

4

AUTHOR

NABESHIKI

ILLUSTRATOR

KAWAGUCHI



I PARRY EVERYTHING

WHAT DO YOU MEAN I'M THE STRONGEST?

I'M NOT EVEN AN ADVENTURER YET!

[Oken]

The cleric, Astirra. She was a half-elf, which was a vanishingly rare race indeed.

Roy of the Lepfolk, who lived in the north of the continent and were few in number.

And finally, Oken, the magician—a human and self-proclaimed genius.

To anyone with an experienced eye, the Philosopher's Goblet was an excellent adventuring party indeed, to the point that it was enviable.

[Astirra]

[Roy]

"M-MAGH... MAGNI... FICIENT. THIS BLOOD. THIS
BLOOD IS... MAG... NIFICENT. AHH... SO
DELECTABLE. AH... AH... AUGHHH!!!"



I PARRY EVERYTHING 4

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THE STRONGEST?

NOT EVEN AN HOUR AGO?

"You have no talent at all."

So the man was told.

But after mastering [Parry]
and becoming the strongest...

[The Story So Far]

As part of her plot to annex the Kingdom of Clays, High Priestess Astirra of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra invited Lynne to a ball celebrating the coming-of-age ceremony of her son, Holy Prince Tirrence. Lynne accepted with her own plan in mind and journeyed to the Theocracy with Noor, Ines, and Rolo. Holy Prince Tirrence wasted no time declaring that Lynne was his betrothed, and our heroes found themselves in a situation akin to a powder keg ready to blow.

The next day—the day of the ball—Noor was taken away by a group of knights and shown their violently enthusiastic “hospitality.” In the meantime, Lynne, Rolo, and Ines headed to the ballroom, where High Priestess Astirra demanded that Lynne be seized.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

Astirra (Her Holy Highness)



High Priestess Astirra

A half-elf and the reigning authority in the Holy Theocracy of Mithra. She plans to annex the Kingdom of Clays. Although she is over two centuries old, she still boasts fearsome beauty.

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Jnovels.com](#)
4. [The Story So Far](#)
5. [Characters](#)
6. [Chapter 77: I Parry Some Blue Light](#)
7. [Chapter 78: Lynne and Tirrence](#)
8. [Chapter 79: A Place Unknown](#)
9. [Chapter 80: To the Dungeon's Depths](#)
10. [Chapter 81: The Holy City](#)
11. [Chapter 82: Two Astirras](#)
12. [Chapter 83: Holy Mithra](#)
13. [Chapter 84: Between Mother and Son](#)
14. [Chapter 85: Mithra's Incarnation](#)
15. [Chapter 86: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 1](#)
16. [Chapter 87: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 2](#)
17. [Chapter 88: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 3](#)
18. [Chapter 89: The First Cry of a Newborn](#)
19. [The War between Saint and Demon](#)
20. [The Philosopher's Goblet](#)
21. [Extra Chapter: Part-Time Job as a Waitress](#)
22. [Afterword](#)
23. [About J-Novel Club](#)
24. [Copyright](#)



Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

[Zerobooks Universal](#)

[Zerobooks USA ONLY](#)

[Zerobooks IOS](#)

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

[Jnovels.com](#)

[Join our Discord and meet Thousands of LN readers to chat with](#)

Chapter 77: I Parry Some Blue Light

After leading me to the entrance of the Dungeon of Lamentation, the six soldiers of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra had surrounded me and begun showing me their wonderful hospitality. The two women had used water and earth magic in combination, while the other four had launched a magnificent series of attacks with dual swords, a two-handed sword, and two spears. Their intricate teamwork and the sheer technique inherent in their repeated displays had me both amazed and delighted. I hadn't even wanted to blink, lest I miss something.

Still...

"What's wrong?" I asked, a little confused. For a while now, the six had been getting quieter and quieter. "Are you finished already, Sigir the Frugal?"

"Flash. It's Sigir the *Flash*."

At first, the soldiers' moves had been breathtaking—but their movements had dulled over the course of the show. Their faces were covered, so I couldn't say for sure, but it seemed as if they were getting tired.

"Can you keep going?" I asked Sigir. He was the leader, from what I'd gathered. "You don't have to force yourselves if you can't."

After a moment, he replied, "Apologies, but we must break for a brief conversation. Will that be all right?"

"Sure. Go ahead."

The six of them moved away from me, gathered in a circle, then began some sort of whispered conference. This made for the third time, by my count.

"Hey, what's going on? This guy's meant to be second in strength to the Six Sovereigns, right? *Second*. Are the Six really that strong?!"

"He's abnormal, by any measure. Even after enduring a simultaneous assault by us six of the Sinistral, members of the Twelve Sacred Envoys, he isn't out of breath in the slightest."

"By my estimate, he *exceeds* the Six Sovereigns. How in the world was he unknown for so long?"

"I wonder the same thing. I'm also beginning to suspect that he hasn't

even shown us his true strength yet.”

“And...Her Holy Highness wants us to capture him *alive*?”

“Her Holy Highness’s orders are absolute. Yet...”

Their conversation seemed pretty serious. They were still wearing their masks, but I could see this time that they were exhausted. It really didn’t surprise me; during their show, they had demonstrated fresh techniques at every turn. It had been a blast for me, but a continuous performance of spectacular acrobatics would tire anyone out. They were probably running out of tricks in their repertoire too.

As for me, my overzealousness had resulted in a decent number of new cracks and dents in the ground... Maybe this was a good time to call it quits.

“Sigir,” I said, “how about we call this the end of your hospitality? You don’t need to overexert yourselves.”

Sigir, the man with two blades, turned from the circle of soldiers to look at me. After several moments, he finally replied, “Very well. My apologies. It appears that this is our limit.”

“You don’t have to apologize. That was really fun. Thanks for doing all this for me.”

Beneath his mask, the strangely armored man breathed a sigh; then he stuck his two blades—which had chipped somewhat against my black sword—back into the scabbards at his hip. “A question,” he said. “How strong are you relative to the others of the Kingdom?”

“Me?” I asked. “I’m on the weaker side, to be honest. I *do* train and all that, so I think I’m better than your average guy off the street, but I know a lot of people who are *way* stronger than I am. Why do you ask?”

There was a long silence before Sigir said, “I see.” He then turned back to the other five and started having another whispered conversation of some kind. “We’re withdrawing. Come.”

“Sigir. Are you disobeying Her Holy Highness’s order?”

“Don’t misunderstand me. Her Holy Highness ordered us to apprehend him, even if we die in the attempt, and we will. We are simply falling back to regather our strength before we challenge him again.”

“But...that would mean...”

“Do you see any way for us to seize victory in this situation? As mortifying as it might be, the outcome is already clear as day.”

“Tsk... Fine. As much as I hate this, it’s for the sake of our duty. We’ll need to request support from Raiva of the Dextral.”

“Hey, uh...are we just going to leave him here on his own?”

“Yes. Even if we had someone stay behind to watch him, they wouldn’t be able to detain him. Plus, as long as he remains here, we won’t need to worry about him interfering elsewhere. It is our best option. Our *only* option, in truth.”

“This is pathetic... To think the Twelve Sacred Envoys would be reduced to this...”

Sigir turned back to me. “Pile Driver,” he called out. “We are leaving to fetch reinforcements. Stay here and behave yourself.”

“Okay.”

Sigir paused, then said, “Good. No matter what happens, *don’t go anywhere*. Surveys of the Dungeon of Lamentation have rendered it mostly safe since Her Holy Highness conquered it, but it still contains live traps. Be aware that a single misstep could mean your death.”

“Yeah? I’ll keep an eye out, then.”

With that, the six of them started going back the way we’d come.

Though it looked as if they were abandoning me, they had said they were going to fetch more people—probably to show me even more of their hospitality. And right after I’d told them they didn’t need to force themselves. What upstanding individuals. I supposed that sitting tight and waiting for them was the least I could do.

“Hey... Why’s he being so obedient? It’s kinda creepy.”

“Who can say...? This has been on my mind for some time now, but does he even understand the situation he’s in?”

“He’s so carefree that it dampens my will to fight.”

“He *did* say that he would wait, though. And he didn’t seem to be lying to us, at the very least.”

“Still... Oh, and Sigir—what if he starts heading down below? Won’t we be culpable?”

“Fear not—the dungeon has multilayered stratum barriers established personally by Her Holy Highness. Even if he were to reach them, he would not be able to pass through. The lightest touch would render him dead in an instant.”

“I know that. It’s just...”

“That aside... Is he truly an ‘evil man’ who must be slain? I struggle to believe it. We were so brazen with our killing intent, yet he showed us none in return.”

“Are you doubting Her Holy Highness’s order?”

“No. I am only attempting to discern Her intent in having him captured.”

Once the six were out of sight, I was all on my lonesome in the wide cavern. “Don’t go anywhere, huh...?” I muttered, recalling Sigir’s warning as I surveyed my surroundings. My eyes had acclimatized to the gloom, meaning I could see quite far, and there were all kinds of fascinating curiosities lying around. Here and there, mixed among the stone underfoot, were objects that resembled strangely shaped coins. And a short distance away stood a mysterious monument made of some kind of stone I’d never seen before.

Since everything was unknown to me, a part of me wanted to wander around and see what I could find. Still, it was probably best to obey Sigir’s request.

“The Dungeon of Lamentation, hmm?”

The six had told me it was an ancient dungeon with a long and venerated history. They had also said that while it was safe enough to stroll around in since it had been conquered, the risk of accidentally stumbling into a live trap made it a risky endeavor.

I already had experience with that kind of danger; I’d once accidentally triggered a supposed-to-be-inactive trap in a storeroom that had formerly been part of the Dungeon of the Lost. At the time, I’d seriously thought it would be the death of me. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake here in a foreign country—it would be an awful bother for Lynne and the others, as well as for our hosts.

“I’d better be careful not to touch anything weird.”

Looking around, there was a square stone nearby that looked perfect for sitting on. I wasn’t all that tired, but a rest would surely help me to calm down; I was still a bit excited from the soldiers’ performance.

“Yep, that rock should be fine.”

Having decided to take a seat, I shouldered my black sword, plopped down on the square stone—and then heard a heavy *clunk*.

“Hmm?”

I looked around in an attempt to discern the origin of the noise, but nothing around me had changed as far as I could tell. Then, while I pondered the mystery, I realized that my line of sight was getting lower. The rock I was sitting on was gradually sinking into the ground.

Mysterious.

“Uh...”

The rock was sinking faster and faster. It couldn't be... Could it?

"Aw, cra—"

The moment I realized my mistake, there was a deafening *boom*, and my surroundings shuddered violently. The floor—*the entire floor*—had started to crumble, sending up a tumultuous din.

Not good. This was so not good.

Evidently, the square stone I'd just sat upon was part of a mechanism of some kind. I hadn't been able to tell that from its appearance, and Sigir's assurance that this area was safe had caused me to lower my guard.

On second thought, I supposed the floor was probably crumbling because of all the cracks I'd made in it before—but that didn't really matter right now. I was rendered completely helpless as I fell along with the shattered remnants of stone.

Crap.

Below me was utter darkness.



I couldn't see anything. A sense of powerlessness overtook me as I plunged through the gloom, stuck in free fall. I soon crashed into a jagged surface that felt like another stone floor, but I'd landed on my black sword, so we broke through and continued plummeting.

Blind to my surroundings and unable to stop my fall, I was terrified—and that fear stayed with me as I smashed through floor after floor after floor. I wasn't even slowing down; in fact, for some strange reason, it felt like my sword was being forcefully dragged down into the darkness. As I fell even farther, I realized that it wasn't just my imagination—the tugging was growing stronger. Something really was pulling me down.

At a complete loss and with all kinds of doubts flashing through my mind, I simply kept falling through layer after layer of stone. Then, all of a sudden, I reached a space that was different from the rest.

“It's...bright?”

Pale blue light illuminated the area, allowing me to see my surroundings.

“What is this place?”

The strange glow filled the entire space, and it was the same color as the light that the six from earlier had fired at me. I cast my eyes down, and that was when I noticed that I was falling toward layer upon layer of luminescent blue walls that covered the width and length of the expanse below me. They were *much* larger than anything I'd seen from the soldiers.

I didn't know what to do; at this rate, I was going to collide with the barriers. My experience from earlier told me that striking them wouldn't put me in any immediate danger, but it *would* feel kind of uncomfortable and draining. Still, I didn't have the time to be deliberating. First things first...

[Parry]

I slammed my black sword into the first pale blue wall with as much force as I could manage, immediately shattering it into dazzling specks of light. The impact of the blow was considerable; my hands quivered and quickly went numb. Maybe colliding with the wall would have caused me more than a little discomfort after all. My on-the-fly decision had evidently been a smart one.

[Parry]

Thus, I continued my descent, using my sword to smash through every luminescent wall in my way. Each one fragmented into countless dots of blue light, brightening my surroundings yet further. Owing to that, I was

finally able to see the ground far below me, which allowed me to adjust my position in midair to successfully land safely.

“Looks like I made it out okay...”

As I basked in the relief of having my feet on solid ground once more, I gazed around and saw that the scattering lights had vanished, again leaving me in utter darkness. Maybe I should have left one of those barriers intact somehow—not that regretting it now would do me any good.

“Where am I...?”

I wasn’t sure how far I’d fallen, but it had to have been a considerable distance. Based on feeling alone, I was fairly certain I’d gone through at least ten floors.

I started to cast a [Tiny Flame] to illuminate my surroundings—but then I noticed something else that was strange. The black sword in my hand was being tugged slightly farther into the darkness around me.

“What...?”

It was subtle enough that I might have been tempted to dismiss it as my imagination, but my sword was definitely moving. I’d even noticed it earlier while I was falling. That pull was probably why I’d crashed through the sturdy stone floors with such ease—and now it was trying to drag me horizontally.

Altogether, this was very unusual; I’d never had it happen before.

Was the sword trying to tell me something? That seemed impossible...but when I strained my eyes, I could make out a small cave entrance in the direction my sword was pulling me. A scant amount of pale blue light was leaking out from within.

“Is there something over there...?”

Faint hope sparked in my chest; maybe the light meant there was a staircase or some other passage out of this place. But when I approached it, that hope was dashed—there were no stairs, only a vast cavern.

The cavern was a strange place too: a semicircular cavity carved neatly into the stone, at the center of which floated a transparent gem made of some kind of pale blue crystal. The gem gave off enough light that I could properly take in my surroundings. I was a little disappointed that I couldn’t see any exits or stairs, but I was also curious about the floating crystal, so I decided to approach it.

“That’s...pretty big.”

The more I examined the gem, the stranger it seemed. It was huge—ten times my height and far wider than my arm span—and made up of a

jumble of smaller, rectangular crystals with clean edges. It was also transparent, though tinged slightly blue, so I could see through to the other side.

And of course, it was levitating.

I crouched down on the floor and examined the gem from below, but I couldn't see anything that might have been supporting it. As far as I could tell, it really was just floating in midair.

To add yet another layer to the mystery, the crystal was clearly responsible for the pull on my black sword. Anytime I attempted to point the weapon in another direction, it would start fighting against me, wanting to turn back to the center of the gem.

"What's with this thing?" I muttered. "It seems a little too strange to just be a light source..."

Curious, I reached out to touch it—and that was when it happened. A strong force began pulling my body toward the blue gem. I instinctively fought back, sensing danger, but the black sword in my hand refused to move with me. As though it had a will of its own, it also started pulling me closer to the crystal.

"My...body...won't—!"

Then, I plunged *into* the blue gem as though it were swallowing me. My consciousness went pure white.

When I came to, I was in an unfamiliar place. There was a single woman collapsed on the ground, and behind her was...

"A skeleton?"

Staring down at me from atop a golden throne was a gigantic skeleton dressed in resplendent robes inlaid with gemstones. It looked exactly like the one I'd seen in the painting that morning.

Chapter 78: Lynne and Tirrence

After knocking out the knights standing guard in the hallway and quietly opening the door, Princess Lynneburg entered the room to find Holy Prince Tirrence awaiting her with a smile.

“I knew you would come, Lynne. Do you know how long I have waited for the day you would visit my quarters? My heart’s desire has finally been granted.”

The princess didn’t respond. She just glared at the man before her, still gripping her sword.

Holy Prince Tirrence refused to falter in the face of Lynne’s silent pressure—as did the smile he was wearing. “Given that you made it in here,” he said, “I wonder how the guards stationed outside are faring.”

“They’re all enjoying a relaxing nap.”

“Is that so? Wonderful.”

“There are no longer any allies around you,” the princess said. She was feeling uncomfortable; why did the holy prince seem so cheerful and at ease? “I would like to speak with you, Holy Prince Tirrence.”

“Ah ha ha!” The holy prince broke into a delighted chortle. “You’re truly extraordinary, Lynne! I never thought things would go this well! It was worth going through all that trouble to invite you to Mithra after all!” He laughed again—this time so hard that tears began welling from his eyes.

Lynne was taken aback. “What’s so amusing?”

Holy Prince Tirrence’s laughter eventually trailed off, at which point he replied, “Sorry, I didn’t intend to get all worked up on my own. Did you truly defeat the knights in the hallway by yourself? Ha ha! I knew you were incredible, Lynne. You’ve met all of my expectations.”

Still wearing a smile and completely unbothered by the sword that the distrustful princess was pointing at him, the holy prince slowly righted his posture and looked her in the eye. “Thank you,” he said. “Truly. You dealt with all of my *surveillants*, down to the last. My actions were considerably limited under their watchful eyes.”

“Holy Prince Tirrence, what in the world are you talking about...?”

“Ah, of course. This must be terribly sudden and confusing for you.

