princess?”

“Yes. Show her the list once you’ve completed it. I’ll give her a summary of their contents and how we’re dealing with them. There’s no need to put her through the agony of reading such drivel.”

“As you wish. We’ll get to work setting aside the ones that seem important and deliver them to you for your final verdict,” Carew said, still smiling under his mask. He put the letters back under his arm and then vanished without a sound.

Carew was Rein’s most trusted subordinate. The man had served as his guard for as long as he could remember, and it was under his tutelage that the prince had learned everything he knew about intelligence operations. He was one of the few individuals who had watched over Rein and Lynne since they were children, and it was because of their long history together that the prince knew exactly what Carew’s parting smile had meant.

“I’m too soft on my sister, am I...?”

Carew still saw Rein as an overprotective brother; it was something he’d teased the prince about for years. And in truth, there were no grounds for Rein to deny it. As much as he thought his father’s approach was a little *too* hands-off, he agreed that Lynne was capable enough not to require his protection. At

fourteen years of age, she was his junior by six years, yet she had already surpassed him in so many regards.

There *were* still areas in which Rein took the lead, but he knew those days were numbered. Still, until Lynne reached adulthood, he would continue to keep her safe, no matter the cost.

“How can I not? She’s destined to become our kingdom’s next queen.”

Rein had already completed the ordeal that was the rite of succession to the throne, meaning he had obtained the right to become the next king. Lynne had yet to complete hers—it had needed to be postponed when the Magic Empire attacked—but she was guaranteed to pass and stake her own claim to the Kingdom’s highest seat of power.

It was abnormal enough that a child of only fourteen had sought to challenge the rite, much less that she had attempted it *alone*. Though her solitary delve into the Dungeon of the Lost “for the sake of her training” had received the king’s approval, under any other circumstances, it would have been unthinkable. Rein had tackled the challenge at the similarly tender age of sixteen, but he had enlisted the help of an entire party. Unless his sister adopted self-imposed restrictions, she would achieve success in short order.

From there, in accordance with the Kingdom’s customs, the two would need to take part in the war of royal succession, a competition that pitted candidates against each other in a fair contest of skill. Rein considered it an outdated and somewhat barbaric tradition, but it was how the Kingdom’s rulers had always secured the support of their citizenry.

In such a competition, the prince knew he would never come out victorious—not against Lynne. An objective analysis of their combat prowess was enough for anyone to reach that conclusion.

Truth be told, Rein had never actually *wanted* to win. Though he had yet to tell anyone, he sincerely believed that his sister deserved the throne. Even as a child, she had proved to be a prodigy in every field, breaking records left and right. She hadn’t even let her talents get to her head; rather than being haughty and arrogant, she did everything in her power to encourage those around her. It had made her the admiration of everyone, not to mention the military, within

which she already had a considerable amount of support. Perhaps one could describe it as a natural talent for attracting others.

She was well and truly born to rule.

Rein was only slightly more gifted than the average person, so he had always believed that Lynne was head and shoulders above him. Once she had taken her rightful place as the heir to the throne, he would simply carry out the role of an advisor. That aspiration was the reason he had taken on his current role.

Watching his father's work had made it clear to Rein that a future as king would have been too much of a burden for him, though he knew that few wanted him to succeed the throne in the first place. He took no issue with that fact; he was much better suited to working from the shadows. Indeed, that was exactly the role he was destined to play: the shadow to his sister, the light who would unite the hearts of everyone in the Kingdom.

"The future of our country rests on her shoulders."

He wasn't speaking as her elder brother—that was his genuine, unbiased opinion. Lynne was the most important person in the entire kingdom, so no matter how much he was teased about being "overprotective," he would continue to keep her safe until she came of age.

And that included weeding out any undesirable romantic partners.

His resolution firm, Rein sat back down at his desk to begin going through the stack of documents his subordinates had prepared.

## Chapter 105: The King's Motive

"I simply cannot fathom that man!"

For the sovereign of a kingdom, the circumstances were anything but amusing—the entire nation had been thoroughly duped by the high priestess, made to act out a charade with a monster for a stage partner. The truths that had come to light as a result of the recent incident would rock the very foundations of the world, sending ripples of change across the continent. The weight of the situation wasn't lost on King Clays—and yet, for a while after hearing the princess's report, he hadn't been able to stop laughing. An uncontrollable humor welled up from deep within his stomach. When all was said and done, he could see the report only as the most uproarious comedy.

"He's saved us again!"

Nobody was around to hear the king's merry voice. According to the report he'd received, Noor, their man of the hour, had fallen into the Dungeon of Lamentation, rescued the true Astirra from her prison—the blue crystal serving as the dungeon's core—and then proceeded to slay the monster pretending to be the high priestess. It was a tale straight out of a hero's epic, and the king's heart had soared as he'd listened to it. Despite being the sovereign of an entire kingdom's worth of people, his desire to applaud Noor made him feel more like a common member of a theater audience.

Maybe it was *because* he was the king that he found the story so exhilarating. Everything he had wanted to accomplish but couldn't was gradually being done by Noor. Societal norms, old traditions, and more—the man ignored every obstacle in his path as he charged straight toward the most ideal end, acting as though they had absolutely nothing to do with him.

Noor's progress was such a perfect crystallization of the essence of adventuring that the king couldn't help but laugh. Once-in-a-lifetime events fell over themselves to happen in his orbit, inducing changes both hectic and unexpected. It was like the world *wanted* to revolve around him. The young boy

for whom Noor had sought protection was but one example.

“Never a dull moment... To think that boy obtained the knowledge of a primordial...”

Upon his return to the royal capital, the demonfolk boy Rolo had given the king a detailed report on the incident—and the king’s estimation of the boy’s importance had risen sharply as a result. Rolo had come into contact with the heart of the primordial lurking within the Dungeon of Lamentation and gained knowledge of the old world. It was impossible to predict how monumentally this would change things, but the king knew there was something on the horizon.

As things stood, there was an infinite well of questions about the world and its creation: How had the dungeons scattered across the world come to be? What was the truth about the Dungeon Masters sealed deep within them? Why did the Black Blade, a relic created from unknown material, even exist? Through his encounter with a monster over two millennia old, Rolo had gained the answers—or fragments of them, at least—in a matter of moments.

For millennia, such knowledge had belonged to naught but the void. If the news that Rolo had acquired it came to light, the fate of the world would surely change. Perhaps even the elves, considered no more than wisps of a daydream in the current day and age, would make their first move in centuries, determined to “collect” the information in question.

A revolution of sorts was already underway. The Magic Empire, marching to the drum of military rule, had fallen to its own hubris, leaving its neighbors astir. And now Mithra, whose authority had kept those neighbors under control in the Magic Empire’s stead, was showing signs of weakening. This was no longer just about the Kingdom of Clays—the power structure of the entire continent was being rewritten, and its catalyst, Noor, stood at the center of it all. The footfalls of his adventures would only become louder and more impactful as time went on, and that premonition was why the king felt so uncontrollably overjoyed.

Noor was as odd as King Clays had anticipated. Despite his heroics in Mithra, he had once again asked for nothing in return—something that bothered the

king to no end. How could anyone let someone to whom they owed so much go unrewarded...?

The king supposed there was no need to rush things. “One day, though...” he murmured, a smile creeping onto his face, “I’ll give you the crown itself.”

*Those with strength, rule.*

Such was the one immutable law of the Kingdom of Clays—the nation of adventurers. As much as outsiders joked about its “barbaric ways,” the custom of the strongest individual taking the throne had stood since the day the Kingdom was founded. That the Clays royal family—descendants of the first King Clays—had managed to stay in power throughout the nation’s history spoke only to their indomitable strength. Succession was not hereditary in the slightest, so if someone more capable appeared, there was a very real chance that the crown would pass to them.

Given the circumstances, Noor wouldn’t be able to take the throne anytime soon. King Clays doubted the man would even want the role. But sooner or later, the idea would consolidate into something more real. Noor had more than proved that he was worthy of ruling the Kingdom; all that remained was for him to undergo the procedures laid down by the law. Then, King Clays would simply need to give his approval.