But I wanted you to come *here*, on this day—and I was willing to resort to any means to make it happen. I expended a great amount of effort and pulled all kinds of strings...but I'm still surprised to see it all come to fruition.”

Under Lynne’s dubious stare, the smiling Holy Prince Tirrence shrugged, wiped the tears from his eyes, and took a deep breath. “Sorry again,” he said. “I couldn’t contain my excitement. I’m just so happy, you see. This might be abrupt, but I want your help. I haven’t been able to find anyone in this country whom I can rely on.”

“As matters stand, I cannot see a single reason to help you,” the princess said suspiciously. “Explain yourself, if you please.”

Holy Prince Tirrence took a breath, then calmly began. “Of course. First, I must once again apologize to you. But ah, right, I ought to tell you that *nobody is currently listening to this conversation*. I’ve secretly modified this room to obstruct surveillance-type magic. It took quite a lot of doing to manage it without anybody noticing. But thanks to that hard work, this is the one place where I can speak to you truthfully.”



“Truthfully...?” Though Lynne kept her sword at the ready, taken aback by the sudden change in the holy prince’s behavior, she continued to hear him out.

“Yes. I wanted to speak with you alone, without anybody interfering. But as you know, that’s no small feat in this country. I considered many methods before eventually coming to my decision: I would pretend to have fallen for you and use that as a pretext to invite you to my quarters. I thought it would cause minimal suspicion, you see, and I couldn’t think of any other scheme that would allow us to be alone and free from surveillance. Though...it would appear that I accidentally caused you to hate me in the process.”

After a pause, the princess replied, “Indeed. It was entirely counterproductive.”

“Yes, I’m aware. I do regret it. I realized my mistake when I made my first attempt only to receive a reaction much worse than I’d anticipated...but I was already trapped in the act by then. Dropping it out of the blue would have drawn too much suspicion. I remained just the slightest bit hopeful that you would notice the signs I was giving you, but I suppose they were too few and far between.”

“I don’t have a clue what ‘signs’ you mean. To be honest, I only remember my indignation at your outrageous attempts to get closer to me. I think I made my feelings clear from how I treated you.”

“You did. That’s why I provoked you today. I thought that angering you might also incite you to come here.”

“You provoked me intentionally...?”

“Yes. But even though it was an act, it still must have been quite unpleasant for you. I greatly regret that. I likely could have handled things far better than I did.”

The princess recalled how Holy Prince Tirrence had left the ballroom with a smile and a wave. Her temper almost flared, but she calmed down when she began to consider the sliver of a chance that he was telling the truth. If so, then...

“Do you mean to say that your behavior until this point has been a lie?” she asked.

“Oh? You’re not doubting me?”

“I always thought it was odd how persistently you chased after me. Now it makes sense.”

The holy prince chuckled. “You really are sharp. You’ve caught up

much quicker than I expected. I was right in my choice to entrust the fate of this country to you.”

“I haven’t agreed to help you yet. You’ll need to fully explain yourself before you can convince me.”

“Thank goodness. I’m not sure what I would have done if you’d refused to listen.”

“I won’t necessarily believe everything you say.”

“Yes, of course. I don’t mind that at all. I want you to decide for yourself whether you can trust me. But the tale I’m about to tell you won’t be easy to swallow. Even I find it hard to believe.” The holy prince’s expression darkened, and he cast his eyes down as if deep in thought. “No...perhaps I should say that I don’t *want* to believe it.”

“Holy Prince Tirrence,” Lynne said. “I don’t have much time, I’m afraid, so please keep this short.”

“Right, right,” the holy prince replied. Then, while wearing his usual carefree smile, he said, “In essence, there is only one thing that I wish for: I want you to help me kill my mother.”

The princess was speechless for a moment. “Kill...? Her Holy Highness?”

“Yes. I’ll bear full responsibility for the crime, of course.”

“But...why?”

The holy prince did not answer. Instead, he pulled aside a large carpet to reveal a magic circle on the floor, glowing with blue light.

“Is that a transfer...?”

“It’s connected to the deepest layer of the Dungeon of Lamentation, far below us. You appear to be in a hurry, and I’m afraid that I *don’t have much time left either*. Let’s continue this discussion on the way there.”

Holy Prince Tirrence stepped onto the transfer circle, and Lynne followed after him.

Chapter 79: A Place Unknown

Again, I gazed around the entirely unfamiliar place in which I'd suddenly found myself.

“Where am I...?”

I couldn't see any lights, but my surroundings were bright. There wasn't a hint of shadow anywhere. And from what I could see, the ground—as clean and smooth as the interior floor of a building—continued on forever.

Stranger still, there was nobody else here. Well, apart from the massive skeleton and the collapsed woman.

I had been in the dark depths of a cave system only a few moments ago, but looking up now revealed nothing that resembled a ceiling. Instead, there was a luminescent, seven-colored cloud of sorts writhing above me. Or maybe it was a rainbow. Either way, it was terribly strange.

I didn't have the foggiest idea where I was. For a lack of other options, I started approaching the skeleton and the collapsed woman, the latter of whom seemed to notice me.

“Wh-Who are you?” she asked, turning to gaze at me as she slowly tried to get up from the hard ground. She looked unusually similar to the green-haired boy whom Lynne had spoken with yesterday. “Have you been swallowed by the dungeon's core too? The people outside—Oken and Roy—are they okay?”

“Oken...?” I repeated. I wasn't sure what she meant by “core” and the like, but Oken was definitely the name of my old magician instructor. “I do know an Oken. Are you an acquaintance of his? I don't know any Roys, though. Only a Rolo. Sorry.”

“Roy is...an adventurer of the Lepifolk. He's the scout of our party. I do hope he was able to escape the Dungeon of Lamentation unharmed...” The woman cast her eyes down for a moment, a sad expression on her face, before looking back up at me. “Is Oken doing well? I don't know how much time has passed since I wound up here. It feels like quite a while, but I'm not sure...”

“I don't have a clue how long you've been here, but Oken's doing well. Almost too well, considering the fact he's such an old man.”

This woman evidently knew my magician instructor. She looked young—around my age—but maybe she'd just met him recently. That or, like me, she had ended up in his care as a kid.

However, as I thought back on my memories of my old instructor, a look of astonishment came over the woman's face. "Oken is...an old man...?" she uttered.



“I mean...yeah? He was my magician instructor as a kid, and even then he was old. It wouldn’t be strange for him to pass on any day now. Or are we thinking about different people?”

“No... You said yours was a magician, so they are likely one and the same. I see. So much time has passed... In that case, are you an adventurer also, here to conquer the Dungeon of Lamentation?”

“Oh no. Well, I *am* an adventurer—at least technically—but I only ended up in this dungeon by chance. I didn’t even mean to go inside, but I accidentally stepped on a trap at the entrance, and it dropped me all the way down here.”

“A...single trap brought you all the way to the deepest stratum?”

“Looks like it.”

“I suppose wonders will never cease...”

“What is this place, anyway? I touched a weird, floating blue gemstone, then all of a sudden I was standing here.”

“So you *did* touch it... That was the core of this dungeon—and also something more, it would seem. I know not why, but the dungeon’s master must have made some kind of alteration to capture any intruders.”

“The dungeon’s master?”

“An entity that has integrated with the core, located at the innermost part of a dungeon. One such example is *that*.” The woman looked up at the massive skeleton sitting off to our side. “In other words, the master is a powerful monster that was sealed here in the deepest part of the Dungeon of Lamentation a very long time ago.”

“A monster...?” I repeated. “But it hasn’t moved at all. It looks dead, even.”

“Yes, what you see is merely a husk.”

“A husk?”

“Indeed. There was once a horrifying monster here. I fought it, if you would allow me such a generous description; there was painfully little I could do against its might. Still, for a reason unbeknownst to me, it spared my life and instead chose to imprison me. I suspect the substance of that husk departed this place for the outside world, but I am unsure what it has done or plans to do.”

“It...went outside?”

I gazed up at the massive skeleton. Its sheer size still impressed me—it was maybe twice as tall as the goblin I’d once encountered—and the more I examined it, the more it reminded me of the painting I’d seen upstairs in

the Cathedral.

Beyond that, I certainly hadn't seen anything resembling this monster in the outside world. Its appearance was so terrifying that I would never have missed it.

"A monster husk, huh...?" I muttered.

Just to make sure it really was dead, I gave the giant skeleton a light tap on the shin with my black sword. The bone cracked slightly, and the entire husk twitched and trembled.

"Um...oops."

I twitched as well, though out of surprise. I sincerely hadn't meant to cause any damage, but maybe I'd put a little too much strength into my tap. My thoughts began to race. What would we do if my carelessness woke it up again?

The woman stared at me, surprised. "Did you just...?"

"Just what?" I asked.

"I've tried to damage it before, but not even my best strikes left a mark. You cracked it with a single knock."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"Not at all. The opposite, if anything. Just what *is* that sword...? It looks to be made of quite a strange material. The more I study it, the more unique it seems..."

The woman examined my black sword with great curiosity. I couldn't blame her; she was right about it having a unique appearance.

"This?" I asked. "To be honest, I don't know anything about it either. It has all sorts of uses, though. It might be heavy and in pretty rough shape, but it makes short work of cleaning drains and comes in handy for practice swings. Oh, and it's amazing for pile-driving work."

"Drains...? I...I see..." The woman studied my sword for a while longer, then abruptly looked at me and smiled. "Then again, you are just as unusual. Despite the circumstances, you are entirely composed. For some reason, your presence alone makes me feel strangely secure."

"Oh no, I should be saying that to you. I had no idea what was going to happen when that blue gemstone swallowed me, but I was relieved to see another person here. Being alone with that creepy skeleton would have given me the shivers."

The woman chuckled. "Is that so? You're a rather amusing individual." Then she clapped a fist against her palm in a show of realization. "We haven't introduced ourselves yet, have we?"

“You’re right. My name’s Noor. I’m an adventurer, more or less, from the Kingdom of Clays.”

I couldn’t help feeling that I’d introduced myself a lot today. Well, traveling to a foreign country probably made that a matter of course.

“I see. Noor, hmm?” The woman gave me a kind smile, brushed the dust from her clothes, and sat up straight. “My name is Astirra. I am a member of an adventurer party called the Philosopher’s Goblet, alongside my companions Oken and Roy.”

“Astirra...? That name sounds familiar for some reason...” But no matter how much I racked my brain, I couldn’t quite place it.

The robed woman—Astirra—chuckled again, and struck a pose for me with her staff at the ready. “Does it now? Well, despite the impression I might give, our party *did* make something of a name for itself back in the day. Though...I imagine there aren’t many who know of us anymore.”

Despite the smile on her face, she seemed just a little sad.

Chapter 80: To the Dungeon's Depths

“How are you faring?”

“I’m okay. Don’t worry about me, Ines.”

Rolo and I were in the Dungeon of Lamentation beneath Mithra’s Cathedral, hurrying through the darkness as we headed deeper into its depths.

“And you’re certain this is the right direction?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. There’s no doubt about it. I can’t sense anyone in our way either, so we just need to keep going.”

“Understood.”

Part of me had been concerned about acting alone with a boy who had yet to even come of age, but those misgivings hadn’t lasted very long. In truth, Rolo’s growth was so remarkable that it made me question the worth of the strict training I’d endured over the dozen years since I was a child. I was moving at almost my top speed, wearing powerfully enchanted mithril boots that allowed me to run several times faster than a trained soldier for hours on end, yet he was keeping up without showing the slightest sign of exertion.

I was well aware that Rolo suffered various handicaps as a result of his upbringing. From what he had told me about his past, he had been forced into slavery at a very young age. His arms had also been damaged for as long as he could remember, marred with wounds so old and deep that not even Sain, the Sovereign of Salvation, had managed to heal them. Even now, they hindered Rolo in his everyday life. And on top of all that, his physical constitution as a demonfolk made it impossible for him to use magic directly.

In essence, there were many things Rolo simply could not do. Yet he had refined those he could so well that they more than made up for any shortcomings.

So far, our journey through the dungeon had gone unimpeded. We hadn’t run into a single soldier. Rolo was using his finely tuned sense for changes in his environment to guide me through the darkness, avoiding any and all potential encounters.

Furthermore, the magical tool currently in his hand was a specialized

mana sensor, created to detect and visualize mana wavelengths matching the user's in quality. It required extremely delicate manipulation of one's mana to use, such that even Oken, the Spell Sovereign, considered it tricky. Rolo was unbothered, though; he operated it while running full pelt beside me, his dexterity putting even the seasoned soldiers of the Kingdom to shame.

A mere few months ago, Rolo had entered the Kingdom of Clays as a frail young boy. The change in him beggared belief.

I'd started serving Princess Lynneburg when I was fourteen, so I was keenly aware that prodigies truly existed in this world of ours. Still, it had never even crossed my mind that I might encounter *another* such individual in my lifetime. Rolo truly was a marvel.

"Behind that wall," he said, pointing ahead of us while staring at the magical sensor in his hand.

"Very well," I replied. "[Divine Shield]."

Using my sword of light, I destroyed the spot Rolo had indicated. Dungeon walls were about as tough as dragontusk, a material second only to adamantite, but that meant nothing in the face of my Gift—or Noor's Black Blade, for that matter. Prince Rein knew this, which was why he had conferred upon me a clear and concise duty: "*Smash through every wall that stands between you and your destination.*"

"Now we need to go down," Rolo said.

"Understood."

In exact accordance with the order the prince had given me back in the Kingdom, I destroyed every wall and floor in our path as we delved into the dungeon's depths. Rolo operated the magical sensor in his hand, bringing us closer and closer to our purpose.

"Lord Rein's foresight has proved unnervingly accurate..." I murmured under my breath. It was almost frightening how closely he had predicted every event since our entry into Mithra. I still recalled what he had said to us just before our departure.

"In all likelihood, High Priestess Astirra will reveal her true nature during her audience with you and openly make unreasonable demands. But there is no need to play along. Her inherent expectation is that she can conquer our kingdom, so assume that negotiations will never be on the table to begin with. Instead, focus on what happens after the situation breaks down. If relations between our nations get even worse, the high priestess will move to begin the final phase of her intended plan. Before

that can happen, you must make your move.”

In the worst-case scenario, Mithra could take Princess Lynneburg hostage, catalyzing an all-out war that dragged even the surrounding nations into the fray. The prince had stressed that before such a tragedy could occur, we needed to seize our opportunity to strike at our opponent’s heart.

“Ever since the Kingdom took in one of the demonfolk, a race Mithra has deemed to be hostile, we have been besieged with criticisms from countries under the Theocracy’s influence. As such, the first thing we must do is obtain legitimate justification for taking Rolo into our care.”

There had been no formal declarations, but a war between the Kingdom of Clays and the Holy Theocracy of Mithra was already underway. Cutthroat political dealings were occurring all across the continent as various powers jostled for supremacy in the aftermath. Yet the Kingdom, which had now given its opponents fuel for their outrage, was at a political disadvantage. And the more time passed, the worse its position became.

There was hope, though: “evidence” that would overturn the status quo.

“The Theocracy harbors a dark secret involving the demonfolk. Needless to say, it concerns the Demons’ Hearts. If we could only obtain proof, it would give our kingdom the opportunity it needs—small though it may be—to turn our disadvantage on its head. The impact will only be slight, but the balance between our nations is so tenuous that it should still be enough.”

The prince had explained to Princess Lynneburg, Rolo, and me that we needed to change the narrative surrounding the demonfolk. We had to show the continent that they weren’t enemies of humanity but a race who deserved our protection.

“Information acquired by Carew’s subordinates has given us a rough idea of the location we’re seeking. The critical secret lies beneath the Cathedral of Holy Mithra, behind powerful, multilayered barriers in the deepest depths of the Dungeon of Lamentation. Something is there, mark my words. It could not be anywhere else. You must locate it by any means necessary and expose it for the world to see. Such is the prerequisite for our kingdom to survive upon this continent now that we have elected to take in a demonfolk.”

And the cooperation of that very same demonfolk was crucial to our success.

“If you are truly luckless, the four of you might find yourselves up

against the Theocracy's entire military might. And no matter how dearly I wish I could send you reinforcements, the situation prevents me. Your size can be an advantage, though. Lynne, while Ines and Rolo head for their destination, you and Sir Noor should cause a fuss of some sort and attract attention to yourselves. I shall tell you all as much as I can about the measures you could use, but when you act will depend entirely on your own judgment."

The prince had given us detailed instructions regarding those measures and explained precisely what we needed to watch out for. Then he had seen us off with a few final words.

"Should you fail, our kingdom will not be able to avoid censure. Even if we were to exhaust our diplomatic options, the connections Mithra has forged with other nations through its faith would give it the insurmountable advantage against our minor kingdom, leaving us with even more enemies to face. Yet so would our complacency. As such, Mithra's invitation is our first and last chance to strike at the heart of our foe. I want you to keep that in mind on your journey."

"So Rolo is the key..." I murmured.

The Kingdom of Clays's standing had shifted dramatically with the king's decision to take in Rolo—though of course, the entire situation stemmed from the man who saved the boy in the first place.

After repelling the Magic Empire's invasion, Noor had refused all accolades and rewards offered by the king to the new hero. Instead, he had made a single request: that the Kingdom look after the demonfolk boy Rolo. The king had agreed—and while the prince, the princess, and all of his vassals had accepted the verdict, including me, that was the critical juncture at which the fate of the Kingdom was decided.

In the end, everything had started with Noor.

Perhaps he felt the weight of his actions, which was why he had decided to accompany us to Mithra. But even then, I never expected him to be the first member of our group to make a move.

Now that I was considering the matter, however...his behavior had been nothing but strange ever since our arrival in Mithra. During our carriage ride, right after my lady had warned him that our conversations were being monitored, he had called the high priestess an "old woman." Then he stood directly in front of the portrait depicting Holy Mithra that decorated the hallway outside our lodgings and called it a "creepy skeleton." After that, it had only been inevitable that those surveilling us would act.

From there, in an even more shocking development, Noor had allowed the Sinistral of the Twelve Sacred Envoys to take him away. This had efficiently divided the enemy's forces, and now the Cathedral was in uproar.

"I truly cannot fathom what that man is thinking..." I murmured.

There was no reproach in my voice; as we moved deeper into the dungeon, Noor was likely doing the same, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. Back at the entrance, we had passed a gigantic open shaft connecting to the lowest levels—his handiwork, no doubt.

It seemed safe to assume that the soldiers pursuing Rolo and me had already entered the dungeon in great numbers. However, seeing that hole had surely confused them as to which path we had taken. It was a splendid diversion by Noor—one that not even his allies had imagined.

Although he had appeared to be sightseeing at his leisure ever since we had arrived in Mithra, his improvised, audacious actions were beyond anybody's expectations. As I recalled, while Prince Rein was giving us his directives, Noor had spent his time chatting casually with Oken, the Spell Sovereign. He had acted for all the world as though he had come into this without a thought—but his actions thus far could only have been premeditated.

In any case, we could not allow this opportunity he had given us to be wasted.

"Behind this wall, Ines."

"[Divine Shield]."

Still with Rolo as my eyes, I used my sword of light to smash through one sturdy wall after another. Anytime he sensed pursuers, we would fade into the darkness and take a roundabout path through the floor or ceiling, being especially careful to stay away from the enemy.

"Once in Mithra, do everything in your power not to make more enemies. This is not an act of conflict, merely some bilateral political jostling between our two countries. Even if their soldiers surround you, do your best to avoid combat and make haste toward the objective so that you can expose the Theocracy's secret to the world. Our true enemy is time, or the lack thereof. Do not forget that."

In accordance with Prince Rein's orders, we did everything in our power to minimize contact with Mithra's soldiers as we proceeded deeper into the dungeon. On my own, my best option would have been to force my way through with my unyielding strength—but with Rolo, we were

capable of moving with a surprising degree of stealth.

I was ashamed of my old self, who had seen Rolo only as a possible burden. Even so, I suppressed my unnecessary thoughts as we advanced closer to our objective.

Eventually, our foray into the darkness led us before an immense door. No, it was less a door than a sheer mass of metal covering an entire section of the dungeon wall. The atmosphere surrounding it was imposing and somber, as though this were a place where human hands had sealed away something that should never see the light of day.

“It’s here,” Rolo said, sounding slightly nervous. “*Something*’s behind this door.”

“[Divine Shield].”

I demolished the metal wall and stepped into what lay beyond, carefully examining my surroundings. Even in the almost pitch darkness, I could tell we were somewhere completely different from every area we had passed along the way.

“I’m lighting the lantern,” I said. “Rolo, are you ready?”

After several silent beats, he replied: “Yes.”

From a small compartment built into the underside of my armor, I retrieved a portable magic lantern. I activated it, and we were greeted by the sight of a pile of gemstones, each as crimson as blood. They were precisely what we had been looking for—what we had come here to confirm. And yet...

“This is...truly the place, then,” I murmured.



“Mm-hmm. It is...” Rolo said, still gripping the sensor magical tool in one hand. He spoke slower than before, as if attempting to process what he was seeing. “This is it. These gemstones... They all have the same mana wavelengths I do.”

His words sent a chill down my spine. This spacious cavern was overflowing with Demons’ Hearts: rare, ultrahigh-purity manastones that fetched colossal sums of coin. We had expected to find them here; after all, they were the reason we had come in the first place.

But the sheer number of them...

“This is...just too many...” I whispered, eyes fixated on the towering heap of crimson gemstones. That there were so many could only mean one thing. “Are these all...?”

“Mm-hmm.” Rolo sounded mournful as he stared up at the Demons’ Hearts, which glittered in the light of my lantern. “They’re most likely my predecessors. Every single one.”

For a while, I could not speak. This news had come as no surprise to me—I was privy to it even before coming here—but still no words passed my lips.

By forcing a vast amount of mana through a demonfolk’s body, one could make their flesh transmute and ultimately harden into a unique crimson mineral. This knowledge had once been known to a specific portion of the population, but the Holy Theocracy of Mithra had suppressed it for so long—with the help of merchants who shared in the vast profits to be made from Demons’ Hearts—that it was now entirely forgotten.

Oken, the Spell Sovereign, had once been taught this information by an old friend, so several of the Kingdom’s most important figures knew as well, the king foremost among them. Prince Rein had informed Rolo and me before our departure, so I’d expected my resolve to be firm. Yet I could not move a step from where I stood.

“These are all...shadows of past demonfolk,” Rolo whispered. He had fallen to his knees in the darkness, tears running down his face. As if the crimson gemstones weren’t bad enough, also littering the cavern were clothes and bones—piles upon piles of them.

The demonfolk captured for their bounties had ultimately been sent to Mithra, where each and every one of them had received their “divine punishment.” Their remains had disappeared without a trace, and not even a gravestone marked their passing.

This was where they had gone.

“Rolo...”

I searched for words of consolation, knowing full well that I was shaken too. But before any came to me, I was struck with a sense that something was amiss. I peered into the gloom, inspecting our surroundings more closely...and was overcome with an emotion that bordered on despair.

“No...”

What I previously assumed to be the back wall was instead another heap of crimson Demons’ Hearts, towering far higher than the one by the cavern’s entrance. To say there were hundreds was a grave understatement. Here lay the ruins of thousands—no, tens of thousands—of demonfolk lives.

The piles of gemstones, each a symbol of so many tragic fates, continued into the darkness with no end in sight. There were too many. Far too many.

Over two hundred years ago, Mithra had fought a war against the demonfolk, and a bitter grudge between them had endured ever since. But could the casualties from back then even compare to the unfathomable amount of death I saw before me? I wasn’t sure.

Why were so many Demons’ Hearts being kept here? I reeled in place, feeling sick to my stomach.

The prince had tasked us with retrieving this evidence of the Theocracy’s dark dealings and using it as political leverage. For us to shed light upon that darkness, however, Rolo had needed to face a terrible revelation. We had known that as well as we knew that our actions here were essential to his continued survival. That was why we had thought we were prepared to set foot in this place.

“But this is just...too much...” I whispered.

I cursed my own insufficient foresight; this was too great a burden for a mere child—for Rolo—to have thrust upon him. The demonfolk had endured so much hatred from people and persecution from nations, and their suffering hadn’t ended there. After so much torment, they had been captured for a specific purpose: to be utilized as raw materials for vast sums of wealth.

Out of the blue, I was pulled away from my brooding. I could sense something moving in the darkness.

“What is that...?” I strained my eyes to determine the true nature of

whatever I'd seen, and once again, I was struck with astonishment.

"What...is happening here?"

It was a pack of monsters. They were relatively strong varieties which one could find in the deeper levels of our own Dungeon of the Lost, and they were spilling forth from the darkness, advancing on Rolo and me.

I wanted to doubt my eyes. Why were there monsters here? It should have been impossible.

"What does this mean...?" I murmured.

As I faced the innumerable monsters suddenly appearing from the darkness, I was unable to conceal the bewilderment that welled forth from within me.

Under normal circumstances, when a dungeon's core shattered, the dungeon it had once been connected to would stop producing monsters. Then, after specialists of the Adventurers Guild confirmed the two necessary criteria, the dungeon would be marked as "conquered."

High Priestess Astirra had already conquered the Dungeon of Lamentation—all on her own, if the tales were true—and its resources had served as the foundation upon which the Holy Theocracy was built. That had been roughly two and a half centuries ago. The dungeon should have been long dead, unable to produce any more monsters and without any hope of reviving. But for there to be a throng of deformed, squirming monsters before us right now...

"This dungeon *hasn't been conquered yet.*"

In other words, it was *still alive*.

Unrest seized my heart as I gazed upon the dozens of monsters already surrounding us. Rolo remained on the ground, kneeling among the crimson gemstones.

"What...is happening in this country...?" I murmured.

Dark emotions threatened to swallow me whole as, before my eyes, a never-ending wave of monsters spewed forth from the darkness.

Chapter 81: The Holy City

“And that’s the gist—though I abbreviated much in deference to haste,” Holy Prince Tirrence concluded as we strode quickly through the dungeon’s dark passageways. “May I trouble you to share your thoughts?”

“That was a lot to digest,” I replied. The tale he’d told me had been one revelation after another, and they had all been hard to believe. “If you thought I would take everything at face value, then I must apologize. To begin with, the very idea that the Dungeon of Lamentation is still *alive* is just...”

“Yes, that’s about what I expected. Doubt *would* be the natural reaction.”

Over two centuries ago, after conquering the Dungeon of Lamentation alone, High Priestess Astirra had received a revelation from Holy Mithra that had driven her to establish the Holy Theocracy upon those very grounds. But according to Holy Prince Tirrence, the dungeon had never been conquered in the first place; it remained active to this very day. In other words, the Theocracy had been founded on an utter lie. It seemed too implausible to be true.

“When did you realize?” I asked.

“I was five when I first began to suspect something was wrong. But if you’re referring to the matter of the dungeon, that wasn’t until much later.”

“Five?”

“Yes. On my fifth birthday—exactly ten years ago—a certain incident sparked my misgivings,” the holy prince explained as we continued through the dungeon’s gloom. “Lynne... You know about the Church of Mithra’s sacred scripture, do you not? The one said to have been written by my mother after receiving Holy Mithra’s revelation?”

“The one detailed in *The Teachings of the Savior*? I’m no expert, but... ‘It has been decreed: Holy Mithra, the savior, shall rise again. In preparation for this most hallowed of days, we, its believers, must gather in the holy land and construct a glorious city. No effort can be spared, for when our savior returns, all those who have settled there shall receive life eternal. Until then—until we are raptured—we must live honorably in our savior’s name.’”

This precept, which instructed believers to gather in the holy city and prepare for the blessings and salvation they would receive upon Holy Mithra's resurrection, was considered the foremost dogma of the Church of Mithra. Its adherents were faithful, and there were many of them; ever since the Theocracy's foundation, it had engaged in relief efforts all over the continent, gathering more people toward the holy city.

The Theocracy's humanitarian work, carried out by its missionaries dispatched to ailing nations, took many forms, but it mainly involved the intake of those who had lost their homes. Orphans were adopted and educated in remotely established churches, after which they immigrated to the holy city; slaves who had endured cruel treatment were bought and freed, then granted citizenship and employment; and refugees displaced by war were given somewhere to live and work. They were benevolent acts of charity in anybody's eyes, and the country that proactively carried them out was considered a wonderful place filled with compassionate people.

In essence, the sacred scripture was the core of the Theocracy's ethos and the driving force behind its development as a country.

"I...shouldn't have expected any less from you," Holy Prince Tirrence said. "Few individuals can recite the original text word for word, even within the Theocracy."

"But why bring it up?" I asked. "You don't mean to tell me that precept contains lies, do you?"

"No, no. It's the *exact opposite*."

"The...opposite?"

"I believe that everything recorded in the scripture is *true*. Holy Mithra genuinely *does* exist in this country. And the more I investigate, the more certain I become that gathering people truly is for the sake of its resurrection."

"What...do you mean by that?"

"When I was five, I saw Holy Mithra with my own eyes. But it was nothing like its depictions in our sacred iconography. It was a colossal skeleton—and my mother was talking to it."

I didn't know how to respond to Holy Prince Tirrence's news; the most I could do was stare at him. Nothing about his demeanor suggested that he was joking.

"Your astonishment is only natural," he continued, "but I speak the truth. On the night of my fifth birthday, my mother took me from my bed while I was sleeping. I awoke in a strange, unknown place, where I saw

her conversing with a colossal skeleton in a language I'd never heard before."

"She was *talking with Holy Mithra?*" I asked.

"Yes. I was unsure what they were saying, but it sounded like they were consulting each other about something. I distinctly remember how terrified I felt. Though I pretended to be asleep for the entire ordeal, I couldn't stop my body from shaking. Back then, I was already familiar with Holy Mithra from picture books. I had been raised to see it as an object of reverence...but what I saw could not be described as holy. Rather, it was the complete inverse—a being of pure evil."

"What makes you say that?"

"It relishes the taste of blood. My mother had drained some from my arm, which she gave to the skeleton in a chalice. It accepted the offering with a bony hand, its fingers as thick as logs, then greedily gulped it down. Being only five then, I passed out from sheer terror at the sight...but I still remember the way it stared at me. Although it lacked eyeballs, it looked ravenous, like a starved animal gleefully watching its prey. I was convinced that, in its mind, I was nothing more than a convenient meal—and I still hold that belief to this day."

Holy Prince Tirrence looked grimly serious as he spoke, an expression I had never seen from him before.

"So...you don't believe it was simply a dream you had when you were young?" I asked.

"The morning after, I *did* wake up in my bed, as always...but when I told my mother what I'd seen, she gripped my arm so hard that I worried it might break and insisted that I forget it. She stressed that it was only a nightmare, but I knew better. Even though the wound was gone, I remembered the sharp pain of the knife she used to slice into my arm. It was impossible to forget. So, to answer your question: no, it couldn't have been a dream."

"And you've never told anyone else...?"

"Of course not; my mother had ordered me not to. Even as a child, I must have intuited the risk. From then on, whenever she asked me about it, I acted as though I didn't remember. I've spent the past decade pretending to believe in the Theocracy's precepts and my mother. Had anyone doubted my devotion, I wouldn't have survived this long to speak with you."

Despite how calmly Holy Prince Tirrence spoke, he suggested

something unimaginable. If what he had said was true, he had spent almost his entire life—or at least as long as he had understood his surroundings— keenly aware that those closest to him were his enemies. Yet he had never ceased feigning composure and ignorance, maintaining his lie.

“You’ve been pretending since you were five?” I asked. “For ten whole years? I wouldn’t have believed that such a feat was possible.”

“That’s right, though it may be more accurate to say it was my only choice. When I grew old enough to truly understand what it meant for everyone around me to be my enemy, I fell into despair...” Holy Prince Tirrence’s usual smile returned. “But, well, I gradually became accustomed to it.”

“But why would you tell me a secret of such vital importance now, of all times? In fact, why attempt to involve me in the first place?”

“That...was a decision I made when I first learned who you were, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Not to sound boastful, but when we first met, I was about as distrustful of others as a person could get. As a rule, I refused to put my faith in anyone. I still do, in fairness, but it was particularly severe back then. There was nothing and nobody around me whom I could trust, and I considered that the natural way of things. Yet for some strange reason, I could tell you were different from when I first saw you. I can’t exactly explain why. But after speaking with you and getting to know you a little better, I confirmed my suspicions. You really are unlike anyone else I’ve ever met.”

“I...don’t know how to respond. Your explanation is too abstract.”

“Perhaps, but it’s the truth. I can’t explain it any other way. And then you went on to show everyone that you really were a prodigy. I almost couldn’t believe it. With the advantage of my elvish blood, I was the foremost student in the Theocracy when it came to both studies and swordsmanship. Not once had I been bested in either. Yet you surpassed me in almost every field. That was when I began to think that you might be able to do something about my seemingly hopeless situation.”

“You have too high an opinion of me. I am only one person; there’s a limit to what I can do.”

“Perhaps so... Ultimately, my wish for your help is just that—a wish. As much as I require it, you are not obligated to grant me your aid, nor do you have anything to gain from it. In the first place, it is unreasonable for

me even to make such a request, considering that I've dragged you into my circumstances without word or warning. More than unreasonable—it's absurd. Were I in your place right now, I would refuse."

"Indeed."

"So...if my tale hasn't convinced you—if you decide that helping me is not in your interest and simply return home with the information I've given you—I won't mind at all. Because all that lies ahead of us now is danger, plain and simple."

"The original reason we came to Mithra was to stop the Theocracy from interfering with Rolo and our kingdom. To that end, we need information that will give us a more favorable position, so there *is* value in what you've told me. In fact...there's so much to unpack that it's actually somewhat troubling."

"I...suppose it would be. My apologies, but this was the only way I could tell you. If I'm not mistaken, today was my *last chance* to meet you and take action."

"Your last chance...?"

"Lynne. In your eyes, what is this country like?"

I frowned. Rather than elaborating on his remark, he had changed the topic entirely.

"Mithra truly is beautiful," he continued. "I've spent my entire life here, ever since I was born, yet it still amazes me. Its buildings, plazas, and churches all exist in wonderful harmony. And no matter where you go, the streets are almost unbelievably clean. Not a single piece of litter ruins the scenery."

I silently nodded, agreeing with him.

"Yet our country was founded on lies, so it acts according to mistaken beliefs. The more I investigated, the less I could accept that our scripture's teachings were created with anything but evil intent. This is not a holy city—it is a delusion, woven for a particular reason by that monster my mother worships as a savior. But its inhabitants are good people at heart; their only mistake was blindly trusting the scripture. As you well know, Mithra has done much behind closed doors that cannot be publicly revealed. Its treatment of the demonfolk is one such example. But its people... They have done nothing more than love this land, this country. I wish to believe they are blameless. That might seem overly convenient...but it has to be true. Otherwise, it would mean that every citizen of this country is beyond redemption."

“You’ll need to excuse me, but you haven’t yet elaborated on the ‘purpose’ of the teachings. Honestly, I’m afraid I haven’t been able to follow the rest of what you’ve been saying all too well either.”