Of course, the king’s support for Noor didn’t mean he would complain about his son or daughter succeeding him instead. Rein and Lynne were both talented beyond reproach, and the citizenry’s expectations of them were very high indeed. King Clays knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that either one of them would outshine him as sovereign, and the government they led would surely be a good one. Yet he couldn’t help but imagine a future where that outrageous man became king. What changes would the Kingdom undergo?

King Clays knew that a man in his position shouldn’t be so quick to place his hopes in someone who was by all rights still a stranger to him. He couldn’t entertain such irresponsible thoughts of abandoning his own duties. But what if the Kingdom *did* end up in Noor’s hands? It went without saying that he would introduce the most preposterous changes, defying all expectations. The king’s heart filled with excitement unbecoming of a man his age.

King Clays's dream for his retirement had always been a modest one: after he stepped down, he would return to being an adventurer, wandering wherever his path took him. Now, however, he found himself thinking it might be a lot more fun to stick around and watch Noor.

"I'm letting my daydreams get ahead of me..."

No matter his expectations, King Clays knew he had to respect Noor's wishes. If all the man wanted was a quiet life, then who was he to interfere? The king would simply watch from afar...at least for the time being. A man with Noor's strength would one day need to take center stage whether he wanted to or not. His deeds had earned him the recognition of not just the Kingdom of Clays but also Lord Randeus, currently the highest authority in the Magic Empire. Astirra, the new high priestess of the Church of Mithra, and her adjunct, Tirrence, were likewise so beholden to him that not even handing over the entire Theocracy would balance the scales.

There was also the matter of the demonfolk boy Rolo. He had befriended the Dragon of Calamity—whom he had named Rala—and could apparently instruct her as he wished, but he was loyal to Noor at the end of the day. Though he was receiving the Kingdom's protection, if push came to shove, he would always side with the man to whom he owed so much.

Noor had both the Black Blade given to him by the king and Rolo's knowledge of the primordials. The closer one looked, the more obvious it became that everything was converging around him. One had to wonder whether any single person in history had ever gathered so much power before.

The wheels had already been set in motion. It was no longer a matter of *if* the world would find out about Noor but *when*.

"It's like he was born to be a hero. When the other powers find out about him, how will they react?"

Perhaps it made more sense to ask how much his existence would shake them to their cores. The thought alone caused the king another bout of mirth.

"Still...I've dallied enough. I must get back to work."

It was time to focus. The next matter to attend to was a foreign emissary who

had come seeking an audience, and their negotiations wouldn't get anywhere while the king was wearing such a foolish expression. Beyond that, there were many others waiting to speak with him, and much work still to be done.

*Speaking of work...*

"As conceited as it might sound, handing him the Black Blade was a job rather well done."

It was rare for King Clays to indulge in self-congratulation, but he privately believed that giving Noor the Black Blade was the most beneficial thing he'd ever done. He had no interest in leaving a legacy of his own, but appearing in the epics that were sure to one day be written about Noor was an appealing concept.

"Hmm... Yes, that wouldn't be bad at all. I can't say I'd mind being a supporting character in his story."

King Clays knew he was being drawn into the adventuring epic focused on Noor—and what a riveting epic it was lining up to be! He wanted to watch the rest unfold from the best seat in the house—and in that sense, a supporting role was perfect. Amusement overcame him when he noticed the thought running through his mind.

"What an impure reason to want to remain a nation's king!"

It really was best that he retire soon and allow the brilliance of the younger generation to shine. A delighted smile arose on his scarred face, and the sound of uproarious laughter echoed through his office.



## Chapter 106: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 4

This entire time, Astirra had been trapped in the depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation.

Immediately upon hearing the news from Princess Lynneburg—and reading it in the letter Astirra had written—Oken, the Spell Sovereign, had thrown his entire schedule out the window and departed the Kingdom of Clays alone. It was the dead of night the next day when he arrived at Mithra's capital, having maintained his [Float] spell the entire time.

Looking down upon the city from above, Oken saw that the large manor currently being used as the high priestess's residence was almost undamaged, despite the events of several days ago. True to the *current* high priestess's words, the balcony door of the bedroom on the highest floor had been left open—*“in case an old friend decides to visit.”*

The old magician alighted on the balcony and immediately locked eyes with Astirra, who had been lying on the bed inside and watching the stars. She leaped up and sped out to meet him, having recognized her visitor as the friend for whom she'd been waiting. For a moment, she seemed at a loss for what to do next, but she soon broke into a smile.

“It's been a while, Oken. You've gotten better at casting [Float].”

More than two centuries had passed since Oken had seen Astirra last. She looked as though she hadn't aged a day, and now that they were together again, the first words out of the Spell Sovereign's mouth were...

“I'm sorry I never realized, Astirra. I could have saved you sooner. I... I'm sorry.”

Astirra met her friend's devastated expression with a smile. “It's okay, Oken. It's enough that you remembered me. It's been quite a while, hasn't it? Besides, had it been just us, I don't think we would have made it out. A good rescue is all about time and place. It was a good thing *he* came along.”

“Ho ho. You mean Noor? Hmph. I’m sure I could’ve handled it quite excellently on my own!” Oken stroked his long beard as he boasted, looking slightly discontent.

Astirra laughed. Though her companion’s appearance had changed, his personality—and the words spewing from his mouth—seemed the same as ever. “Oh, don’t be so obstinate. You *can* be grateful to him, you know. That aside...you’ve gotten on in years, Oken. Your beard is so fluffy that I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Hmph. Don’t judge me by the unfair standards of your people, Miss Elf! It’s been more than two centuries; *of course* I’m showing signs of my age! I do get a lot of compliments about the smoothness of my skin—for a man of my years, at least—but still. It’s silly even *trying* to compare us!”

Astirra couldn’t help but giggle at Oken’s characteristic rowdiness. She was relieved to know that her dear friend was the same as ever. “Speaking of which, how are you still alive? You’re a human, aren’t you?”

“Well, I never! I see your acerbic tongue hasn’t changed a whit. As for why... Well, it’s a long story. Mm-hmm.”

“I’m sure.”

Oken retrieved a bundle from within his robes and placed it on a small table in Astirra’s room. As she examined the crimson gemstone peeking through, she voiced the question she had resolved to ask her friend upon their reunion.

“What...happened to Roy? Afterward.”

Oken’s expression fell as he said, “We separated. You might have already heard, but...he died hating your imposter. That gem is what’s left of him. That’s Roy.”

Astirra’s gaze stayed on the translucent crimson gemstone, her face stricken with grief. “Oh. So because of me, he...”

“Nonsense. It wasn’t your fault; it was *mine*. Oh, my foolish stubbornness... If only I’d stayed with him... I would never have let things turn out how they did.”

“Please don’t condemn yourself, Oken.”

“Hmph. I could say the same to you.”

For a while, silence settled over the room as they both contemplated the gem.

“In the end, though, this gem was the key to defeating her,” Oken mused aloud. “And it was a young boy of his people who used it. I’m sure the weight’s been lifted from Roy’s heart. ‘Serves you right!’ he must be saying.”

“Rolo, wasn’t it? He was amazing. I couldn’t believe my eyes when he summoned that titanic dragon out of nowhere.”

“‘Amazing’ doesn’t even begin to describe it. That boy’s got real potential—though, of course, he couldn’t have done it without the fruits of my refined and preeminent research!”

“Yes, yes. I’m aware. Lynne was very grateful.”

“Hoh? She was? I mean...*of course* she was!” Oken began stroking his beard again, looking slightly embarrassed.

“About Rolo...” Astirra began. “Is he one of Roy’s descendants?”

“I couldn’t tell you, I’m afraid. They’re the same race, so it wouldn’t be *too* far-fetched...but too much time has passed to warrant an investigation. Nobody who might know is even around anymore.”

“I...suppose you’re right.” Sorrow flickered across Astirra’s face, but she soon brightened up again. “Still, he was wearing *exactly* the same expression as Roy used to. They must be connected in some way.”

“Perhaps they are. I’ve spent a lot of time with Rolo, and even his temperament struck me as the same. Reserved, timid, and extremely wary—but also too sweet on others. A perfect match.”

“Then it won’t be long before you’re fighting like cats and dogs.”

“Hmph! That’ll just mean he’s come into his own as an adult. I can’t imagine it happening anytime soon, though; he can be gentle to a fault.”

“They really *are* alike.”

The two friends shared a quiet laugh.

“Oh, right,” Astirra said. “Have you heard the news? I’m a mother now.”

“Ah, that. Yes, I’m well aware. I already knew the other you had a son.”

“My very own child... It’s like a dream come true. He’s so smart, talented, and—dare I say—gallant!”

“Are you *really* pretending to be the high priestess? In case you weren’t aware, that puts you on top of the world in terms of status. I can’t imagine you even *dabbling* in politics or religion... Are you going to be all right?”

Astirra laughed. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. Tirrence is taking care of all the hard parts, and everyone else has been so wonderful to me. Anytime I venture out into the city, I send people over the moon just by saying hello or shaking their hand. It makes me feel like such a bigwig!”

“That’s a very...fan-friendly way of doing things. But what do you mean you ‘feel like’ a bigwig? Are you aware how much influence you have right now...?”

Astirra laughed again. “I suppose you’re right. I don’t need to do any work, I’ve got a roof over my head, and I get all the delicious food I want. If that’s not influence, then I don’t know what is!”

“That wasn’t what I... Ah, forget it. We’ve got two centuries to catch up on, but we can save that for another time. The three of us—two alive—are together once again. We should have ourselves a formal reunion.”

“‘A formal reunion’?”

Still gazing upon the Crimson Gem that was Roy’s memento, Oken pulled another bundle from within his robes. Astirra’s eyes widened when she saw what was inside.

“You...still have them?” she asked.

Oken had taken out three silver goblets he had once purchased from a shady street vendor. Though they were now slightly timeworn, there was no mistaking them—they were the very same cups the members of the Philosopher’s Goblet had once used.

“Ho ho. To be honest, I couldn’t tell you how many times I’ve thought about selling them off. They’re priceless historical artifacts, you know—cups from the

adventuring days of the Demon King who shocked the world, Mithra's high priestess, and the one and only Spell Sovereign. How much do you think people would pay for such treasures? If you guessed 'nothing at all,' then you're right—no one believes we were once comrades who entrusted our lives to one another. That's why I decided to keep them; I didn't have much of a choice."

Astirra smiled; hearing one of Oken's long-winded excuses was nostalgic, in a way. "I see, I see. So if they gained value, you'd sell them?"

Oken paused for a moment. "That goes without saying! Think about how much they'd be worth if you and I *both* guaranteed their legitimacy! We could artificially inflate the price and gouge a rich noble or merchant for all they're worth! Though...I suppose we could also do that with fakes. They wouldn't be able to tell."

Astirra had to laugh. She'd expected a response along those lines. "So...you're going to hold on to the genuine articles for a while?"

"Of course. I won't be able to keep them *forever*, but I want to have them for as long as I'm still alive."

"Yes, I think that's for the best. Please take good care of them."

Oken laughed as he set the three goblets down and poured wine into them. Astirra was about to take one when her hand paused momentarily.

"Oh, Oken. Do you still remember how to do the next part?"

"Of course I do! Don't treat me like some doddering old man. I was the one who thought this up in the first place!"

"You were, weren't you?"

The man before her hadn't changed a bit, Astirra thought. But as she studied him with his goblet in hand, she couldn't help but feel the passage of time all at once—months and years gone by in the blink of an eye. Loneliness welled up from within her, clouding her face and causing her to cast her eyes down.

Oken gave a kind smile. "Rest assured," he said, merry notes coloring his voice. "No matter how much time passes, I'll never forget you or Roy. Over the past two centuries, I've dreamed of this day more times than I can count."

“Right... Right. You’re absolutely right.” Astirra raised her head to face the old Oken. “Oh, so... Does that mean you also *cried* more times than you can count? I bet you did.”

“You’ll not get me to admit anything!”

Astirra giggled. “It was a silly question to begin with. You *are* Oken the Crybaby, after all.”

“What kind of a title is that?”

“Roy and I used it for you behind your back. We also had Oken the Pompous, Oken the Fraud, and... Oh! Oken of the Many Hangovers.”

“I could very happily have gone the rest of my days without hearing that...”

“That wouldn’t do at all. They’re very important memories for me.” Her cheer restored, Astirra took one of the small goblets. “Well, then—shall we? Though...don’t you think it’s a little long? And there are all those embarrassing lines—things I’d never want to say in front of anyone else. Do you think we could amend it slightly?”

“After all this time... It’s a little late to complain, don’t you think?!”

“I suppose you’re right. It really is rather late.”

The two raised their small silver goblets and recited the words they had long since committed to memory:

“We three goblets thank the misfortune that brought about our meeting—and the fortune that returns us here alive. We toast to the hardships we have endured and to all the magnificent adventures we’ve shared.”

The Philosopher’s Goblet had made the same toast each time they’d returned to their tavern alive. It was a custom that only its three members knew, founded in the assumption that they would always reunite. This was the first time they had performed it while one of them was absent.

Nevertheless, Oken and Astirra considered it the right thing to have done. They had promised to speak those very same words during each of their reunions—to speak the only vow of that kind they had made. They hadn’t ever discussed what they would do if someone from their group went missing, so

they carried on as though they were still three.

Their third member was no longer in this world. Oken and Astirra knew that well, which was why they barely even reacted when the third goblet shifted ever so slightly—when the Crimson Gem seemed to flash in response to their voices, and when the figure of a friend seemed to appear by their sides. They knew it was all simply an illusion—a phantom brought into being by their own impossible longing.

Yet that one moment was all they needed. Phantom or not, they wished with all their hearts to share one last drink with the friend whom they had once adventured with. Even knowing their prayer would go unanswered, Oken and Astirra raised their goblets and spoke the name of the companion they had lost.

“We dedicate these goblets to our dear friend Roy.”

There was a quiet *clink* as two of the cups knocked together. The third remained in place, sitting in front of the Crimson Gem; the man who had once raised it was no longer with them. The silence of the night enveloped the two friends’ prayer, and all was still.





Oken and Astirra lowered their goblets without a word, staring downward. Then—“Ah!”—Astirra gazed up with a start.

“What’s the matter?”

“I...thought I heard someone laugh just now.”

“You did...?” Oken looked around searchingly but saw no one. “How could you possibly have heard something? There’s nobody else here.”

“No...” Astirra giggled quietly. “I’m certain that Roy was looking at you just now. He was looking at you and *laughing*.”

“Hmph. I suspect any laughter was coming from *you*.”

“It wasn’t, I assure you. Oh, look! He’s pointing at you and laughing so hard that he can’t breathe! ‘Who’s that bearded monster over there?!’ he’s saying.”

“‘Bearded mon—’? Don’t you think that’s going a little too far?”

Astirra giggled again. “You could always shave it. Then Roy might be able to recognize you.”

“Ho ho! I’m not quite ready to do something so drastic... Wait, you’re not *seriously* asking me to, are you? Please don’t make me. Please?”

“It’s not me you have to convince; it’s Roy over there.”

“Again, there’s nobody else here!”

Oken and Astirra were the only ones present; no one else was in the room with them. But then, for a fleeting instant...

The pair could be forgiven for thinking they had seen Roy by their side, watching their banter with the same wry smile he had always worn during their adventuring days.

## Tirrence and Astirra

“Hnnngh... It’s almost scary how well I slept. Why am I on such a nice bed, again? And...where *am* I...?”

Astirra looked around, amazed to see such a beautifully arranged room. No matter how hard she tried to remember, she couldn’t quite recall why she was somewhere so extravagant. She was used to sleeping on a hard floor beneath a distorted sky...but this wasn’t like that at all. Her slumber still clouding her thoughts, she studied the subtle elegance of the room’s furnishings as she basked in the pleasant warmth of the morning sunlight coming through the window.

And then, at last, she remembered.