“Sorry. I got ahead of myself, it seems. That ‘purpose’ has been worked toward for a long time indeed, and I suspect those efforts will come to fruition very soon. If that happens, this country will suffer a terrible fate. That’s why I must prevent it by any means necessary.”

“Is that related to what you said earlier about wanting to kill your mother?” I asked. He had made that unbelievable remark after I’d forced my way into his room, but even now, I was unable to grasp why he wanted to take her life.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “As it stands, she is my greatest enemy. As unfortunate as that may be.”

“Frankly, I still don’t understand... How is your own mother your enemy?”

“It *is* tough to swallow, isn’t it? Trust me, I want nothing more than to help you understand, but there isn’t much time left. I doubt I could give a satisfying explanation before we are required to act. Again, I know it’s unreasonable to ask you to place your faith in what I’ve told you so far, but...I truly believe you are the only one who can save this country. You are my only hope.”

Holy Prince Tirrence abruptly stopped walking. He knelt in front of me, placed both hands on the ground, then bowed his head so low that it almost touched the stone beneath us.

“Please,” he said. “Help me, Lynne. I know I cannot ask you to accept my words at face value—not after all this time. But I wish to save my country...and the people around me. If nothing else, can you believe that?”

He hadn’t yet told me the whole truth, nor had he given me enough reason to believe he was worthy of my trust. One thing was clear to me, though: this was the first time he had ever been truly sincere with me.

“You should have just said that to begin with,” I complained. “Fine. I’ll help you. As much as I can, anyway.”

The holy prince looked up at me, a picture of surprise. “Huh? You...believe me?”

“No. But as for Rolo... Earlier, he said you might not be our enemy.”

“I see... He’s able to read people’s hearts, correct? I took precautions long ago to keep my emotions hidden, but the walls I put up evidently weren’t as impenetrable as I thought.”

“Indeed. Your gratitude should go to him, for *he* is the one I believe.”

“I suppose it should. I owe him my thanks. I owe you too, of course.”

“You have nothing to thank me for, Your Holy Highness. I am only agreeing to help because I believe our objective to be just. Plus, as a member of the Kingdom’s royal family—the *lowest-ranking* member, mind you—I think it is in our national interest for me to lend our neighbors my assistance. Do not mistake this as sympathy for a friend; our interests have merely coincided, so there is no need for words of gratitude.”

In response to my declaration that I couldn’t yet trust him, Holy Prince Tirrence studied my face for a while. Then he burst into laughter.

“I would expect no less from you, Lynne!” he said when his composure returned. “That part of you is exactly why I trust you. I’m falling for you even harder.”

“Must you insist on continuing that joke? I’m rather fed up with it, you know.”

The holy prince laughed again. “No, I really meant it that time. How about it? Shall we get married? I promise to be entirely sincere in my next attempts to court you.”

“This is exactly why I cannot bring myself to trust you.”

All of a sudden, I noticed several large figures farther down the dark passageway. I didn’t need a light to tell that they were monsters.

“It would appear the dungeon really *is* still alive,” I noted.

“Are you more willing to believe my story now?”

“Yes. A little.”

Up ahead, a swarm of monsters began surging toward us, blanketing the sizable dungeon passageway.

“The situation seems to have taken a rather sharp turn for the worse,” Holy Prince Tirrence said. “I had wanted to give you more details, but I suspect our new friends aren’t going to stand by and let me.”

“I suspect not,” I agreed.

According to the holy prince, our destination lay ahead of us, farther down the passageway. In which case...

“Our only option is to cut our way through,” I mused aloud. “I think I’ll increase our pace somewhat from here on. Will you be able to keep up?”

Holy Prince Tirrence chuckled. “I was considered a child prodigy too, you know—at least until you came along. I may not be as capable as you, but I’m no slouch either.”

“Then the plan is simple: go through the front. I’ll take point, so please

assist me as much as you are able.”

As I faced the swarm of monsters and readied my sword, a quiet voice came from behind me: “Princess Lynneburg...I am truly sorry to have dragged you and your companions into my personal circumstances.”

After a moment, I replied, “I’ll hear your apologies later, Your Holy Highness. Let us make haste. We can continue this discussion while we run.”

However, the very moment I prepared to clash with the oncoming wave, the ground around me burst open, revealing another pack of monsters leaping at me from below. I immediately brought my sword into position—but before I could act, a flash of light tore through the darkness. Something long and fine had beheaded all of my would-be ambushers.

“What was...?”

I looked over my shoulder at the holy prince and saw gleaming silver threads hanging from his fingers, gently drifting through the air.

“Mithril wire,” he explained. “I was hiding it in my clothes. It’s a very ‘me’ weapon, don’t you think? Well, I suppose it’s more of a trump card, which is why I avoid using it in front of others when possible.”

“Should you have shown me, then?”

“Of course,” he replied in his usual carefree tone. “I’ve entrusted you with my fate, after all—and with the fate of my country.”

“Please don’t arbitrarily force that kind of thing on me. It’s bothersome.”

As the holy prince stood there, smiling, an entire pack of monsters sprang at him from behind. I dashed forward, weaving through the gaps between the drifting silver wire, and cut them all down before they could reach him.

“Wonderfully done, Lynne. I expected no less of you.”

“If you have time to speak, you have time to help...Tirrence.”

Thus, we ran as fast as we could into the darkness of the dungeon’s depths, cutting through the teeming waves of monsters that surged forth in a futile attempt to bar our way.

Chapter 82: Two Astirras

“Astirra...?” I mumbled. “I feel as though I’ve heard that name before...”

Indeed, the woman I’d met after stumbling into this strange place had given me her name, and something about it sounded very familiar. Was I just misremembering? No, I really had encountered it before. I was certain. The exact specifics of *when* still escaped me, but perhaps it had been somewhat recent.

“Huh? You do?” Astirra asked. “Have I...become famous, by chance?” She giggled. “Do they tell legends about me, the beautiful adventurer who risked her life to save her companions?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“O-Oh. I suppose I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up...”

Astirra looked slightly disappointed, but I’d only been telling the truth. I was reasonably sure I’d heard the name from Lynne.

Astirra... Astirra... Who was that again?

As I did my best to remember, the scenery around us warped and twisted, and a woman’s voice echoed out of nowhere. “Ah, so this is where you were. I must admit, I didn’t expect a little mouse to burrow into a place like this. How did you get past my layered barriers?”

A sudden tear opened up in empty space, revealing a swirling expanse large enough to fit a person. We both stared at the vortex as a single woman stepped out. She was clad in white robes inlaid with gleaming gemstones, much like the massive skeleton to our side.

“Who is *she*...?” Astirra asked, looking shocked.

I was a little surprised too; the woman bore an eerie resemblance to Astirra. No, scratch that—had they been wearing the same clothes, they might have passed for identical twins. I couldn’t spot a single distinguishing feature between them.

As I examined the woman more closely, though, something felt off—the mood that clung to her was cold, somehow. So while she certainly *looked* the same as Astirra, she came across as entirely different.

“Who’s that?” I asked Astirra. “A family member of yours? She looks just like you.”

“No, I don’t believe so...” she replied, sounding troubled. “She’s... Who *is* she?”

I supposed that meant they weren’t sisters or the like, then.



“I am Astirra,” the woman said, facing the other Astirra directly as we gave her studying looks, “the high priestess of the Holy Theocracy of Mithra.”

“Astirra...?” I murmured. I was only getting more confused. So they were *both* Astirra, but this new one was the high priestess? What was that supposed to mean?

Wait, “high priestess”?

The memory finally returned to me: Lynne had mentioned the name “Astirra” while telling me about this country’s high priestess. Still, as I examined the woman before me, I started to doubt my memory.

“Is that really the high priestess Lynne mentioned...?” I mumbled.

The high priestess was supposed to be an older woman of more than two centuries. This “Astirra,” however, looked much younger than that. I’d also heard that every single person in Mithra revered her...but that felt wrong too. This new woman seemed awfully cold compared to the Astirra standing next to me. She wasn’t at all like the person Lynne had described.

Sure, there were bound to be people who preferred a cold personality in their leader...but I just couldn’t picture this woman having the adoration of an *entire country*.

“Who are you?” the Astirra next to me asked. “Why do you share my name and face?”

The cold Astirra—she seemed a little nasty too, actually—put a hand to her mouth and laughed. “Goodness me,” she said. “You have a lot of nerve asking that question, considering that you are nothing more than my imitation. I was gracious enough to let you remain, since I thought you might eventually be useful in some regard. Is that any way to speak to your benefactor?”

“I’m...an imitation...? What are you talking about? No...it couldn’t be!” The Astirra beside me whirled around and stared up at the colossal skeleton sitting behind us. Her expression became grim; then she turned back to the mean Astirra. “Are you—?”

“Silence.”

A bolt of lightning struck the ground by Astirra’s feet, leaving behind a violent gouge. Though it hadn’t been a direct hit, the impact caused her to stumble to the ground.

“You have no need for such information,” the mean Astirra said. “Now, stay there and be quiet; my business is with the gentleman.” She turned to me. “You there. Please give me that object in your hand. Though I know

not what it is, it seems rather dangerous.”

“What, my sword?” I asked. “Why?”

“It appears you have misunderstood me. I am not making a request. If you cannot understand that, then I must teach you the error of your ways.”

Once again, lightning bore down on us.

[Parry]

I swung without hesitation. The bolt collided with the black blade of my sword and went careening off to the side, then slammed into the ground a short distance away.

“How strange...” the mean Astirra said. “That was supposed to kill you.”

“Why are you doing this?” I asked, confused. “It’s kind of dangerous, don’t you think?”

The mean Astirra didn’t answer my question. “If that did not suffice...” she said, slowly raising her hand toward me. “It will put something of a burden on this body, but I suppose there is no avoiding it.”

In her hand, a strange light sparked into being. I strained my eyes, trying to get a closer look, when—

“[Black Bolt].”

A massive streak of dark lightning shot from her hand, blanketing my entire field of vision as it crackled and expanded on its way toward me. My instincts screamed that I couldn’t let it touch me—I would *definitely* die.

[Parry]

Thankfully, my arms moved faster than the massive lightning bolt, allowing me to catch it with my sword and push it aside. It hadn’t been an easy feat; the impact had been so outrageous that my arms trembled and screamed out in protest.

The bolt landed behind us, causing the ground and the air to quake. A moment later, there was a thundering *boom*.

“That was close...” I muttered.

A chill ran down my spine when I saw the massive crater that now marred the ground. Had that lightning bolt scored a direct hit on me, I was sure that even my bones would have been vaporized.

The normal Astirra, still sitting on the ground behind me, looked utterly dumbfounded. “Was that...lightning?” she asked.

“It seemed to be,” I replied.

“I...never knew it could be parried with a sword.”

“Me neither. I’ve never had the urge to attempt it before...but it was surprisingly manageable.”

“I-Is that right?”

Of course, I didn’t doubt that my sword was the reason; a standard metal blade would have conducted the electricity and given me a lethal shock. Once again, I couldn’t help but feel grateful for it.

“Still, to parry *lightning* with a sword...” Astirra murmured. “I would have thought that following it with your eyes would be enough of a challenge.”

“If you’d asked me a while ago, I might have agreed. As it turns out, though, I know a guy who can thrust a spear even faster. Maybe lightning isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Y-Your acquaintance is *faster than lightning*...? I’m finding it hard to believe that such a person exists...”

“Yeah, Gilbert’s pretty amazing. I’ve got a long way to go before I’ll even stand a chance against him.”

“I-It sounds as though the Kingdom of Clays has become a rather outrageous place while I’ve been stuck in here, ignorant of the outside world...”

But while Astirra and I chatted, relieved to have overcome the danger, the other Astirra stared at her palm and muttered to herself. “That wasn’t as potent as it could have been... I suppose this body has already reached its limit. I was right to prepare a replacement.”

I got into a fighting stance as I faced the mean Astirra; I’d sensed danger radiating from her this entire time. “Are we still doing this?” I asked.

“It would seem so,” she replied. “While I don’t wish to make too much of a mess of this place...this is the perfect opportunity. It does one good to move one’s *own body* around every once in a while. And since my *new body* has finally come of age, I shall consider this a celebration of sorts. It is somewhat regrettable that I must discard the form I have grown so accustomed to, but if it has deteriorated this much, then it can’t be helped.”

“Discard’...?” I repeated.

“Indeed. This body has served me well for the past two hundred-odd years; though it pales in comparison to my true one, half-elves make for rather fine material. Truth be told, I didn’t expect this reproduction to be capable of bearing a child. I do wish I’d realized earlier.” The mean Astirra turned to the woman behind me. “Then I wouldn’t have needed to

keep you here for so long as a spare.”

“What are you saying?” I asked. None of what she was ranting about made any sense to me. I must not have been alone in my confusion because Astirra looked equally lost.

“But now...you may rest easy,” the mean Astirra said. “I no longer have any use for you. Your purpose ends here.”

“I don’t understand...” Astirra muttered.

“I simply mean that I *already have a new body*—and a replacement for that one besides. As such, I no longer need you...or *this*.” The atmosphere around the white-robed Astirra changed, black smoke began pouring from her body, and an ominous smile spread across her lips. “From here on, you shall fight against my *true form*.”

Suddenly, the mean Astirra collapsed to the ground as though all the strength had disappeared from her body.

“What?” I could only blink in surprise. “What just happened?”

Then the air around us began to change. I couldn’t work out exactly what was happening or where, but it felt as though something *big* had moved. It didn’t make any sense; nobody was here except the three of us and that creepy skeleton.

“Don’t tell me...” I turned, driven by a premonition, and saw that the colossal skeleton behind us had shifted. Its palm was now pointing straight at us. “It can move?!”



As Astirra and I stared in shock, the area around its skeletal hand began to sparkle like the starry night sky. The multitude of tiny lights gathered into the center of its palm, shrinking into a single, beautiful point no larger than a grain of sand...

Then the grain shook violently and erupted into a blinding flash.

“[Black Bolt].”

A jet-black streak of lightning—drastically bigger than the last—burst forth from the skeleton’s hand and raced toward us with all the might of a natural disaster.

[Parry]

I devoted my all to bringing my sword to bear, then caught the attack in the nick of time. There was an intense burst of black sparks, and my arms rattled uncomfortably. The impact was so preposterously strong that I almost couldn’t believe it. This was incomparable to the lightning strike from earlier.

My arms were battling a weight I’d never experienced before, as though my already heavy black sword had suddenly become several times heavier. The weapon shuddered violently, threatening to rip my fingers from my hands. It genuinely felt as though an entire mountain was pushing against me.

The pain wasn’t only in my hands and arms; the muscles across my entire body vibrated, wailing for mercy, but I couldn’t pay them any mind right now. Unless I could deflect this massive lightning bolt, Astirra and I would die for sure.

Fighting against the immense pressure that threatened to destroy my arms, I forced my sword into a swing and sent the black bolt as far away as I could manage. It crashed into the ground well away from us, shrouding the entirety of our surroundings with a dark flash.

There was a pause; then a cacophonous *boom* reached our ears as an equally intense shock wave washed over us. The ground rumbled violently, disrupting our balance.

In the distance, I thought I glimpsed a massive hole where the lightning had struck, but I couldn’t know for sure; the force of the resultant gale almost sent me flying bodily away. It was all I could do to keep my eyes open.

Goose bumps rippled across my skin. Although we’d avoided an instant death, that had only been a *single attack*. We were far from being out of the woods. I stuck my sword into the ground and crouched,

desperately trying to keep the wind from blowing me away.

Then, out of nowhere, the gales buffeting me disappeared.

“Are you all right?” Astirra asked. “That was awfully intense, wasn’t it?” She had surrounded us with a defensive barrier of some kind.

“Yeah, thanks,” I said. “That was crazy. I think I can manage another one...but if we’re faced with any more than that, we’ll be in trouble.”

“You’re...rather outrageous yourself, aren’t you?”

We had to end our conversation there; the colossal skeleton had slowly risen from its throne and now towered above us. It hadn’t done anything else, but the pressure it exuded was intense beyond compare. Astirra and I reflexively swallowed at the sight alone.

“What *is* that...?” I mumbled unconsciously as I watched the skeleton move. Then a thought crossed my mind.

It’s made entirely of bones.

I already knew about a monster matching that description. I’d yet to actually meet one—my previous attempt had ended in failure—but I still wanted to. As an adventurer, I’d thought it would make the perfect rival.

Sure, this one was much bigger than I’d expected, but that was probably normal for monsters. I’d once encountered a goblin, the weakest of all monsters, and even *that* had seemed giant to me. Then there were the Goblin Emperors that had appeared in the capital—those had apparently been *several times larger!*

At a guess, the monster before me was about three times the size of a regular goblin. It was larger than I’d anticipated, but still—this had to be it. This was what the guildsman had described as the perfect opponent for a man of my modest talents.

“I think I get it...” I murmured. “That’s a skeleton, isn’t it? The monster kind. Am I right, Astirra?” She had mentioned earlier that she had once been part of an adventurer party, so I figured she had enough experience to tell me for sure.

“Huh...? You think...that’s a skeleton? Pfft... Aha ha ha ha!”

But for some reason, she burst into laughter. No, it was even more extreme than that—she was in hysterics! Clutching her stomach, she would occasionally turn back to look at me, then start cackling again.

I’d meant it as a serious question...

“Ahem. Sorry about that,” Astirra said, still trying to stifle a few giggles. “I wasn’t expecting such a surprise attack, given our situation.”

“Was I...wrong?” I asked, feeling apprehensive.

Once her breathing was under control again, Astirra shook her head. “No... No, you weren’t. You were exactly right—that *is* merely a skeleton. Although it *can* use magic, so it might make more sense to call it a skeleton *wizard*. In any case, it’s nothing for us to be afraid of. It’s small fry, and that’s that!”

Even though I’d made the suggestion in the first place, I was starting to doubt that it really was a skeleton. Astirra was making it sound trivial, but she had told me earlier that she couldn’t even scratch it. And...was it just my imagination, or did she seem a little desperate right now?

“That being the case,” she continued, “let’s join forces and take it down. We’ll be done in no time. I might have been incapable of defeating it alone, but with you by my side...” Her expression sobered, and she quietly held her staff at the ready. “I think we’ll be okay.”

“I guess you’re right.” I gripped my black sword and turned to face the skeleton head-on. I was still a little curious about Astirra’s reaction, but this was hardly the time.

“[Black Bolt].”

Another black streak shot toward us, even larger and more intense than the last. It seemed that our opponent was capable of more than its previous attack had suggested, and that realization sent a shudder through me.

[Parry]

Despite my fear, I gathered my strength, caught the bolt with the center of my sword, then blew it even farther away than the last one. This time, Astirra shielded us both before the shock wave and gale could even reach us.

“A-Are you all right?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m actually starting to get used to these lightning attacks. If this is the worst of it, I can probably take as much as it can give.”

“You’re...really something else.”

As we continued to watch the skeleton, a blue light began to swathe its entire body. It was the same light I’d crashed through so many times to get here. The skeleton was doubtless planning to continue its assault.

If the skeleton relied entirely on its lightning bolts, I wouldn’t have much trouble holding my own against it. I couldn’t remain on the defensive forever, though. My black sword wasn’t really able to cut things, but it *was* able to crack bones—we’d seen that much already. I suspected that, with enough brute force, I’d be able to smash the skeleton into pieces, but there was only one way to know for sure.

Alone, I doubted that I would have been able to defeat the monster before me. But together with Astirra... As she had said, if we worked in unison, this simple bag of bones wouldn't stand a chance.

My resolve firm, I once again readied my sword. "Here we go, Astirra. It's time to take this skeleton down. If I look like I'm in trouble, help me out, okay?"

"Of course. I'm counting on you, Noor."

Chapter 83: Holy Mithra

“[Black Bolt].”

After returning to its original body for the first time in a long, long while and unleashing one of the most potent spells in its arsenal, the being that had once been known as Mithra—but had forced so many to call it *Holy Mithra*—was experiencing a keen sense of confusion.

Absurd. This cannot possibly be.

The insignificant creature before it had wished to rebel, so Holy Mithra had loosed its [Black Bolt] upon the insubordinate at full strength, knowing full well that doing so would place a strain on its own precious, irreplaceable body.

Yet the worthless speck—the human—was still alive. How could this be?

Holy Mithra’s [Black Bolt] was a peerless strike; once, it had even touched a being called a god. Holy Mithra took pride in the spell, for it was nigh invincible, and no defense or counterblow could mitigate its might. It was an ultimate, lethal black magic technique—a height the frail examples of humanity inhabiting this era could never even hope to attain. The moment it was unleashed, the death of anyone unfortunate enough to be on the receiving end was set in stone.

At least, that was how it should have been.

[Parry]

How was this human repelling it with nothing more than a twig of a blade? This was inconceivable. The man had just caught the [Black Bolt]—a streak of lightning that moved at the speed of light—with his sword and forced it aside with brute strength alone.

How could such an insignificant speck possess such raw physical power? It was impossible. There had to be some trick behind it. Holy Mithra’s [Black Bolt] possessed enough might to rend a fissure in the ground that stretched to the horizon. Yet this man had easily flicked it aside? It could not be. It could not...

No, Holy Mithra had to acknowledge the truth. There was something odd about the man currently standing before it. He was an abnormality—one that Holy Mithra’s experiences and intelligence, honed over tens of

thousands of years of existence, could not recognize, much less fathom. As hard as that was to accept, the events that had just occurred proved as much.

This man was a threat of an unknown kind that Holy Mithra had never encountered. Not even twenty thousand years ago, during the era known as the age of the gods.

Holy Mithra suppressed a surge of unease and closely studied the events that were playing out before its eyes. It unleashed its [Black Bolt] several more times, and only then did it recognize a single phenomenon. Mithra did not understand well enough to venture an explanation, but the man's shabby black sword was changing the trajectory of its spells, causing them to veer off in strange directions upon contact.

Fortunately, it had a way around that.

"[Megiddo Flame]."

Mithra summoned forth the most destructive spell in its entire arsenal: black flames of annihilation that reduced all to ash. So intense was their heat that they could evaporate even iron instantly. And though Mithra had been planning to preserve its mana for the next several thousand years, it drew upon its reserves unsparingly to blanket the entire area in this dark inferno.

This was its trump card—the most destructive of every spell and technique that Mithra possessed. That power came at the cost of a significant amount of mana. However, in such a situation, one could not be miserly.

Long ago, Mithra had reduced countries—nay, entire continents—to cinders with this very spell. Its current opponent was abnormal, but he was still human, and no feeble human could withstand the annihilation of [Megiddo Flame]. Not even Mithra itself would escape unharmed if the attack were directed at it. As such, it did not need to check to know that its two opponents were now nothing more than ash.

Mithra thought itself safe in that assumption. After all, how could the situation have played out any differently? If not for the pack of insignificant weaklings and their cowardly scheme that had sealed Mithra in this blue gemstone all those years ago, it would have long since scoured their ilk from the world.

For an age, Mithra had dwelled on that thought. As long as the conditions were right, its [Megiddo Flame] would ensure its victory over even a stronger specimen of its own kind. It was Mithra's ultimate

technique, which had never failed to achieve its purpose. And if unleashed alongside a lethal [Black Bolt]—just to be doubly, triply certain—then no matter the opponent, they would be reduced to ash.

That was what logic dictated.

“[Black Bolt].”

[Parry]

How, then, was this man still whole? How was he still in one piece and not a pile of cinders?

And how is he coming straight for me, looking like he does not have a care in the world...?

Was he truly pushing the flames aside with his sword? None of this made any sense. It was impossible. The man’s body was swathed in fire, yet still, he drew nearer and nearer to Mithra. His skin sloughed away in sheets and turned to ash, only to grow back again and again as he closed the distance.

And at the same time, he was *still* parrying bolts of black lightning.

The man’s regenerative ability was inexhaustible. But how? What had he done to gain such power? *Just who was he?* To describe him as an abnormality no longer sufficed. He was an abomination—one that should never have existed.

No. Be calm. This is not only that man’s power but hers as well.

Astirra, the half-elf woman. She had reduced the potency of the flames and was assisting the man’s regeneration. Mithra had kept her in this place for two hundred years, yet she had this much strength left in her? It had valued her blood and body quite highly—but evidently not highly enough.

Still, Mithra did not let its surprise take hold. With this new understanding of the situation, it could no longer deceive itself. It was not powerful enough. Its strength had declined. This body would not last much longer.

Twenty thousand years had passed since Mithra had been locked in here. It had already destroyed the function of the blue gemstone that had drained its power, converted it, and fed it into the dungeon, but not soon enough. Its body had deteriorated far too much as a result.

At best, Mithra had only another ten thousand years left—no, in the worst case, only another several thousand. Its strength had waned more severely than it had imagined.

But even then, its power should never have fallen low enough for *insignificant humans* to seize the upper hand. Mithra and its kind stood on

a plane of existence far above humanity. Intelligence, technique, physical makeup—they were incomparably superior in every way.

Burying two primitive humans should have been trivial. Even a negligible amount of effort would force them to their knees.

So why is this happening?

“[Black Bolt].”

[Parry]

Mithra doubted its own eyes. How could this be? The next barrage unleashed from its hand contained not just lightning and flames but also a matrix of the most potent defensive barriers it could produce. The more power that was devoted to the creation of these barriers, the more resilient they became. And while Mithra’s half-elf puppet could create barriers a hundred times sturdier than anything an ordinary individual could muster—such as the ones it had placed on the route to the dungeon’s core—even those paled in comparison to the ones Mithra’s true body could produce.

Mithra continued to form barriers, creating dozens each time the humans blinked. It was almost excessive—an absolute defense, to be sure. Mithra soon had around it a blinding fortress of azure light. Though it could not believe it had been forced onto the defensive in the first place, it was now completely safe. Not even ten instances of its own [Black Bolt] cast at their highest potency and unleashed all at once would make it through the barriers.

So how...?

[Parry]

How was this man smashing through them as though they were paper?

Even with the flames searing his skin, he continued to advance, breaking Mithra’s barriers by the thousands. His momentum simply *would not stop*.

Unbelievable.

Mithra could no longer retain its composure. Its barriers, created with techniques beyond the understanding of the current era, were being shattered one after another by a being of no consequence. As soon as it formed the next layer, the man’s black sword had already shattered another several hundred. Mithra was losing what little ground it had managed to cling to.

Who is this man? Who?

Everything about him was sheer insanity. How had he even come to exist?

No... It wasn't just the man. Yes, he was abnormal, but his sword was the true problem. It was the Black Blade, a relic recognized as the greatest of its kind, recovered by that fool of a king from the depths of the Dungeon of the Lost. How had Mithra overlooked it until now?

Mithra suspected that a being of tremendous power was sealed within the Dungeon of the Lost in the same way it had been trapped here. That was precisely why it had eyed the Black Blade, thinking it was a burial item of the highest quality from ages past.

It had been completely mistaken.

The Black Blade was not the greatest relic in the world—such a restrictive moniker did not even begin to describe its true worth. Its very existence was an exceptional outlier. Comparing it to anything in their current world was a ludicrous insult to its uniqueness.

How had Mithra not noticed that until now?

Indeed, the Black Blade existed on another level entirely—one so superior it could not be expressed through words. Mithra had heard of such items being created at the end of the age of the gods. As a final act of defiance, the insignificant beings of the past had made strange wonders, the likes of which had never been seen before. This was Mithra's first time laying eyes on one. And the more it studied the Black Blade, the more threatening the sword seemed. One needed only to look at the relic to know it could not be compared to any other. Even putting aside its many abnormal qualities, it was made of something that simply *should not have existed*.

Ideal Matter.

Twenty thousand years ago, during the era now called the age of the myth, the insignificant specks had reached heights that had allowed them to defy those such as Mithra. Ideal Matter was the crystallization of their entire civilization: the pinnacle of achievement that existed without peer. The material could affect anything else yet could not be affected in turn. Its very existence was contradictory.

The Black Blade was the only weapon in existence made from this legendary material. It could oppose even a god—a being that was as conceptual as it was physical.

So why was it *here*? The word “peerless” did not do the Black Blade justice; even twenty thousand years ago, when civilization had thrived, it had been said to exist in a league of its own. There was nothing a person would not cast aside to obtain it. Such was its preeminent worth.

In this era, nothing could rival the Black Blade, so wielding it was akin to holding the entire world in one's hand. Mithra could hardly believe it had already been unearthed from its resting place.

Yet the weapon was not whole. Even at a glance, one could tell it had sustained considerable damage, and its power had faded entirely. Because it had initially been of exquisitely delicate make, its functions had ceased; now, its only notable quality was the contradictory material from which it was made. By all accounts, it should have been unusable in its current condition, unable even to be carried. And yet...

[Parry]

How was this man wielding it without any issue? He should not have been able to swing it—nor even touch it, considering what it was made of. Yet he made it seem like the most natural thing in the world.

It was insane. The man, the sword, the entire situation.

[Parry]

The man's blade smashed through the remaining barriers, allowing Mithra's own black flames to seep through. Mithra was quickly enveloped in the conflagration, and its body *burned*.

Unable to breathe air through its hollow throat, Mithra let loose a silent scream. Twenty thousand years had passed since it had last felt such agony. Such unease. Such *confusion*.

This was wrong. No, it was *impossible*. At this rate, Mithra—*Holy Mithra*, once said to be the closest existence to the gods themselves—would die at the hands of two primitive, inferior animals. Was this really the end...? Would the last blow truly be dealt by this nobody who had appeared out of nowhere without word or warning? Mithra had never considered such an end for itself. How—

[Parry]

How is this man's sword reaching me?

Everything about the man was wrong. Everything about him was contradictory. He could use a sword that should not have been usable. He could react to lightning that moved too fast for the eye to follow. He could pierce through barriers that were supposed to be impenetrable.

Then he shattered Mithra's jaw, which should not have been reachable.

Mithra unleashed another soundless howl from a throat with no flesh to burn. How long had it been since it had last experienced this feeling—since it had last feared the unknown? At once, it abandoned its plans.

Ah. This is it—the end.

The future it had carefully laid out for itself had been changed, and there was nothing that could be done about it. No longer could Mithra leisurely chart out the steps of its resurrection. The being standing before it now had dragged it from its intended path.

But even then, Mithra lamented what had slipped through its fingers.

First, Tirrence. Mithra had doted on the boy, eagerly awaiting the day he would become its new body. And what an exquisite body he would have been. He had finally reached an age when he was capable of propagation, and the exchange with Mithra's current puppet—Tirrence's mother—had been just around the corner. How vexing it was that the plan had been thwarted at the eleventh hour.

Second, Lynneburg. Mithra had been on the verge of obtaining her as well. She would have served as a mere backup for its new form, but her potential as a new mother body was immense. Through her veins ran blood of a rare and excellent quality. If only Mithra had been able to obtain it, the Theocracy would have prospered even more. The addition of talented individuals to its ranks would have been guaranteed, with each one eventually becoming a fine vessel.

But above all, its beloved Holy Theocracy of Mithra—the country it had made from nothing and where it was an object of worship. Mithra had gathered people from all over the great continent, created a doctrine to facilitate its eventual resurrection, and established political influence to support the religion that revered it. The population of the capital had steadily increased, setting the stage for Mithra's rebirth.

Even now, though, there weren't enough people to create Mithra's flesh and blood. Not enough to satisfy its hunger. The Theocracy had to be nurtured for a little while longer. Patience would make the eventual reward so much sweeter—that was why Mithra had endured. So much had gone into its plans and schemes, all for that final moment of delight.

To lose everything was truly regrettable. Mithra had devoted so much time to creating something special, only to see it all collapse before the finish line.

Still, there was nothing to be done about it. As regrettable as it was, there was no sense in raging against the inevitable. Right now, Mithra's only focus was defeating the man—and unless it brought its full strength to bear, it would not win. This was the only option.

Fortunately, there was still plenty of time—an eternity, even, compared to the life spans of worthless humans. Having to give up on roughly two

hundred years of progress and start again was unfortunate, but there was no need to be hasty. Mithra needed only begin again. As long as it survived, there would *always* be another chance.

As the black flames continued to burn and rage, Mithra quietly accepted its fate. It was time to reap the rewards of seeds sown long ago.

This was coming a little earlier than anticipated, but that was all. Perhaps it was even a blessing in disguise. This version of the Theocracy would serve as a mere rehearsal for when the new nest was established. There had been many events with which Mithra had not been satisfied, but this second attempt would provide a chance to manage things differently.

Yes, this was necessary. Inevitable. An event that could not be avoided, even if the outcome meant the annihilation of everything Mithra had made for itself. There had only ever been one way this was going to end...so why not raise a grand toast in celebration?

Though it no longer had a jaw, Mithra threw back its head in silent laughter. In its throat, which was still at the mercy of the inferno, it felt the intense hunger and thirst it had endured for the past twenty thousand years.

And so, resolved to surrender everything it had worked toward, Mithra left the dungeon core. The gemstone had served as its prison for generations, but that was in the past. For a long time now, the only reason Mithra had remained within the core was because it had served as a *convenient hideaway*.

Chapter 84: Between Mother and Son

Tirrence and I hastened through the darkness toward the deepest stratum where the core was located, mowing through an endless tide of monsters. When we reached a slightly more open area, the holy prince abruptly stopped and gazed at our surroundings.

“Lynne,” he murmured cautiously. “Wait.”

“What is it, Tirrence?”

“Something’s wrong. This area—there should be powerful barriers layered here to prevent intruders from proceeding any deeper. We shouldn’t have been able to enter so easily.”

A closer look revealed a procession of massive furrows in the ground—likely impressions of the barriers that had once been there. “Could the high priestess have lifted them to pass?” I asked.

Tirrence slowly shook his head. “No, she would have put them back up again... Something else happened here.”

I was about to respond when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. “Look. Farther in. There’s light.”

Taking care not to let our guards down, we advanced through the open area—and the moment we stepped out the other side, the presence of the monsters we had previously been fighting vanished entirely. The light I’d noticed was blue in color, and as we grew closer, it became more evident that it was coming from a crystal structure composed of interlocked parts of various sizes.

“That must be...the dungeon’s core,” I murmured. I’d never seen one in person before, but there was no mistaking it. “So it really *is* still alive...”

This core was much larger than any I’d ever heard about—I actually had to crane my head to take it all in. As I fell quiet, so, too, did our surroundings; aside from us, there was nothing in the vicinity of the giant, glowing blue crystal.

“Nobody’s...here?” Tirrence muttered. “But...”

“Wait,” I warned. “Over there.”

We both stepped back, distancing ourselves from the presence we could sense manifesting. Then, with the eruption of a flickering black inferno, a single woman burst forth from the darkness.

“It can’t be. Is that...?”

“Her Holy Highness...?”

The person who had suddenly emerged from the blue crystal, wreathed in black flames, was none other than High Priestess Astirra. Tirrence and I were frozen in shock as she alighted on the ground, calmly stood up straight, and smiled at us.