“Oh, right... I’m the high priestess.”

Astirra wasn’t an adventurer anymore; as far as anyone was concerned, she was the woman in charge of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra, a country she knew barely anything about.

“Right, then. I’ll do my best today too!”

Astirra stretched, slipped out of her fluffy white bed, and used the room’s large, full-length mirror to briefly fix her hair. Then, once she looked presentable enough, she stepped out of her room and into the hallway. Waiting there was a masked woman in a white robe, who bowed upon seeing her.

“Good morning, Your Holy Highness.”

“Good morning, Rylda. Another wonderful morning to— Hmm?” Astirra focused on the woman; something about her seemed out of place.

“I-Is something the matter?”

“No, it just feels like you’re a little different from yesterday... Oh! You changed your hairstyle, right? It looks great on you. I thought your old one was nice too, but you’re looking even more lovely today.”

“Y-You’re too kind, Your Holy Highness! Your words are wasted on me!” Rylda shrank back—even more so when Astirra smiled at her—but not out of terror; she was just especially embarrassed.

“You don’t need to be so deferential.” Astirra giggled.

“R-Right.”

These days, it was a secret delight of Astirra’s to watch the reactions of the people she spoke with. A simple greeting was enough to send those who worked in the large manor where she currently resided—the Founder’s Manse—over the moon. The residence had all manner of employees, and they would all step aside and respectfully bow when they came across the high priestess. She didn’t find it unpleasant; rather, it made her feel like she’d become somebody important.

Astirra had spent so long isolated underground that she was starved of company. To make up for that, she always stopped to converse with those who moved out of her path. This had surprised them at first, but with time, they had opened their hearts to her, and now they spoke to her without reservation. Astirra now knew all their names and faces, from the guards at the gate to the young maids who took care of the laundry and other miscellaneous affairs. She knew some of them well enough that she could even list off their family members.

As unfamiliar as it was, Astirra was enjoying her new life in Mithra. She had found it somewhat strange when Holy Prince Tirrence—the country’s true reigning authority—had asked her to stay and pretend to be the high priestess, but she had already fallen captive to her fluffy bed and the manse’s delicious meals. If the prince changed his mind and decided to kick her out, she’d probably beg him to let her stay.

*A taste of luxury can be a scary thing...* Astirra thought as she strode through the manse’s wide and tastefully furnished corridors. She soon came to a stately wooden door and greeted the knight in silver armor standing outside it.

“Good morning, Sigir.”

“A fine morning to you as well, Your Holy Highness. I am truly blessed that you would go out of your way to greet me.”

“Is Tirrence working right now?”

“Yes, the holy prince is at his desk. Though he is seeing to his official duties, he said that he would receive you whenever you awoke.”

“Then I think I’ll take him up on that. I’m going in, okay?”

“By all means, Your Holy Highness.”

The knight clad in silver armor opened the thick wooden door for Astirra, then closed it behind her and locked it from the outside with a specialized key. Tirrence looked up from the documents he had been writing on and stood.

“Good morning, mother,” he said politely. “You’re up early once again. Are you feeling better already?”

“Yes, I’m slowly getting used to being an early riser. I can’t spend all my time sleeping like I did in the dungeon. It’s about time I start getting up in the mornings!”

Though they weren’t the same gender, Tirrence and Astirra looked quite alike. Their ears were slightly longer and angled more horizontally than a human’s, their hair was a bright, soft green, like the fresh verdure of spring, and they both had fair skin and beautiful features. Someone who didn’t know any better would believe they were mother and son without hesitation.

But of course, the two weren’t related at all. Their relationship was purely contractual, with each person playing their respective roles. One was a stranger merely acting the part of “High Priestess Astirra,” the highest authority in the country. The other was Holy Prince Tirrence, the true political authority who had just recently come of age. The former called the latter “son,” and the latter called the former “mother.” That was the basis of their shared lives.

In other words, they were accomplices.

Despite the nature of their agreement and the fact they had spent only a few days together, the air between them was pleasant and affectionate. They had formed a bond stronger—though certainly more unusual—than the one between a genuine parent and child.

“Still, only a few days have passed since all the chaos,” Tirrence said. “You

can't have recovered that quickly. Please don't overdo it."

Astirra chuckled. "I could say the same to you. I appreciate your concern, but a mother can't just sit back and let her son do all the work. I need to show that I can pull my weight!"

The "son" in question smiled at her. Since the day they'd met, they had pretended to be mother and child in front of others. Even in private, they did their best to maintain appearances, never knowing when somebody might be watching. Their act had ultimately become a natural part of their daily lives, the border between truth and fiction becoming so hazy that it was hard to tell whether it remained at all.

As for what the two people involved in the deception thought... One was of the opinion that "it doesn't really matter, does it?" The other was quick to respond, "Actually...it rather does." That alone encapsulated the peculiar nature of their parent-child relationship.

"Does that mean you intend to go out into the city again today?" Tirrence asked.

"It does," Astirra replied. "That's not a problem, is it? Would you rather I rein it in a little?"

"No, far from it. As you're aware, it hasn't been long since the recent disaster. The hearts of the people are still uneasy. Your presence alone will greatly bolster their spirits."

Astirra couldn't help but laugh again. "In that case, there's no reason for me not to."

"That said...haven't you been going out every day?" The concern in Tirrence's voice sounded like that of a genuine son. "Maybe you should take a break. You must be exhausted."

"High Priestess" Astirra smiled and shook her head. "Not at all. I was alone underground for such a painfully long time. Going into town and getting to speak with all sorts of people is amazingly fun. Just a wave and a hello, and they're overjoyed. It feels like they're cheering *me* up. Plus, it's pretty easy for me to move rubble with my wind magic when I've got a spare moment. It's like

an extra perk—it doesn't tire me out in the slightest!"

As upbeat as Astirra sounded, Tirrence knew she had worked tirelessly to help the public since the day she'd first appeared. Her assistance with aid and rescue operations throughout the ruined city had amazed everyone who'd seen her. Anytime she heard about anyone who had sustained injuries during the chaos, she hurried to their side to heal them. And when she heard that somebody was in a fix because of all the rubble strewn about, she used her potent wind magic to clear it away. Much of the citizenry had witnessed her "miracle work," and the pleas for her aid were only increasing by the day. Astirra maintained that she could manage it all with one hand tied behind her back, but when Tirrence considered her lack of rest, commitment to helping out, and constant willingness to interact with others, it was hard to believe she *wasn't* exhausted.

"I see..." Tirrence hesitantly replied. "Then please take care, and don't overdo it."

Astirra chuckled softly. "You worry too much, Tirrence. After that monster kept me trapped underground all those years, I could really use the fresh air. From here on out, I want to catch up on the life I missed out on—so it's a good thing I've more than enough stamina. It's honestly a shame that I need to spend so many hours of the day asleep!"

Tirrence could not deny that he harbored suspicions about Astirra. Her actions over the past few days had only further cemented the people's trust in the "high priestess" and her authority. It was enough to make him wonder whether it was all part of some premeditated plan.

Nonetheless, each time those doubts surfaced in his mind, Tirrence did whatever he could to push them aside. He thought it far more likely that Astirra's actions were a by-product of who she was; this was just her natural response to the situation and the natural result that had arisen from it.

The current situation was a far cry from the formal sympathy visits the previous high priestess had performed, yet it was clearly doing more to win her the citizenry's hearts. She interacted with them as considerately as if she were their neighbor, indirectly discerning what they needed and providing it on the spot. And at times when nothing could be done, she laughed and cried with

them.

To the people of Mithra, Astirra's work was a balm for their aching hearts—but Holy Prince Tirrence viewed it as something more than that. In her actions, he saw the ideal traits for a country's leader. "In that case...don't let me stop you," he said. "I'm sure the people are eagerly waiting for you."

Astirra giggled. "Right? I'm looking forward to seeing them too. All right—I'm going."

"Take care, mother."

"Oh, but first..." Astirra's hand stopped before it reached the door, and she spun on her heel to face Tirrence with a beaming smile. "I almost forgot to do the usual!"