“My, my...” she said softly. “Tirrence? And Lynneburg too. Fortune must not have cast me aside just yet, for this makes *two* strokes of luck. The first was this body not being touched by the flames. The second was finding the two of you waiting here for me upon my egress.”

There was no doubt that this was the high priestess, but reconciling that fact with her appearance was challenging. Black fire licked the air around her as she spoke, its heat so intense that it was melting the dungeon’s nearby surfaces. Even her mithril-weave robe, highly resistant to magic, was charred black and melted through in places.

What could have happened to put her in such a state?

“I’m overjoyed, Tirrence,” the high priestess said. “Just when your mother was facing a predicament, you came running. Well done. I am delighted that the two of you are here.”

I was struck speechless by the gentle smile she wore. The unnatural black flames cloaking her were unmistakably the product of a horrifyingly vast abundance of mana. They were burning her skin even as she spoke; it was unthinkable that she wasn’t in pain. How could she simply smile like that?

Taking in the sight before me, I felt my suspicions had been confirmed: something was wrong with the high priestess. As she stood there, her expression unchanging, my back stiffened almost on its own, and cold sweat trickled down my cheeks.

“Mother,” Tirrence said in greeting.

The high priestess turned her soft smile to the holy prince. Her expression wasn’t human—every instinct in my body screamed that at me. And...“mother”? It made no sense. How could Tirrence address the being before us by that name without hesitation?

One thing was becoming clear to me, though: I now understood why he believed that his mother needed to be killed.

“Mother, why do you look like...?” Tirrence trailed off. “Did something happen here?”

“I’m afraid to say that we had a burglar on our hands,” the high

priestess replied. “One who managed to sneak his way into the heart of our country.”

“A...burglar?”

“Indeed. The man whom young Lynneburg brought along. He took advantage of his position as a guest of today’s celebrations to sneak around and has proved to be a rather stubborn nuisance—enough to force *me* to take extreme measures. Still, he is no longer a concern; I’ve trapped *them* on the other side.”

“The other side’...?”

“And while I will not go so far as to say that escaping is *impossible*, it will take a significant amount of time, at best. All that remains is to acquire its flesh from the good citizens of Mithra and restore its original power. Then, not even that man will stand a chance against it.”

I didn’t have enough context to understand much of what the high priestess was saying. Still, my heart was pounding so rapidly that it hurt, and alarm bells were ringing violently in my head. She had apparently trapped “them,” but to whom was she referring? And what did she mean by acquiring flesh from the citizens? I had my suspicions, of course, but even considering them sent a shiver through me. Every fiber of good sense within me refuted them.

“Wait...” I murmured. “I’m...cold...?”

The chill I felt wasn’t a temporary phenomenon; it grew more intense with each passing moment. Accompanying it, a mounting sense of dread sent goose bumps rippling across my entire body.

Something was coming. Something unknown and unthinkably horrifying.

The moment I came to that realization, the space around us warped and distorted. A silent howl rang out as something huge manifested before us, enveloped in black flames that burned so bright they were blinding. The cavern’s walls were scorched black, then wholly evaporated, and the air instantly became hot enough that my throat burned in pain.

“Is that...?!”

My breath caught in my throat. Standing there, wreathed in black fire so intense that it melted the surrounding rock as though it were ice, was a monstrous figure resembling a gargantuan skeleton. The mere sight was overwhelming—it felt like its presence alone would crush me to a pulp.

The colossal skeleton had a broken jaw and wore the same scorched, mithril-weave robe we’d seen on the high priestess. It was also still alight,

its flames flickering in the darkness. I'd never encountered such a monster before—not even in reference or history books—but I *had* seen its likeness depicted more times than I could count. After all...

It was a religious icon found all over the Holy Theocracy.

“Holy Mithra...” I murmured.

The most Tirrence and I could do was gaze up at the gargantuan, flame-wreathed skeleton. Its mana reserves resembled a vast, torrential river—a force that no human could ever contend with. Standing before it, I couldn't even find the confidence to move a finger.

We were in the presence of Holy Mithra, the one and only focus of the entire Theocracy's worship. The being who, several centuries ago, had provided the Church of Mithra with its teachings through the high priestess.

As I stared, the high priestess's earlier remarks drifted back into my memory. She had said that all “it” needed to regain its power was flesh from the citizens—but what did “it” refer to?

As much as I didn't want to admit it, I already knew the answer: Holy Mithra, the being before my very eyes. And with that realization came understanding—I now knew what Tirrence had meant when he had told me that the being known as Holy Mithra had been meticulously preparing for this day. In all likelihood, for the past couple of centuries—ever since the Theocracy's founding—it had manipulated the country from the shadows, wearing the high priestess as a disguise. It had gathered its adherents to this city to use them as *sustenance* to gain more power. Everything here—the entire religion of the Church of Mithra—had been created for that purpose and no other.

“Correct, Lynne,” the high priestess said. “This is the venerable Holy Mithra, our country's true lord and savior.”

Another realization forced itself upon me: this wasn't a being that any human could deal with. Merely standing before it was terrifying. The atmosphere was so oppressive that I felt as though a vise were clamped around my chest, and my body was as mobile as a heavy slab of rock.

This being was on a level far, far above humanity. It was pointless even to compare them. So intense was the fear crushing my heart that it warred with the terror locking me in place; I almost believed I could break free of the hold on me and run away.

“So it wasn't a dream after all,” Tirrence said. “Was it, mother?”

“I suppose you *have* met Holy Mithra before, haven't you, Tirrence?

But to answer your question: no, it wasn't. Holy Mithra is no mere fairy tale. In fact, today is the very day of resurrection foretold in the Church of Mithra's teachings. Now, Tirrence, Lynneburg... Come this way. Join everybody in receiving the Blessing of Eternity."

Smiling, the high priestess beckoned us closer. Approaching her would put us in danger—that much was obvious—but so would staying still.

If I wasn't going to run, then I needed to take up my sword and resist. Against such a daunting opponent, however, not even my full strength would be enough. The moment that thought took root in my mind, my legs locked; without any regard for my will, my body had succumbed to despair.

"Mother," Tirrence said quietly while I stood frozen next to him. "May I have a moment of your time?"

He had called her "mother" *again*. There hadn't been fear or hesitation in the word, but neither had there been affection; it had sounded utterly devoid of emotion.

"Yes, Tirrence?" the high priestess replied.

"I must discuss something of vital importance with you. Alone, if possible."

"Must you now? Well...I suppose there is nothing wrong with *seeing to you first*. Come here."

The high priestess smiled genially and spread out her arms, paying no mind to the burns on her skin or the gargantuan skeleton at her back. Any lingering doubts were now nowhere to be seen: there was something deeply wrong with her. It was as though, like Holy Mithra, she wasn't human either. I tried to warn Tirrence not to go, but the words refused to leave my throat.

"Lynne," he said in a whisper. "It appears that this is as far as my vain struggle will get me. I'd wanted to achieve a little more, if I'm being honest...but I was evidently too naive when it came to thinking ahead."

"Tirrence...?"

"You must escape this place. By any means possible. I'm sorry for heaping my troubles on you so unilaterally. Nonetheless...now you know what kind of being that *thing* is, don't you?"

I simply nodded, still unable to move my mouth as I wanted.

"I truly am grateful that you've accompanied me this far. But now...you *must* escape. And if you can, inform those above of what happened here. I suppose it's quite shameless of me to leave you yet another request, isn't

it? Consider it further proof that you're the only one I can rely on. I'll buy you as much time as I can, so...please."

Tirrence spoke in his usual lighthearted tone. Then he turned to the high priestess and slowly began approaching her.

"Come along now, Tirrence," she said. "You cannot keep Holy Mithra waiting."

"There's no need to rush me, mother. I'm coming."

Tirrence continued at a slow, steady pace. I knew what he was about to attempt, but my body still refused to move.

The high priestess chuckled. "To be quite honest, Tirrence, I truly regret that your end must come here and now. Like this body, you possess blood of very fine quality. But there's no other choice, I'm afraid—not now that I know what that man has in his possession. Fear not, though; you will not go to waste."

"I couldn't have put it better myself, mother," Tirrence replied. "I don't intend to throw my life away either."

"Wait..." I choked out. "Wait!"

I saw Tirrence pull a red dagger from the inner folds of his jacket. It was the Crimson Reaper, a relic from the Dungeon of Lamentation that promised to claim its victim's life with a single stab. But this power came at a tremendous cost: if used, the wielder would join their victim in death.

"Wait! You can't—!"

It was no use. My words could no longer reach him. Over my strangled cries, Tirrence spoke in a cold, resonant voice.

"This body of mine is what you want, isn't it, mother? In that case, you're *welcome to have it.*"

Like the high priestess, Tirrence spread out his arms. Then he broke into a sprint, heading straight for her. He had quite literally told me that he wanted my help to eradicate his mother and that he would personally bear the weight of the sin. I'd assumed that he'd meant he would live with the consequence of his actions, but no—his resolve was firmer than that. From the very beginning, he had been prepared to stake his life on the outcome of this day.

Tirrence gripped the dagger firmly and sprinted even faster. Watching him was enough to confirm my suspicions: he planned for this to be the last strike he would ever make.

I should have realized it sooner. I needed to stop him, yet I didn't even attempt to move. Why? Why was I so weak? As his figure grew

increasingly distant, I couldn't even manage to be irritated at my own powerlessness.

"For as long as I've lived, I've been your tool!" Tirrence yelled. "But if you think that means you get to decide how I spend my life, you're *wrong!*"

His crimson blade reached the high priestess's chest...

And the next moment, he was gone. *Something* had enveloped Tirrence's entire body.

"What...?"

Only when my senses caught up did I realize what had happened: Holy Mithra had seized Tirrence in a massive hand and was now holding him like a tiny bird. I hadn't even seen the hand move.

The high priestess huffed in amusement. "Diving into my arms so enthusiastically... You're such a good boy. Holy Mithra is pleased too, see? You'll make for fine nourishment indeed. Truly, there was worth in raising you until now."

Tirrence was unresponsive; the force with which Holy Mithra was gripping him had rendered him unconscious. Seeing that made the high priestess laugh in delight.

"No..."

I didn't want to believe what was happening before my eyes. How could something so huge move so fast? It was beyond imagination. No, it was *outright impossible*.

Even with all the intelligence at my disposal, I couldn't think of anything that could possibly compare to *that*. Catastrophe-class, Calamity-class—the monstrous being I was up against existed far beyond the realm of such simple descriptors. It was an aberration that had never been recorded in the annals of history, for humanity had been fortunate enough to never encounter it.

From the shadows, this being had been manipulating an entire country for *centuries*. How was I supposed to face it alone? Even the prospect of escape seemed hopeless. I had already wasted the chance that Tirrence had sacrificed everything to give me—though I knew for certain that not even my best efforts would have been enough. Seeing what Holy Mithra had done to him was proof enough of that.

There was nothing I could do. Nothing.

"Now, Lynneburg. It's your turn. Come here."

The skeleton reached its other hand toward me—slowly, as though

aware that I was no more likely to run away than a lifeless doll. Its vast hand closed around my body, which was so frail and fragile compared to its own, and picked me up with almost tender care.

I thought I'd gotten stronger, but that wasn't true. I was still weak. Despite how hard I'd worked to improve, I was unable to act at the most crucial moment. As tears started to blur my vision, anger bubbled up from within me. Was this really all that I could do? Cry?

Even while I was so frustrated, it seemed that there truly was nothing I could do. The gargantuan skeleton opened its broken jaw wide, then held Tirrence and me above its gaping maw.

The high priestess laughed. "Oh, how I look forward to this. There is such wonderful potential lying dormant within you both. How great of a boon will it be to Holy Mithra, I wonder? I truly cannot wait to see. May your futures be blessed and happy."

I closed my eyes and accepted my fate. Giving up on everything, I simply waited for the monster to drop me into its mouth.

And waited... And waited...

Puzzled, I opened my eyes—and saw a fireball manifest in the corner of my vision. Standing within it was a human-shaped figure holding a familiar black sword.

"Finally, we're out! I really thought we were going to die in there."

The high priestess took a step back. "You're..."

With a start, I realized that *Holy Mithra* had retreated a step too.

My head was spinning. I couldn't follow what was happening around me. I took a brief reprieve to collect my thoughts, and when I eventually refocused, I realized that the person standing there, looking at me, was...

"Instructor Noor?"

"Lynne? What are you doing here? Shouldn't you be at the ball?"

It was Instructor Noor. He stood in front of *Holy Mithra* and the high priestess, and just like them, he was encased in flames. I didn't have the time to recognize anything else, though—*Holy Mithra* immediately released its grip on Tirrence and me, tossing us through the air, and its arms vanished from my sight.

No!

It was going to crush Instructor Noor! Even for a man of his talents, *Holy Mithra* was too fast to—

[Parry]

There was a thundering impact that threatened to tear my ears from my

skull; then I suddenly realized that one of Holy Mithra's skeletal hands had shattered into fragments of bone. This had all taken place while Tirrence and I were still sailing through the air. It had happened so quickly that I hadn't been able to follow any of it.

I just barely found my bearings in time to grab Tirrence and land with him a good distance away from Holy Mithra. Then my legs wavered, and I fell to my hands and knees. Was it because of the terror I was feeling? No, not at all; the blow exchanged just now had caused our surroundings to shake violently. I turned around to see that a vast spiderweb of gashes had marred the ground, reaching all the way to the walls—and Instructor Noor was standing at its center.

"Hey, Noor! Please don't just leave me behind like that!" All of a sudden, another humanoid figure appeared from a warp in space, similarly wreathed in flame. "Phew. Thank goodness. I somehow made it out. I seriously thought I was about to be left in there on my own again. Wait... Huh? Who are those two?"

The figure—a woman—had alighted on the ground and extinguished the flames covering her with a burst of wind magic. Then, her eyes had settled on us.

"Mo...ther...?" Tirrence asked, his voice tinged with confusion. He had evidently awoken in my arms.

The source of the holy prince's bewilderment was obvious. After all, the woman looking at us was the spitting image of someone with whom we were both very familiar.

Chapter 85: Mithra's Incarnation

Reflexively, I swallowed my breath. I heard Tirrence do the same beside me. The woman who had appeared before us looked exactly like High Priestess Astirra. Based on appearances alone, it seemed reasonable to call them the same person—but the air about the newly arrived woman was markedly different from that of the high priestess I knew. Just who was she?

“Instructor,” I said, “might I ask who that woman is?”

“Her name’s Astirra,” Instructor Noor answered plainly.

“‘Astirra’...?” So she shared not only the high priestess’s appearance but her name too? My bewilderment only deepened.

“Um, hello...” the woman said, wearing a gentle smile as she studied my face. “It’s a pleasure to meet such a charming young lady. I... My goodness. Excuse my abruptness, but that gown you’re wearing seems awfully expensive.”

“Astirra, meet Lynne,” Instructor Noor said. “She’s on our side.”

There was a short pause before my manners finally returned to me. “My apologies. I am Lynneburg Clays. Though if you don’t mind, I would rather you call me by my adventurer name, ‘Lynne.’”

“Lynne, hmm? But of course. And what about that dashing young gentleman by your side? Could you tell me your name too, sir? For some reason...I have the strangest feeling that I already know you.”

“Mother...?” Tirrence murmured. “No, but that cannot... Who *are* you?”

The woman’s appearance had caught him entirely flat-footed. I couldn’t blame him for being surprised; I was feeling the same way. This second Astirra looked so eerily identical to the high priestess that it was hard to believe she was anybody else.

Yet at the same time, I could tell that she *was* a separate person. In contrast to the high priestess, who had backed away and was now glaring at us, this woman was wearing a smile so kind that just standing near her made me feel at ease.

“I... Pardon me,” Tirrence said, looking at a loss under the woman’s gaze. “My name is Tirrence.”

“Tirrence. That’s a nice name, but... Hmm...” The woman paused thoughtfully. “I really cannot shake the feeling that I know you. I wonder why...”

As their conversation continued, Instructor Noor kept his Black Blade pointed in Holy Mithra’s direction, not letting his guard down for a moment. Neither the giant skeleton with its shattered hand nor the high priestess made an attempt to move; they merely watched my instructor, wary of his every move.

“Instructor...” I said, “may I ask where you’ve been?”

“I don’t actually know for sure,” he replied. “From what I’ve heard, I think we were inside that blue gemstone, but...”

“You were inside the core?”

“Seems like it. Then that thing suddenly made a break for it, so we chased it here.”

I was stunned into silence. Even when my voice came back to me, the most I could utter was “It... ‘made a break for it’?”

Instructor Noor’s words repeated in my head again and again as I tried to decipher their meaning. He’d mentioned being *inside* the dungeon’s core, which was quite frankly unprecedented. I’d certainly never heard of a person entering one before. And the “*thing*” that had apparently “made a break for it”... Did he truly mean what I thought he meant?

As my mind reeled, the high priestess broke her silence. “I am truly surprised. However did you manage to escape?”

“Good question,” Instructor Noor said reflectively. “Well, after you two left, I found this *hazy spot* of sorts. I whacked it with my sword to see if that would do anything, and then we got out. Don’t ask me to explain how; I don’t have a clue why it worked.”

“I...see. How truly absurd. I speak of both you and that sword, of course. I never expected you to pursue me so easily, but that was my mistake. I shan’t underestimate you again.”

The gargantuan skeleton took High Priestess Astirra in its remaining hand and slowly raised her into the air. Black flames spread from its body to hers, then began consuming her white robe.

“I shall start by expending this body of mine,” the high priestess said. “That should provide at least a modicum of power.”

“Mother...?”

“Tirrence. I shall take the lead in becoming our lord’s flesh and blood. Do not tarry in doing the same. This is a blessed opportunity we have been

given. It is the grand salvation that our Holy Theocracy has always striven toward.”