The prince looked agitated; by "the usual," Astirra was referring to the mother-son hug they had shared the day they'd met each other. "Um, mother..."

"Yes?"

"I'm aware that I agreed to it back then...but do we really need to do it every day?"

"Of course! We're supposed to be mother and son, aren't we? Method acting is an important part of that! All the famous actors and actresses do it."

"Certainly, but..."

"Could it be that...you don't enjoy it? We don't have to keep doing it if that's the case."

Tirrence paused. "N-No, that's not what I'm saying..." He didn't dislike their hugs; instead, the problem had to do with his perception. From a young age, he had come to see his mother as someone he couldn't trust. He'd never known what it was like to be vulnerable around one, let alone engage in physical contact with her.

There *was* a certain persuasiveness about Astirra's claim that they needed to put more work into acting like a true mother and son...though that did nothing to assuage Tirrence's embarrassment. He was an *adult* now.

“Still, isn’t that kind of thing mostly for children?” he asked.

“Sure,” Astirra agreed. “But did you get many hugs when you were young?”

“No...” Tirrence eventually conceded. “But is that really a surprise, considering my mother’s *true* form?”

“Right? As I told you then, like you, I don’t have any memories of such things. But we want to maintain this act of ours, don’t we? So I think it’s important that we know how it feels. If we want to be a better mother and son, we need to know what our roles entail—or something like that.”

Her words seemed to make sense, and Tirrence remembered what she had said about her past. She had apparently been exiled from the home of the elves upon turning fifteen, and she suspected that they had erased her memories of living there. As a result, she had no clear recollections of her family.

Tirrence saw no reason to doubt Astirra. In fact, he was rather confident that her suspicions were correct. The problem was, he also had the vague sense that her reasoning didn’t quite add up. Though she always claimed it was for the sake of their act, she always seemed unusually excited about hugs.

“Besides, your mother basically neglected you for the past fifteen years, right?” Astirra asked. “We’ll need to make up for that, little by little. Like right now, for example.”

After a few moments of silence, Holy Prince Tirrence capitulated to the high priestess’s reasoning with a quiet “Very well...” It was something of a daily occurrence by that point.

“Okay. Let’s do this!”

Astirra beamed and, without hesitation, spread her arms wide for the prince. He obediently stepped forward and allowed her to hug him, not resisting in the slightest as she placed a hand on his head and gently tousled his hair.

This exchange—including the little debate that had preceded it—was an everyday routine for Tirrence and Astirra. It was almost a ritual of sorts. The prince wondered how long it would need to continue, though he didn’t find it unpleasant. Was this what having a real mother was like?



Tirrence took comfort in the warm touch of another and the feelings of security it brought...but it wasn't enough to stop his embarrassment. As his "mother" gently ran her fingers through his hair, he prayed that nobody would choose that exact moment to walk in.

"Phew. Thank you, Tirrence," Astirra eventually said. "I'm all recharged and ready to... Um, I mean, it really feels like I've gained a greater understanding of my role. Yes."

"Right... I'm glad to have helped." Although their hug had been relatively brief, Tirrence's face was bright red.

"Now I can do my best today too!" Astirra declared with a chuckle and a satisfied smile. "All right. Away I go!"

It was with those parting words far too casual for a woman of her station that High Priestess Astirra trotted over to the door and took her leave. She had come and gone like a gust of wind, and as Tirrence sat alone in his office, he couldn't help but sigh. She never changed.

"I wonder if this really is all right... Though I suppose there's nothing to be done about it now."

By all rights, Astirra was required only to play the part of the high priestess. Maybe the rest was her own personality. Though she insisted that acting was her strong suit, it was clear to everyone that she was nothing like her predecessor. She hadn't even known what the previous high priestess was like. Tirrence had initially thought to teach her...but each time he considered it, he dismissed the idea. Astirra was already unifying the people—exceeding his expectations, in fact.

Though she looked the same as the previous high priestess, Astirra's personality couldn't have been more distinct. The drastic change in her behavior had confused her retainers to the point that their comments had started reaching Tirrence's ears. However, further inquiry revealed that none of them were negative.

For one reason or another, Astirra's retainers were all pleased with the "new" high priestess. Puzzled though they were by the stark changes to her character, they had always been her faithful servants—particularly those such as Sigir of

the Twelve Sacred Envoys, who had come to an especially favorable conclusion. “This is Her Holy Highness’s true nature,” he had said. “How honored I am to behold it.”

In the end, everyone had cheerfully accepted their “new” ruler. It both relieved Tirrence and reminded him that in times of strife, the people always looked to the high priestess as the target of their faith.

Through his investigation, the prince had discovered that Astirra’s surprising behavior was swiftly closing the distance between her and her retainers. She spoke to the guards on a daily basis, and they all went around boasting that the high priestess knew who they were. The Twelve Sacred Envoys, whom the previous high priestess hadn’t even bothered to distinguish, had given their oaths of allegiance all over again simply because Astirra had memorized their names.

The manse’s break rooms were always abuzz with the chatter of delighted maids, sharing how the high priestess had complimented their hair or attire—and nobody felt the need to scold them. The chamberlain had reprioritized their work in a redoubled endeavor to please their esteemed ruler, and everyone had thrown themselves into the task with great enthusiasm. These days, morale was at an all-time high, and the mansion’s employees were finishing their work faster and more perfectly than ever before, even going as far as to use the extra time to complete other duties.

It seemed that someone was always in high spirits because Astirra had greeted, conversed with, or praised them. She had already memorized everyone’s names and faces, and even the families of certain people. Even when Tirrence had inquired, hoping to find out more, she had just smiled and said, “People’s names are easy to remember! Kinds of alcohol, not so much—though I still manage, mind you!”

In just a few days, she had gained a better understanding of the manse than even the prince himself.

The holy knights deployed throughout the city on various jobs had also changed. Compared to before, when they’d obeyed the high priestess out of nothing but fear, they were working far more smoothly. Astirra had done much

to recognize their individual efforts, stepping in to help when she deemed it necessary and praising them freely when she felt they had done something she couldn't have done on her own. It had spurred another surge of devotion and dedication from her already-loyal champions.

Astirra had then brought the knights drinks—an act that had almost given them heart attacks—and warned them with a gentle smile to rest properly and not overexert themselves. Anyone who had even attempted to do otherwise had received a scolding from their comrades, who had chastised them for daring to ignore the high priestess's wisdom, leading to the creation of a balanced and self-regulating workforce.

Everything was proceeding smoothly—and it was all thanks to Astirra's presence. Though activity in the city was still nothing compared to its previous state, the people's adoration for the high priestess had grown to levels that even Tirrence struggled to believe.

The general populace welcomed Astirra with open arms. Before, the high priestess had seemed entirely out of reach, hidden from the public behind a veil of awe and mystery...but now she went out into the city and interacted with her people. She consoled those who had lost their homes, easily cleared away debris with her wind magic, and assiduously contributed to the reconstruction effort.

Not a single person suspected that Astirra was an impostor. They actually took solace in how hard she was working for everybody's sake. There were more than a few who shed tears, their hands clasped in worship as they decreed the high priestess to be everything they had imagined and more.

Astirra gracefully accepted the attention thrust upon her, always with a gentle smile on her lips. Given the dire state the city was in, one might have expected an increase in crime, but the reconstruction effort was proceeding smoothly and peacefully. Tirrence believed this to be because of the new high priestess, who oversaw operations with a welcoming smile. She really was the ideal embodiment of a country's leader.

At the outset, Tirrence had approached Astirra about working together because her uncanny resemblance to the previous high priestess made her an

invaluable asset. She had also possessed the certain “something” he was looking for.

Tirrence had been ready to provide for Astirra even if she couldn’t live up to his lofty expectations, but she had turned out to be perfect. No, more than that—the new high priestess really had changed everything for the better. The prince genuinely believed he could entrust everything to her without needing to worry about the consequences.

Of course, deep down, Tirrence knew their situation would never be so simple. The Holy Theocracy’s status and influence had been carefully acquired through the previous high priestess’s political strong-arming and manipulative diplomacy. The prince had elected to abandon those methods in favor of something far less vicious. It wouldn’t be easy...but he wanted to use the people’s devotion to the new high priestess to point them in a better direction.

Once upon a time, Mithra had forged ahead down a treacherous path—a path paved with the lies of an arrogant monster. But now that monster was gone, and the country was at a crossroads. Tirrence was prepared to do whatever it took to ensure the Theocracy a brighter future, and while his chosen accomplice was performing her role to remarkable success—better than he had ever hoped—the challenges ahead were exceptionally daunting.

“And this is one thing I could never ask Lynne to help me with...”

Princess Lynneburg was an upstanding individual. Tirrence needed only to ask and she would come. But this trial was the Theocracy’s to conquer; relying on its friends to save the day would lead it further astray from its goal of securing independence. The prince had gone far enough by involving Astirra. By all rights, she had nothing to do with the Theocracy...yet she had volunteered to become his accomplice.

Indeed, this was something the Holy Theocracy had to overcome on its own. Tirrence returned to sitting behind his desk, ready to get back to work.



In the holy city’s central district, a sparse gathering of people worked to clear the debris—remnants of stone buildings destroyed during the recent disaster. Including the holy knights, who were working under the high priestess’s orders,

everyone in the city was devoted to the effort. But while visible progress had been made, there was still much to do.

“Her Holy Highness is here! She came again today!”

Men and women paused their work in response to the man’s shout, and a buzz ran through them.

“How blessed we are to see her divine beauty...”

“I can’t believe I’m getting to see her two days in a row. What luck!”

“Hey, don’t gawk so much. It’s disrespectful.”

“Quiet! She’s about to speak! We don’t want to miss what she says!”

The high priestess marched straight into the throng of people, who immediately rearranged themselves into neat rows. She had arrived at a brisk pace, but she wasn’t out of breath, and there was even a spring in her step. Only once she’d arrived at the very center of the group did she stop, straighten up, and greet those gathered with a smile.

“Good morning, everyone! Let’s do our best once again!”

Her words of encouragement silenced the crowd, and they all returned to clearing the rubble with a renewed sense of unity.

“Right,” Astirra began. “As usual, I’ll take care of the large pieces. Please keep your distance until they’re out of the way. [Float].”

The first spell the high priestess showed the citizenry bright and early that morning was one of her specialties. Even those among her audience who were seasoned in the study of magic considered it a miraculous feat—one they could never even dream of reproducing. She performed it with a smile, levitating debris high up into the air before setting it down in an orderly stack in the designated location.

“Phew. All done,” Astirra said. “Sorry, everyone, but can I leave the rest of the cleanup to you? I need to move on to the next work area.”

“Of course, Your Holy Highness!” replied a chorus of voices.

Astirra left the holy knight supervising the area with a set of rough

instructions, then headed to her next destination at a light jog. Several days of working together meant everyone had naturally settled into their respective roles. Debris that couldn't be moved with man power was entrusted to the high priestess and her potent magic; then the general citizenry dealt with the rest.

Compared to the hours upon hours spent by Mithra's populace, the high priestess always finished her work in a matter of seconds. She accomplished so much in such a short time that all who witnessed it could only marvel at the sight.

"The next area is... Right. It's this way."

The high priestess's overwhelming contributions meant the city's reconstruction was proceeding at a frighteningly quick pace. In only a few days, four of the six districts had been fully cleared of rubble, and work in the last two was slated to conclude within the day. Afterward, they would start rebuilding houses to put roofs over the heads of the unfortunate who had lost their homes.

"Everything's cleaned up quite nicely. I think I can call it a day."

The high priestess's manner of speech stood out in contrast to her status, but her people did not mind; many thought she was doing it intentionally to make them feel more comfortable. There were even times when she cried with the children made homeless by the fighting. Her empathy was so clearly sincere that it sparked hope in those whose losses had pulled them down into the darkest depths of despair.

Prior to the recent disaster, the high priestess had graced the Theocracy's people with her presence only on formal occasions observed on a national scale. Wrapped in a veil of mystery, she had always been hard to approach and best venerated from a distance. Audiences with her had been permitted only in the most exceptional circumstances, and the citizenry had spoken about her in the same way one might discuss a character of myth.

Now, Astirra treated her people like neighbors, always regarding them with a gentle smile. Those of the holy city who saw her in person pledged themselves to her all over again, convinced she was a ruler who deserved their loyalty.

Not a single person seemed to suspect that someone new had taken over as

the high priestess; they were too overcome with reverence and gratitude as they watched her work with unrivaled determination. It would not be long before the people's hearts, heavy from their losses and the disaster, united with renewed strength.



“Hey, Sigir. Is it just me, or do you look like you’ve been having more fun lately? I can practically see the tail wagging back and forth behind you.”

“What are you on about, Miranda? I don’t have a tail.” The silver-armored warrior reached a hand behind himself to check.

Miranda sighed into her mask. “I don’t mean you *actually* have one. Here, let me reiterate in a way that even you should understand: I know Her Holy Highness has changed a lot, but whenever you see her these days, you remind me of an overexcited dog!”

“Yes, my duty of protecting Her Holy Highness has felt more fulfilling than ever before. I can’t say I see your point.”

“Oh? So you admit it, do you?”

“Don’t get me wrong—my loyalty to her did not waver, and it never will. But even you must have noticed the preciousness she now exudes.”

“‘Preciousness’...?” Miranda repeated, her head cocked. She’d never heard her colleague use a word like that before.

“Yes. Though her presence used to be so solemn and austere, and she was a sublime example of sternness and intellect—”

“Hooold up. Since when were you so talkative? And what’s with all the new vocabulary? Oh, whatever. Go on.”

Sigir paused for a moment, regathering his thoughts, then continued. “These days, her intelligence is no less apparent in her kind demeanor. There’s a tenderness to her expression, but her eyes always contain this unshakable resolve—the perfect balance of grace and bearing that gently envelops all who look upon her. And although both demeanors are precious and irreplaceable...she changed into *this* one by choice. It must be at least in part

because she's relieved that His Holy Highness has come of age. In other words, this is her truest and most dazzling self. If that does not deserve all of my devotion as her loyal servant, then what does?"

Miranda hadn't missed the fact that Sigir was balling his fists tighter and tighter as he continued his energetic monologue or that the words were veritably spilling from his mouth. He'd never been one to blabber on so much.

"I guess you're right," she said. "I *do* prefer Her Holy Highness's new demeanor. She felt unapproachable before, but now she's... How do I put it...? She's softer around the edges and easier to speak with. It's wonderful."

"But who are we to pass judgment on her? My feelings got the better of me and rushed out all on their own... Let us say we were both simply muttering to ourselves and forget it ever happened."

"Uh-huh..." Miranda sighed. "You've changed a lot too, Sigir. There was that whole thing with the demonfolk kid, for one."

"Incidentally, I heard you received a new mission directly from Her Holy Highness. I don't know the details, but I trust you'll stake your life on seeing it through."

"I don't know about calling it a mission. She just asked me to paint a portrait of Holy Prince Tirrence for her."

"Paint? I didn't know that was one of your talents."

"I've...never told anyone this, but I originally wanted to be an artist. Her Holy Highness just happened to see me sketching during my downtime."

"An artist? How did you come to be my colleague, then?"

"I could ask myself the same question. I took the holy knight examination because of the salary, and before I knew it, I was in a combat division. I was just doing my best to survive, yet I somehow ended up as one of the Sinistral of the Twelve Sacred Envoys. I'm not a career warrior like you are, you know."

"I see. Still, whichever path you took, you've been given the momentous duty of depicting His Holy Highness's gallant figure, which I will note shares a close resemblance to that of our high priestess. Your work will be admired for the



next hundred—no, *thousand*—years. Rejoice! Her Holy Highness would not have ordered a portrait from you if your talents were not genuine. I expect you to devote your all to it, even if doing so uses up the rest of your life span.”