“Mother, what are you—?”

Before Tirrence could move from where he stood, Holy Mithra brought the high priestess closer and threw her into its jawless mouth.

“Wha...?”

The next thing we knew, a thick, cloying malice had enveloped us all. Muddy black blood flowed from Holy Mithra’s bones, onto which now clung small, scattered chunks of writhing pink flesh.

“GRUHGGHHH...”

From the skinless, partially formed, human-shaped monstrosity came a guttural moan that shook the ground. The oppressive mana it discharged threatened to knock me unconscious, and terror caused my body to seize up once again.

This aberration was so much more than a simple monster. It had become something else entirely—something that no human could ever hope to match. Any comfort I’d felt before was gone, replaced only with despair.

A deafening noise split the air; before I’d even had a chance to react, something had collided with the ceiling above us and then burst through it. Only by looking at my surroundings was I able to discern what had transpired: the skeleton had thrust its hand toward the ground, then flicked something upward. That I’d only noticed this after the fact sent another shudder through me. I tried desperately to regain my composure, but then I realized that one of us was missing.

“Instructor...Noor...?”

He had been with us a moment ago, but now he was nowhere to be seen. Had the skeleton just...?

“No!”

Holy Mithra had been biding its time, waiting for the perfect opportunity to dispatch its greatest threat. My legs began to tremble. Now that he was gone, the rest of us were helpless prey. Any moment now, I thought, the skeleton would set upon us.

But nothing happened. The abomination pocked with fleshy lumps kept its gaze trained on the fresh hole above us, uttering a string of deep, repulsive noises.

“NGUHHH... H-HOW...DEL...DELECTA...BLE.”

With a start, I realized the monstrosity wasn’t just making sounds—it

was actually *speaking*.

**“GRUGH... DE...DELICIOUS... AHH... AHHH! DELICIOUS!
GRRRAHHHHHH!!!”**

All of a sudden, it began slamming its fist into the bedrock around it. Was it lashing out in delight or had it simply lost its mind...? The dungeon’s ground and walls burst apart as if struck by a thousand explosions, reduced to a tapestry of cracks and craters. Debris rained down from above, shaken loose by the impacts, but Holy Mithra ignored them as it finally turned to us and spoke once again in its unpleasant, strangled voice.

**“TI...TI-TIRRENCE. LYNNEBURG... I THINK...I SHALL...S-
SAVE YOU FOR LATER...AFTER AAALL. IT WOULD
BE...EEE...SU-UH-UCH A...SHAME TO...END YOU...HERE-ERE-
EEERE.”**

The monstrosity’s bloodshot, incomplete eyeballs stared down at us. Its repulsive voice echoed throughout the dungeon, chilling me to the bone.

**“M-MAGH...MAGNI...FICENT. THIS BLOOD. THIS BLOOD
IS...MAG...NIFICENT. FAR BETTER...THAN I...IMAGINED. I DID
NOT...KNOW...THAT ELVISH BLOOD...WAS
SO...DELECTABLE. DELECTABLE...AND...NOURISHING. I
WANT...MORE. MORE TO...CONSUME. BUT MY
SOURCES...ARE...LIMITED. I SHALL...WAIT. THEN
I...SHALL...FEAST. TO C-CONSUME...IT ALL...NOW...WOULD
BE...SUCH A...WASTE. BUT... AHH... SO DELECTABLE.
SO...DELECTABLE! AH... AH... AUGHHH... UGH... UGHHH!!!”**

Again, Holy Mithra lashed out as though in a frenzy. The ground shook, but I remained still, unable to move even a finger. I couldn’t break free of the terror that had seized me. If my interpretation of the monstrosity’s guttural moans was correct, then it was *laughing*—and the sound alone was enough to send tremors through the cavern. My suspicions were confirmed: it was even stronger than before.

Compared to earlier, Holy Mithra’s might, wickedness, and insanity were all drastically more intense. It was nothing short of superlative. We had no hope of even touching it anymore; its strength was so far beyond our own that I felt like we were facing an evil god straight out of myth.

As I stood there in a daze, struggling even to breathe, the monstrosity raised its hand. A shimmering blue barrier appeared around me and the others.

“No...”

It was a cage so potent that just touching it would send me flying back. And its purpose was to contain us, Holy Mithra’s prey. No, at this point, we were nothing more than *livestock*.

“YUUGH...YOU...WILL ALL...WAIT...HERE. I WILL BE...BACK...SOONNN.”

Its voice rumbled the cage, dark and thrumming.

“REH...REST ASSURED. I DO NOT...WISH TO HARM...YOU. NOT MORE...THAN IS NECESSARY. YOU ARE...ARE...MY PRECIOUS...SEEDS. FOR MY...EVENTUAL FEAST. SO STAY...HERE...AND BE GOO-GOOD. HA. HA. HAAA!”

The monstrosity focused its eyes on us, trapped as we were.

“TRULY...I CAN...HARDLY...WAIT. AH. HA. HAA. HAAGHH. HARD...HARDLY. AAH. HAAAGH. HAAA!”

Its laughter was unlike anything I’d ever heard. I struggled to believe it was even of this world. The dungeon continued to shake with each peal, the vibrations reaching even my internal organs. Then, when Holy Mithra finally ceased its bout of merriment, it shot up toward the ceiling. In mere seconds, it had enlarged the hole left by Instructor Noor and started crawling through at a frightening speed.

As the monstrosity’s presence faded into the distance along with the sounds of its departure, the weight on my chest finally disappeared. I took a single breath, then several more, sucking in as much air as I could. Only then did it occur to me that I was drenched in a veritable waterfall of cold sweat and that my throat was bone-dry from the tension I was feeling.

Suddenly, the woman who had arrived with Instructor Noor called out to Tirrence and me. “Um... Lynne and...Tirrence, was it?”

“Y-Yes, Asti...” I paused to reconsider. “Your Holy Highness?”

“Oh no, I’m not a high priestess or anything. I’m just Astirra, an adventurer. But, um, while we’re on the subject...what was with that woman?”

“She’s... Pardon me. I’d like to tell you, but I’m...not quite sure where to begin.”

Astirra chuckled. “That’s quite all right. I wouldn’t mind sitting down with you to learn all the details, but I suppose this is neither the time nor place. He needs my help.”

“Your help...?” I echoed. Did she mean Instructor Noor? But how would she do anything while we were trapped in this cage?

"Indeed. I think he needs it, at least. That bone monstrosity seemed even stronger than it was earlier. And...there!"

The woman swung her staff at the barrier, creating a small crack. Then, with a light tap, she turned the breach into a larger opening.

"Huh?" I stared at her, awestruck. Tirrence was doing the same. "How did you...?"

She giggled, then threw out her chest. "Well, I wasn't going to let all that time I spent trapped in the core go to waste. And if you think little old Astirra's going to sit around twiddling her thumbs while that bone monstrosity runs amok, then you're dead wrong! I'm the type to hold a grudge, you see. Now come on—let's go!"

Astirra led the charge and the rest of us followed. Escaping the cage was easy enough, although the opening closed shortly behind us.

"Well, that brings us one step closer to foiling its schemes," she said. "Serves it right! This isn't anywhere near enough to satisfy me, though. I'll accept nothing less than a front-row seat while Noor gives it the thrashing of a lifetime!"

The air rustled, and a cloak of wind wrapped around Astirra, carrying her up into the air. I couldn't believe my eyes. It was a spell counted among the most demanding class of wind magic in existence. I knew about it purely from a theoretical standpoint; in the entire Kingdom of Clays, only Instructor Oken had managed to use it practically. It was essentially an ultimate technique of sorts, yet this woman was casting it with ease. Who in the world was she?

"It couldn't be..." I muttered. "Is that...[Float]?"

"Hmm? Recognize this spell, do you? Nobody I've taught it to has ever been able to use it."

"I do. I'm also aware of how hard it is to cast. I've only ever seen it used by Instructor Oken, the Spell Sovereign."

"Huh?" The woman resembling the high priestess looked taken aback. "Oken can cast it?"

"Are you acquainted with him, by chance?"

"Acquainted with him?" She chuckled. "I guess you could say that. You see, I'm the one who taught him this spell. He was a real sore loser about not being able to cast it. In fact, do you know what he said to me? 'Who needs such a plain spell anyway? It's not like I'll ever use it!' He must have put the practice in. How very admirable."

Astirra smiled and nodded, evidently satisfied. Then a violent impact

from above saw us bombarded with another slew of rubble.

“Oh, but this isn’t the time to be kicking back,” she said. “I really must be going.”

“Alone?” I asked.

“Despite how I might look, I was once a renowned adventurer!” she replied with a sharp, sportive puff. “I’ve had more brushes with death than I can count—in large part because a certain reckless *someone* was always charging ahead. Someone you seem to know, I might add. Let me tell you, he was— Oh, drat. Look at me. It’s been so long since I’ve had company that I can’t help but chitchat. I’d better refocus.”

The woman adopted a more serious expression before charging the cloak of wind surrounding her with mana. A sudden gale whipped into existence, fierce enough to send any one of us flying bodily away—and then disappeared just as quickly. The debris falling from above gradually lost its momentum, then began to follow new trajectories that avoided us entirely.

At that moment, I came to a realization: this woman was an outlier too. The finesse with which she controlled the wind was astounding. She had somehow focused a windstorm powerful enough to level a major building into a cloak, which she was manipulating as easily as she could move her fingers. Wind magic was my specialty too, but I could tell that even my best would seem trivial to her.

Just by standing close to Astirra, I could sense that her mana reserves were tremendously vast. Not even Instructor Oken, the Spell Sovereign, could rival them. This woman’s very existence was unbelievable; I hadn’t felt this way since my first time meeting Instructor Noor.

“Well, I’m off,” she announced. “In the meantime, you two should get someplace safe.” Then, with a gust of wind, she ascended through the hole in the ceiling and disappeared from view.

“We should make haste too, Tirrence,” I said. “Let’s start heading back up.”

For a long moment, he didn’t respond; he was staring up at the hole Astirra had disappeared through, partially dazed. “Lynne...” he finally said. “Do you think... Could that woman possibly be my...?”

“Tirrence. We need to warn the others of the danger and start evacuating the city. I’m sorry, but we don’t have time for this conversation.”

“Right... Right, of course. Sorry.”

“Besides, I don’t think you need to worry about her. She’ll be fine. I’m sure you’ll get to see her again.”

“I’m...not sure where that’s coming from. But if you’re attempting to console me... Thank you.”

In truth, that hadn’t been my intention at all. I’d only said those words because *I’d* needed to hear them. My feet, rooted to the spot as they were, wouldn’t have listened to me otherwise. Only by feigning confidence was I able to shake the dread that racked me at the thought of getting any closer to the despair-inducing monstrosity up above.

I was well aware that my assurances were no more than desperate wishes, but I needed to say them. The alternative was succumbing to hesitation and despair. So once again, I voiced my forlorn hope.

“Everything is going to be fine. Instructor Noor is up there too.”

Strangely enough, when the words left my mouth, the weight on my shoulders started to fade. It was then that I remembered—why was I letting my fear get the better of me? I couldn’t abandon hope yet; with Instructor Noor on our side, it was much too early to give in to despair. Letting my terror keep me here wasn’t an option.

“We can’t just cower in a place like this,” I said. “There are still things we can do to help. Let’s go.”

Tirrence hummed in agreement. “You’re absolutely right.”

And so the two of us retraced our steps, running as fast as we could. We needed to get back up to the surface.

Chapter 86: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 1

Inside a bustling tavern crowded with adventurers, three individuals sat together at a table: a half-elven woman with a gentle smile and beauty that drew the eye; a short man in magician's garb quaffing a tankard of beer; and a slender man with distinct pale-blue hair.

"I hope our delve goes well. The Dungeon of Lamentation won't be a walk in the park."

The remark had come from the woman of the group. Her words weren't laden with meaning—they were just a casual wish that the trio's upcoming adventure would see them safe at the end.

The short man seemed to interpret them differently, however. He placed his tankard on the table and scoffed, "Ha! None of that nonsense now, Astirra. *Of course* it'll go well! How many dungeons do you think our party's conquered already? And most important of all, we have me, Oken, the Genius Magician!"



Seeing the short man's ever so familiar confident smile and hearing his thoroughly pompous declaration, the woman breathed a small sigh. "I have no idea how you can always strut about saying such embarrassing things, Oken. In a sense, I actually kind of respect it..."

"Hmph. If you've ever wondered why you still get treated as second-rate, Astirra, it's because you say things like that. Being first-rate takes skill *and* reputation! You'd do well to learn a little from my example!"

"Sure, whatever you say. I don't think I'd get much joy from a fake, overexaggerated prestige, though. You might be famous, but only as 'that one shady braggart who frequents taverns.' I'd hate to have a reputation like that attached to *my* name, so I think I'll refrain from following in your footsteps."

"Wh-What did you say I'm famous for?!"

The short magician whirled around to look at the bartender, who quickly averted his gaze. As he grappled with the shock, the woman—wearing the white robes of a cleric—turned to the slender man beside her, who was inspecting the tools he had laid out on the table, one by one.

"That aside," she said, "Roy, are our preparations in order?"

"Yeah," the slender man replied. "I've double-checked and counted up the tools we'll need and completed the maintenance on our equipment. All that's left is to pack everything in our bags. Hey, Oken—your magical tools make up most of our stuff. Can't you take care of them yourself? Why do you always make *me* do it?"

"Ha, as if there's any other choice," the short man said. "Of the three of us, you're the best at handling magical tools. The right person for the right job, as I always say."

"I seem to remember you calling yourself a genius 'even at handling magical tools.'"

"Hmph. I, the august and magnificent Twinspell Oken, am willing to concede this singular honor to you, my good man. Accept it with gratitude, for you are a genius of a kind as well. Perhaps your blood and innate ability are the only reasons, but you are worthy of overseeing my tools. In the future, once I ascend in status, I will be more than willing to employ your services."

"Now listen here, Oken," the woman chided. "You have no right to act so self-important when Roy always maintains your tools for you. And what's with that nickname? 'Twinspell'? Are you alluding to twinfold casting? You know as well as I do that *nobody*'s figured out how to do that

yet, not even you. What are you, a fraud?”

“Hmph! I’ll get it *eventually*. I’m a genius. What difference does it make whether I take the title now or later?”

The woman sighed. “Just talking to you is exhausting, Oken. Roy, you don’t have to play along with him, you know.”

“It’s fine,” Roy said. “He’s full of hot air, so I ignore nine-tenths of what he says to begin with. I only take care of his tools because I feel bad for them; he treats them so roughly.”

“Wh-What did you say?!” Oken cried. “Are you two ignoring my heartfelt advice?! The nerve of you!”

“Advice?” the woman repeated. “I could’ve sworn it was nothing more than jumped-up boasting.”

“All talk and no substance,” the slender man agreed. “It’d be more worth my while to listen to a little bird chirping in my ear.”

“Ngh... Don’t think I won’t cry if you keep being so cold to me,” Oken said. “I’ll really do it, you know.” In contrast to his haughty demeanor, he was quite the sensitive man; his eyes truly were brimming with tears.

A pain in the behind, a cocksure braggart, an oddball who only ever spoke about himself—almost everybody who met the eccentric magician Oken held the same opinion of him and stayed away for the same reasons. Astirra and Roy were the first and only two people who had agreed to form an adventuring party with him—a proper one, anyway—and by this point, they had already spent five years together.

“I...I’m warning you two,” Oken tearfully continued. “My heart is grievously wounded, and I *will* weep. My grief will be so profound that you’ll *both* share in my sadness. A-Are you really o-okay with that?”

“Yep,” Roy said.

“Weep away,” Astirra added. “Oh, but do it over there, will you? I don’t want people thinking we’re associated.”

There was a long silence, broken only by Oken beginning to sniffle.

These days, there wasn’t a single adventurer in the north of the continent who hadn’t heard of the Philosopher’s Goblet, the party made up of the rare combination of a magician, a cleric, and a scout. That wasn’t all that was unique about it, however—its three members were all of separate races and, as such, possessed their own distinct peculiarities.

The cleric, Astirra. She was a half-elf, which was a vanishingly rare race indeed.

Roy of the Lepifolk, who lived in the north of the continent and were

few in number.

And finally, Oken, the magician—a human and self-proclaimed genius.

At first, both Astirra and Roy had been outcasts because of their notable idiosyncrasies. The former had been deceived by others after coming to the big city from the depths of a forest and almost sold off, while the latter had been tricked, cheated, and swindled so many times by humans after coming to the city from deep within the mountains that he had developed a severe distrust of them in general. That hadn't mattered to Oken, though; he had been the lone member of a one-man party and desperate for companions, so he had half conscripted them into joining him.

The result had been a party comprising two country bumpkins and an oddball. As for its name, it had come from the silver goblets of questionable quality that Oken had purchased from a shady street vendor shortly after the trio had met.

The group had started working as the Philosopher's Goblet—and miraculously enough, despite their individual differences, they had worked well together. As a party, they had managed to refine their abilities and conquer a number of smaller dungeons.

Despite the less-than-amicable words they traded, deep down, the three were truly fond of one another, and their relationship was built upon a sturdy basis of trust. To anyone with an experienced eye, the Philosopher's Goblet was an excellent adventuring party indeed, to the point that it was enviable.

"Very well," Astirra said. "Since it would seem that our preparations are all in order, shall we go?"

Oken smirked and exclaimed, "Hah! We'll conquer the dungeon for sure, mark my words. It's a piece of cake, so long as nobody slips up. Just leave everything to me, okay, you two?"