“I... I’m well aware, okay?” Miranda grinned behind her silver mask, remembering how the high priestess had praised her art. To conceal her embarrassment, she switched tack. “Th-That aside, don’t you think the holy prince has been working himself too hard lately? He almost never leaves his office, and rumor has it he barely sleeps. Elvish blood or not, that can’t be good for him.”

Miranda had only brought up Holy Prince Tirrence as a way of changing the subject, but now that she’d mentioned it, he really was overworking. Sigr gave a firm nod, evidently agreeing.

“You’re right. Her Holy Highness is always checking in on him as a result. She even went to see him this morning. Still...he must have his reasons for striving so hard with his duties. As his loyal servants, we should refrain from remarking upon it without further context.”

“I guess you’re right. It *was* a bit rude of me.”

“We of the masses cannot ever hope to comprehend their profound intentions. Nevertheless, we can still devote ourselves to supporting them from below. There is nothing else we can do as their servants. Right now, we can only have faith in His Holy Highness and wait.”

“You know, you’d be much easier to deal with if you were just a pain in the butt. Why do you have to make decent points every now and then?”



“No... These aren’t the words the high priestess of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra needs to say.”

Holy Prince Tirrence had been holed up in his office for some time now, working on the same draft. The ends of his desk were piled high with his previous failed attempts, and the stacks teetered dangerously on the verge of toppling over. As for what he was writing, it was a speech for “High Priestess Astirra” to deliver to all adherents of the Church of Mithra.

“Can’t use this either... That part’s no good... Blast, I just can’t get it right.”

Tirrence wrote a few lines, considered them, and then folded the sheet he was working on in half and added it to the stack of rejects beside him. A fresh idea came to him, and he began writing...only to stop when the words just seemed to come out wrong. For the past few days, he had been stuck in this constant cycle.

By now, news of the holy city’s destruction had spread to other countries, and many influential figures now had their eyes on the Theocracy. They wanted to know what had occurred, and who could blame them? A grand disaster had shaken the capital of one of the most prominent players on the world stage. The Theocracy’s governing authorities, Holy Prince Tirrence foremost among them, could not remain passive in the face of so much attention; he needed to leverage the situation.

Thankfully, he already had the greatest means at his disposal.

Oken, the Spell Sovereign—one of Astirra the adventurer’s old companions—had informed Tirrence of an innovative magical item of great potential called the oracle’s orb. With it, the high priestess could transmit her own image and words across the continent to her followers. Tirrence had placed an order with the Spell Sovereign on the spot, requesting enough to distribute to every branch of the Church of Mithra across the land, and the old magician had replied that he would start on their production right away.

It was a prime opportunity. This speech was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to give the Holy Theocracy a fresh start, made possible by the efforts of Princess Lynneburg of the Kingdom of Clays and her companions. Tirrence had no intention of letting it slip through his fingers. And yet...

“I can’t get it right...”

He sighed despite himself, leaned back, and stared up at the ceiling. After several days spent shut away in his office, he was no closer to having a speech for his new mother to read. He did not even feel like he was improving.

Tirrence had known from the beginning that this would not be an easy task. The draft he was grappling with was not merely an orderly set of words put to paper; it was the speech that would indicate the Holy Theocracy’s new direction

to its people, who venerated its high priestess, as well as to outsiders concerned about its future policies. Given this, the prince was having a tremendously hard time choosing the right words.

Thanks to their guests from the neighboring Kingdom of Clays, the monster that had called itself Holy Mithra and ruled the Theocracy since its founding was gone. Tirrence's battle with it still raged on, however. He and everyone else who remained needed to overcome everything it had created if they truly wanted to seize victory.

Though Holy Mithra had been unquestionably evil, it had also been a political juggernaut—one that had cared only about its own needs, but one nonetheless. It had been a genuine calamity in every sense of the word, and unless the prince managed to dismantle its lingering influence, the Theocracy would never move on.

"I suppose I shouldn't expect to resolve everything so quickly..."

Underneath the veneer of virtue the Theocracy had worn, there existed only falsehoods. Though it had maintained the pretense that it could provide the path to heaven, it had actually been on a destructive descent into the depths of hell. For centuries, the monster at its helm had carefully steered the country toward that destination, and correcting its course would not be easy. It was best that the Theocracy not expect to be of equal standing with foreign nations for a while.

Nevertheless, Tirrence's situation would not allow him to take his time; the waves of change were coming whether he wanted them or not. Not every neighbor was as gracious as the Kingdom of Clays. Far from it, in fact—there were many waiting in the wings who would eagerly bare their fangs now that the high priestess was no longer browbeating them into submission. That harsh reality weighed down on the prince. He could not afford to be lighthearted...yet he suddenly recalled the woman who had embraced him that morning.

*How does she manage it...?*

It was an honest question. In the span of a few days, she had changed everything. Her hard work was doing wonders to dispel the lingering remnants of the monster's influence, but was that her intention? Was that the reason she

had decided to stay in the Theocracy?

The answer was no.

As much as Astirra had said she was “the kind of person to hold grudges,” she seemed to have already forgotten them. She had eyes only for the immediate future. Her sincerity and freedom of spirit had already saved many hearts, and Tirrence’s was no exception. Her gentle demeanor meant she was easily able to wriggle her way into a person’s good graces.

Tirrence recalled the warmth of Astirra’s embrace that morning. To carry out her role, she needed only to be herself. She was someone who would always support those facing hardships and do her best to encourage them to hang on. Her presence inspired those who had lost everything to pick themselves up and keep forging ahead. The prince could not do any of that—and the thought made him smile.

“In the end, I can only rely on others...”

Only a few days ago, he had entrusted the Theocracy’s fate to Princess Lynneburg. And when the country had faced the greatest crisis in its long history, he had been saved by a stranger who had just happened to be traveling with her. Now it seemed that he would need to put Mithra in the hands of the “mother” he barely even knew.

Tirrence had spent his entire life refusing to trust others and striving to accomplish everything on his own. But when he reflected on the past few days, he realized that he hadn’t been doing much of that at all. The change suited him, he thought. His experiences with the new high priestess gave him hope that it was okay to rely on those around him.

Astirra never gave orders; she *listened*. She nestled up to others, encouraged them, and showed them the empathy they needed during such trying times. Her compassion alone had reinvigorated the people of Mithra, inspiring them to face the future of their own volition. It was a touching display of inner strength brought about by the warm light they had all gathered around.

The Theocracy had already found the path it should take—the path its citizens actively desired. All the prince had to do was stick with them, as Astirra had already demonstrated. He wasn’t apart from the citizenry—he was one of

them. Another face in the crowd, able to lean on those around him for support. That was just how things were now.

The recent changes weren't a bad thing. Not in the slightest. It wasn't like there was some predetermined path they had to take, anyway. Tirrence didn't need to decide the Theocracy's future alone; he could simply hold steady and advance with everybody else. As long as they acted together as one and with smiles on their faces, it would all work out in the end.

It was strange, the prince thought; when had he become such an optimist?

On a whim, Tirrence opened a window, letting in a comfortable breeze that scattered the stacks of rejected drafts. As he regarded the mess of papers now strewn across the room, he couldn't help but laugh.

"Doesn't matter, really. I'll need to start from scratch again, anyway."

The prince's earlier frustration was nowhere to be found.

Later, after calling for someone to help him clean up the papers littering his office, Holy Prince Tirrence found that his brush raced across the fresh page he had started on. He was giving life to the most important speech in the Holy Theocracy's history—one the new high priestess would deliver to the entire world.

## Afterword

Thank you very much for reading this volume. This marks the end of the three-volume Holy Theocracy Arc. How was it?

In the previous afterword, I mentioned that my initial plan was to complete the Holy Theocracy Arc in the fourth volume; but now that I'm looking at how enormous this volume is, I'm realizing what an absurd assumption that was. (Volumes four and five together would make for a seven-hundred-page behemoth. It'd pretty much resemble a dictionary!) Back when I sent the manuscript for volume four to my editor, I was gently advised that it might be best to divide the content between two books. Deep down, they were probably thinking, *"There's just no way we're fitting all this into a single volume."* (That's what I would've thought in their position, anyway.) The fact that my editor didn't outright tell me it was impossible speaks to just how kind they are. But of course, if we'd actually attempted it, we would have run into all sorts of problems. Light novels don't get as thick as dictionaries for a reason! Looking back, I think it would also have been impossible from a workload perspective.

Furthermore, speaking as the author, splitting that volume into two meant more illustrations by Kawaguchi-sensei. That was the best thing about the decision, if you ask me! The pictures in this volume are magnificent. Words can't even begin to describe how much I adore the two color illustrations, but I couldn't help breaking into a grin when I saw the eerie depiction of "Holy Mithra" making its appearance in the sky. Ines's smile was wonderful too!

The other illustrations were all equally crucial to this volume. We might not have been able to see them all if we'd tried to cram everything into a single book, and what a sad outcome that would have been. It actually makes me want to cry. I am eternally thankful to the managing editor who made the right call at just the right time.

Next, once again, please allow me to thank you, the reader, for sticking with this series. Because of you, we have managed to release five volumes. Now that

the Holy Theocracy Arc has concluded, in the next book, the Mercantile Free State Arc shall commence. Noor and his companions will venture into a barren desert region where they'll experience the most spectacular adventures they've had yet.

Due to various circumstances, it's going to be a little while before the next volume comes out. In the meantime, I hope you'll stay with the series by enjoying KRSG-sensei's manga adaptation.

Nabeshiki

Thank you  
for reading!

Kawaguchi  
カワグチ





# Bonus Short Story

## Letters to the Princess

“Lynne, do you have a moment?”

“Of course.”

Prince Rein put his hand down. He had just knocked on the door to one of the royal castle’s many rooms, which soon opened to reveal the face of Princess Lynneburg.

“What do you need?” she asked. “You rarely ever come to my room.”

“Do you remember those letters I told you about? I thought you might want to see them for yourself.”

“Oh, right. The ones sent to me after what happened in Mithra?”

Rein responded only with a sour expression, his arms laden with letters.

“Are those all addressed to me?” Lynne asked.

“Yes, twenty-seven in total. They’re unopened, though Carew and I *did* use [Clairvoyance] to examine them for anything dangerous.”

“Twenty-seven? That’s quite a lot.”

“Indeed. But the problem is their contents.”

Lynne paused for a moment. “What do they say?”

“Most are fan letters written by admirers—or love letters, if one dares to use the term so generously. The worst ones barely make it a few lines through before asking for your hand in marriage.” Rein’s brow furrowed, and he shot a cold glare at the bundle he was carrying.

“Love letters...? To me? Are you sure there hasn’t been some kind of mistake?”

“I wish I could say there has,” the prince replied, the crease across his

forehead growing even deeper. “The Kingdom’s diplomatic channels are not a courtship service.”

Lynne stared quizzically at the letters as she plucked some from the pile, then examined their seals and senders. “I recognize these names. But I don’t remember being very close to any of them.”

“I suspected as much. They’re from countries that barely have a relationship with our kingdom. The majority were written by former hangers-on of the Theocracy’s high priestess who smell a change in the wind.”

“I suppose I can understand that...but why approach me?”

“The younger ones probably assume they can butter you up. Though, after your impressive display in Mithra, I’m sure many were just searching for an excuse to contact you.”

“It wasn’t my intention to stand out so much...” Lynne paused, recalling her actions in the Theocracy. Then she sheepishly reached up and scratched her cheek. “Actually...it sort of was, wasn’t it?”

The prince sighed. “Since these letters can technically be seen as diplomatic missives, I was going to deal with them accordingly. They *are* addressed to you, however, so I will not interfere if you wish to read them. I would recommend against it, though; their ulterior motives are so painfully obvious that I cannot see them being at all enjoyable.”

“Still, they were sent at least partly out of affection, were they not? It would be terribly impolite of me to not even read them.”

“Perhaps, but they have already thrown politeness to the wind. They ignored all diplomatic etiquette and addressed their letters directly to you. We are under no obligation to be courteous.”

“This *did* only happen because I stood out, though... I think I’d like to read them after all.”

“In that case, I won’t stop you.” The prince breathed a quiet sigh and placed the stack of letters in the princess’s arms, his expression still sour.

“These are a lot heavier than I expected...” she remarked.

“Mm-hmm. Each envelope is full to bursting. You’ll have a hard time getting through them all—and not just because there are so many.”

“I’ll do my best to— Hmm? What are these?” Lynne’s eyes stopped on several letters in particular.

“Is something the matter?”

“Some of these are from girls. Three of them, maybe.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yes. I studied with them during my time abroad in Mithra. I remember they always helped me out when I was still getting used to being in another country.”

“Oh...? But I’m certain the contents are blatant attempts to get in your good graces.”

“Well...they have their own circumstances to deal with. They told me their status back home wasn’t particularly impressive. Perhaps they were strong-armed into writing to me.”

“Now that you mention it...I suppose their letters could be interpreted that way.”

“Do you mind if I open them now?”

“Not at all. Go ahead.”

The princess returned the letters to her brother’s arms, then took one and opened it. “You’re right...” she said as her eyes skimmed the first page. “It reads like she’s trying to curry favor with me. I don’t remember her being the kind of person to do something like this. The beginning and end sound more like her, at least; maybe those were the only bits she could write in her own voice.”

“I can’t pass judgment on that, I’m afraid. Would you mind reading through the others for me?”

“Of course.”

The princess opened and scanned the letters one by one. The majority were exactly as her brother had described, but a few made her reminisce about past

friends and acquaintances. She eventually decided to reach for an envelope a size larger than the rest—but Rein raised a hand to stop her.

“Lynne, wait.”

“Brother? What’s wrong?”

“This envelope—the thickest one... You should be careful with it.”

“What do you mean? Is there a trap inside?”

“No, not that. The contents are just a little...”

“‘A little...’?”

The pair spent a few moments in silence before the prince finally said, “It opens with thirteen pages dedicated to your physical appearance from the top of your head to the tips of your toes. Then there are twenty-two pages of unbearable peacocking as he attempts to convince you to enter a relationship with him with the eventual aim of marriage. While I can praise his...*enthusiasm*, it was such an affront to good writing that even I, a mere observer, have nightmares thinking about it. If you read it, you *will* regret it.”

“I must admit...your harsh criticisms are just making me more curious.”

“If you’re certain, I shan’t intervene. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Lynne weighed up her options for a moment before coming to a conclusion: “I’ll read it.” She took the letter from her brother, whose expression was grim, and immediately opened it. The contents were even stranger than she had imagined, and the author’s shockingly messy handwriting certainly didn’t add to the appeal. Nevertheless, perhaps because she kept in mind that the sender was laying bare his true feelings, it wasn’t all that unpleasant.

From there, the princess went on to scan through the rest of the envelopes. She selected twenty-five of the twenty-seven and gave what remained to Rein. “I’ll return these two to you and take care of the rest,” she said.

“You don’t need them anymore?”

“No, I’ve more or less finished reading them all. Those two were addressed to me, but their contents were purely diplomatic, so I’ll entrust them to you. I’ll respond to the rest on my own.”

“Very well. Sorry for the trouble. I’m counting on you.”

“Not at all. I enjoy writing letters, and this might be a chance to rekindle some old friendships.”

True to her word, the princess replied to every one of the letters. She politely declined anyone who asked to marry her, taking their circumstances into account all the while. As for the others, she returned greetings to her past friends interspersed with polite comments. “It pains me to inform you that I cannot serve as a legitimate channel for diplomacy, but you are more than welcome to collaborate with me as an individual,” she wrote. “If you wish to forge diplomatic relations, the Kingdom of Clays would eagerly welcome you through official points of contact.”

In the end, almost nobody responded to Lynne. A few of her letters resulted in semi-regular correspondence, and one scattered exchange in particular inspired the princess to journey out alone to assist her conversation partner, whose family was on the verge of ruin. Her actions just so happened to enable a country to declare its independence...

But that is a story for another time.



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I Parry Everything: What Do You Mean I'm the Strongest? I'm Not Even an Adventurer Yet! Volume 5

by Nabeshiki

Translated by Jason Li Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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