"You can keep going on like that if you want," Roy intoned. "Just know that if you make a misstep in the darkness and fall into a chasm, I'm not going to save you this time."

"R-Roy? You don't actually mean that, do you? You'll...save me, right?"

Their preparations were indeed sorted, so the trio set out with the ease of experience under their belts. On this particular day, they were challenging the Dungeon of Lamentation to the west of the Kingdom of Clays. It was said to be the largest known dungeon—with the exception of

the Dungeon of the Lost—and considered one of the hardest in the world to attempt to conquer.

But the Philosopher's Goblet wasn't your everyday adventuring party.

Despite Oken the magician's reputation for being an exaggerative braggart, when it came to magical ability, he was truly one of the elite. In dungeons, it was he who almost single-handedly annihilated every monster the party encountered. With Astirra's support magic backing him up, no foe could stand in their way.

As for Roy, the party's scout, while he wasn't very well suited to direct combat, he was the best of the best when it came to performing the duties of his role. These included detecting enemies, sensing dangers, and leading his companions along safe paths. Moreover, when he was required to battle, he made use of his natural agility to run interference.

And in the event that anybody sustained an injury, Astirra the half-elf would immediately heal them with her excessive reserve of mana. For that reason, it wasn't rare for the Philosopher's Goblet to return from conquering a small-scale dungeon *entirely scratch-free*. When the trio worked together, even the gatekeeper of the core—the fiercest monster in a dungeon—was hardly a threat.

There was Oken, the magician, who cast spell after spell in quick succession, each with such outlandish destructive potential that it was almost laughable; Astirra, whose forte was wind magic, with her wide array of support spells that mitigated or outright nullified all manner of enemy offensives; and Roy, who made use of his innate agility and talents to sense danger, calmly assess the party's situation, and distract whatever opponents they faced. Each of the trio had their defined role to play—and together, they were truly formidable. As long as they made no major mistakes and were able to fight the stronger monsters in a head-on confrontation, even the deeper levels of a challenging dungeon were no match for them.

Thanks to their winning combination, the Philosopher's Goblet reached the deepest level of the Dungeon of Lamentation in relatively little time.

"What's...that?" Oken murmured, beholding the strange light spilling from the chamber before them. He stepped ahead of the others to be first to enter. "Is it the dungeon's core?"

As they all entered the chamber, they came face-to-face with a massive core the likes of which they had never seen before.

"Looks like it," Roy agreed. "It's made of the same material as the ones

we're familiar with."

"Still...it's rather large, isn't it?" Astirra mused. "To the point that it's almost incomparable."

"That's not all. There's something strange about this chamber; I sense some kind of power here. And unlike in other dungeons, there are no monsters."

"Hah!" Oken scoffed. "Don't be such a scared little mouse, Roy. Once we've smashed this thing, we'll go down in history as the ones who conquered the Dungeon of Lamentation. Come on, let's break it up and take it home."

"Yeah... I suppose you're right. Let's get this over with. Our rations are running low, so best we be quick about it."

But as Roy and Oken began to approach the large blue crystal, Astirra called out to them. "Oken, Roy—wait. This core... Something's not right about it."

"What? What do you—"

"Look out! Move!"

Having sensed something abnormal, Astirra shoved Oken aside before he could get any closer to the core.

"Astirra?! What was that for?!" Oken said. "A-Are you all right?!"

In the blink of an eye, her body had been half swallowed by the blue crystal.

"What in the...?" Roy muttered. "Astirra, are you okay?"

"I am, more or less," she replied. "But this is probably one of the dungeon's traps. I can feel it draining my strength—and at quite a rapid rate."

"Blast!" Oken cursed. "No wonder there wasn't a gatekeeper around. To think we'd encounter a trap here, of all places!"

"Oken. Roy. Keep your distance. It'll pull you in too."

"Can you get out under your own power?" Roy asked. "I can't do anything about magical traps."

"I don't think I can. I've somehow managed to stop it from pulling me in any deeper, but I've already lost a lot of mana. I'm trying...but I don't like my chances."

"Oken, back her up with spells from a distance."

"I'm...ngh...already doing that!"

Then, through the tension filling the air, Roy sensed that something was approaching them. "Not good," he said. "Monsters are coming. A lot

of them.”

“Tsk!” Oken clicked his tongue in annoyance. “At a time like this?!”

“Come on, Oken. Let’s wipe them out. Can you fight while supporting Astirra?”

“Of course I can! Who do you think I am?! I won’t let a single one past us! You’d best back me up properly, Roy!”

“Yeah. Let’s do this.”



An entire day passed with Astirra still half engulfed by the crystal. Oken and Roy had wiped out every swarm of monsters that had come their way, but there was no end in sight.

“The next wave’s coming. Get ready, Oken.”

“Tsk! Again?!”

Though they were only two, Oken and Roy had exterminated countless monsters already. However, the seemingly limitless swarms continued to spill out of the darkness, with only intermittent intervals between each wave.

It had been an entire day without sleep, rest, water, or food. Though the pair’s kills numbered in the hundreds, they were at their physical limits. They had attempted all kinds of methods to pull Astirra free from the core, but none had worked. The trio were reaching the end of their tether.

“Oken. Roy. Please run,” Astirra said. “There’s nothing else you can do for me. At this rate, I’ll just put your lives at risk too.”

“Enough of that, Astirra! Don’t give up! A small pinch like this is nothing for one such as—”

“Oken, the next wave of monsters is coming. Get ready for combat.”

“Blast!”

They had just staved off a huge wave, yet another was already on its way. The swarms were clearly becoming more frequent. Not only that, but the number of monsters each contained was increasing.

The situation was desperate; the party was on its last legs. Yet even so, Oken never once stopped reassuring Astirra.

“It’ll be okay. Roy and I will figure something out. Don’t give up. We’ll get you out of there, I swear it.”

But his face was already as pale as a corpse, and it was obvious that his mana was on the verge of running dry. Their mana potions had run out a while ago, and there were no other options for them to pursue.

“It’s okay, Oken. You’ve already done enough.”

“Don’t talk like that, Astirra! I’ll get you out of there right now! Just watch me! I’ll—”

“No, Oken. She’s right. We need to withdraw or else we’ll meet our end too.”

“Don’t even joke about that, Roy! As if we could flee and leave one of our own behind!”

In contrast to Oken’s indignation, Astirra smiled gently. “It’s okay,” she said. “Please, Oken—just go. The three of us agreed upon what we’d do at a time like this, didn’t we? I’m...glad I was able to go on adventures with you both. Now go.”

“Oken...we should do as she says,” Roy added. “Don’t forget the vow we all made before coming here. It was your idea in the first place, wasn’t it?”

“Blast!” Oken swore. “Hellfire and damnation!” They had indeed made a vow—one to flee if their lives were ever endangered. In the event of a catastrophe, they would each focus on self-preservation.

“If things get hairy, I’m getting out of there, so you two had better do the same. And no hard feelings between any of us, all right?”

That declaration had come from none other than Oken himself.

“Screw the vow!” he exclaimed. “Like I give a damn! Astirra, I’ll never _____”

“Sorry for this, Oken,” Roy interjected. Then, with one swift blow to the back of the head, he rendered the magician unconscious.

“Thank you, Roy. Please make sure he escapes with you.”

“I’m sorry, Astirra... Forgive me.”

She chuckled. “There’s nothing to forgive. I’m *asking* that you do this. Live well, Roy.”

“Yeah. I’ll never forget you. I swear.”

“And one more thing...” Astirra looked to Oken, who was now hanging limply in Roy’s arms, and smiled sweetly. “When he wakes, give him this message from me: ‘I had so much fun on our adventures together. Thank you.’”

A silent moment passed between the companions before Roy eventually replied.

“Yeah. I will.”

Thus, Roy the scout turned his back on Astirra as she was slowly dragged into the blue crystal, and escaped the dungeon with Oken over his

shoulder.



Oken awoke inside an inn, lying in a bed. When he noticed that his wounds had been bandaged and tended to, he sat up in shock.

“Roy,” he said. Then, after taking a few moments to gather himself, “Where is this? Why am I here?”

“Oken. You’re awake.”

“Hey, answer my question. *What happened to Astirra?*”

It took Roy a while to find the right words—and when he finally did, he spoke them in a low voice, as though he was having to force them out.

“She died. Covering for us.”

Silence fell over the room.

Oken confirmed that nobody else was around, then shot his companion a stern glare. “Why, Roy? Why did you abandon her?”

“Because...she wanted us to. The only alternative was us all dying together. She saved us.”

“*Bullshit!*” Oken slammed his fist into the wall nearest the bed, caving in the wood. Ignoring the blood dripping from his fist, he continued, still glaring at Roy: “Why did you stop me?! How could you be so quick to give up?! I could’ve saved her! I...I could’ve—”

“Face the facts, Oken. You were on the verge of collapse. If we had stayed any longer, we would have been wiped out. She made the right call.”

“Don’t give me that shit. You think I can just accept that? I still had—”

“*Admit it already.* We...weren’t strong enough. Think about how she must have felt. She left me a message for you, you know. You should at least hear it ou—”

“Enough of this. I get it now.”

“Get what?”

Oken held a bloody hand up to Roy. “You’re no companion of mine,” he said, wringing the words from deep within his throat. “Not anymore. I...don’t want anything to do with a guy who’ll abandon his allies at the drop of a hat. *Anything.*”

“Yeah...?”

A heavy silence weighed on the pair for a brief while.

“Well,” Roy said, his voice gentle, “I...don’t want to stick with a guy who’d disregard a vow he made with his allies.”

Oken turned his back to Roy and slowly rose from the bed. He took up his equipment—everything had been packed and arranged neatly by the bedside—and started dressing himself.

“This is it, then,” he said. “As of today, the Philosopher’s Goblet is no more.”

“Mmm... ‘Do what you want.’ That was what you told us at the beginning, wasn’t it? So...it stands to reason that it should hold true at the end.”

“Yeah. From here on, neither one of us will ever have anything to do with the other. I...never want to see your face again.”

His injuries still not healed, Oken marched out of the room.

On that day, the accomplished Philosopher’s Goblet disbanded. A death among the group had caused friction between its remaining members and an abrupt altercation—a tale as old as time among adventuring parties. Stories of such fallings-out were common wherever one went. They were so common, in fact, that they wouldn’t even make for good accompaniments to the first round of drinks at a tavern.

One member of the newly disbanded party decided to journey alone, while the other returned to his birthplace. It was a commonplace end to the dreams of commonplace adventurers.

The story of the Philosopher’s Goblet had come to a close...but the same could not be said about its members. For them, it was only the beginning.

Chapter 87: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 2

One day, without word or warning, a woman showed up at the birthplace of her former companion.

"It's been a while, Roy. You look well."

Roy didn't know how to react; the woman who had just spoken was his fellow adventurer Astirra. He had thought he would never see her again. By all accounts, she should have been dead.

Even more surprising was her appearance—more than a decade had passed since their last farewell, yet she looked exactly the same.

"Astirra? You're...alive?" Roy asked. "Is that really you?"

"Whatever do you mean? Of course it's me. Have you forgotten your old friend's face? How hurtful."

Roy was unable to believe it right away. The fact that she was a half-elf—a race that boasted long life spans—went some way toward explaining the strangeness, but he still couldn't shake the feeling that something was amiss. Yes, this woman appeared to be the Astirra he had known, but the air about her was entirely different.

Still, there were very few individuals who knew the location of Roy's birthplace.

Since olden times, the Lepifolk had made their home deep within a harsh mountain range, far from human settlements and so well hidden that one would not be able to reach it without precise knowledge of how to get there. They kept the existence of their home a closely guarded secret, fearing discovery, and only allowed outsiders to approach under the most exceptional circumstances.

It was likewise rare for a member of the Lepifolk to leave their home. They had no reason to; their lives were fulfilling enough in the mountains, where they had access to everything they could ever need.

From birth, the Lepifolk possessed the unique ability to understand and share their own thoughts with other living creatures. Using this power, they borrowed the strength of animals to till their fields and find game in the forests, so not even the largest families ever feared going hungry.

Though their lives were modest, that was plenty enough for them.

Away from the mountains, however, such powers became a hindrance. If a Lepifolk were ever to leave their home, they would always be met with trouble, for they could read even the emotions of other people.

There was a mutual understanding among the Lepifolk, and most conflicts were settled before they could even truly begin. Outside, however, there was no such harmony. Those who didn't possess the race's talents were unable to read emotions, so any encounters they might have with the Lepifolk would be entirely one-sided. The very notion would create outrage, which was why such powers had to be kept hidden; anything less would result in widespread persecution.

Worse still, the power to read emotions also drew the attention of those with wicked hearts. One needed only read the bitter annals of the Lepifolk's history to see that.

It was for these reasons that the Lepifolk stayed in the mountains, away from the other races. They upheld a strict code that forbade them from revealing their power to outsiders or even interacting with them—though in the case of the latter, they made small exceptions to allow for the trade that facilitated their everyday lives. And as a consequence of this self-imposed isolation, not a single Lepifolk had ventured outside their home in several generations.

Well, except for Roy.

Among his people, Roy was considered an eccentric. He had a far greater penchant for curiosity than his kin. As a child, each time he had put into words his longing to see the outside world, he had received strange looks from his friends, and the adults had tried to warn him against such foolish notions. Perhaps that was why he had made such fast friends with Oken, who was considered an oddball among humans.

Roy was something of a nonconformist among his people, yet even he obeyed their code: he disclosed the secret of his home's existence only to the two people he could properly trust—Oken and Astirra, his longtime adventuring companions—and informed not a soul that he could read hearts. Keeping his power hidden was necessary, though he questioned not telling his friends on many an occasion.

Although it took some convincing via messenger birds, Roy eventually received the Lepifolk elder's permission for his companions to travel to his home in the mountains and stay for a while. He had argued that it would benefit their people for generations to come, but in truth, he had simply

wanted the two whom he thought of as his family to see where he'd grown up.

In the end, both Oken and Astirra had visited the Lepifolk settlement and spent several days there. That the woman standing before Roy now had even been able to find him was evidence enough that she truly was his old companion.

At least, that was what he had thought at the time.

"Right, of course you are," Roy said. "Sorry. You just caught me by surprise, is all. I'm impressed you remember how to get here after all these years. But more than that, I'm glad you're well. Would you...like to visit my home? I could introduce you to my wife and children."

"That would be lovely, thank you. I'm a little worn out from the long journey. Would you mind letting me stay the night?"

"Not at all. You're always welcome here."

And so Roy invited Astirra into his home. While they were having dinner together with his family, he once again sensed that something about her was amiss. His wife felt the same way—neither one of them could hear the voice of Astirra's heart.

This was unprecedented. Back when Roy had traveled with Oken and Astirra, the pair had always been open with him. Yes, they had their secrets—everyone did—but because Roy had always been able to hear their hearts, he had known exactly what kind of people they were.

Keeping to the Lepifolk code, Roy had not told anyone about his power. It had pained him to keep such a weighty secret from his friends, but Astirra's and Oken's hearts had always been comforting to hear. He had always thought that they were staunch, trustworthy allies.

And yet...

Now, he couldn't hear *anything at all* from Astirra's heart.

Roy should have been quicker to realize what that meant. The still-vivid memories of his precious companion had dulled his judgment. Something was deeply wrong...but by the time that had occurred to him—the next morning—it was already too late.

"What...is the meaning of this?"

A Crimson Gem, one of the treasures of the Lepifolk, had vanished from the shrine in the elder's home. While the rest of the settlement was in uproar, the first thing Roy did was search for the woman he had invited into his people's home—and immediately, he found her.

"Is something the matter?" she asked. "It's awfully noisy."

More concerning still, Roy noticed what the woman was holding in her hand.

“What are you doing, Astirra?! That’s one of our settlement’s treasures! You need to give it back!”

“Oh, this? I’m going to keep it. It’s what I came here for, after all.”

Roy had once abandoned Astirra in the Dungeon of Lamentation, fleeing only with Oken over his shoulder, and the guilt of that decision had eaten away at him ever since. In his eyes, what she was doing now was an act of revenge. He stepped forward and dropped to his knees.

“Astirra... I know you bear a grudge against me for what I did, but that has nothing to do with everyone else! If you want revenge, take it on me and me alone!”

“Oh, Roy...” the woman chuckled. “‘Revenge’? Whatever do you mean? I don’t hold a grudge against you or anyone. In fact, I’m actually quite *grateful*. You’re the one who told me about *this*, after all.”

“What...?”

Roy couldn’t recall ever telling Astirra about the Crimson Gems, the treasures of the Lepifolk. The only time she might have found out about them was during her stay in the settlement all those years ago, when she had visited the elder’s house to pay her respects. Certainly, there was a chance she had glimpsed one then, but what did that mean? Had she managed to discern its significance with a single glance?

“This is as magnificent as I suspected,” the woman said. “Before, I dared not even *assume* that such a treasure existed in this time and age. But now... My, what good fortune. Holy Mithra’s resurrection will require a tremendous amount of blood, and dare I say it, no other solution will serve as well as this one.”

“What?” Roy asked, failing to understand her. “Astirra, what are you talking about?”

In response, the woman simply turned her back to him. “This gem was the only reason I came here. Now that my business is complete, I must be going.”

“You can’t just take it with you! Those gems are the history and heritage of our people—our very ancestors! We can’t allow a single one to leave this place! Please, if nothing else, you must return it!”

Roy’s pleas were heartfelt. That he didn’t act was partly because he couldn’t bear to raise a hand against someone he felt so indebted to—but above all else, it was because he didn’t want to cause any more harm to his

former companion, whom he had trusted above all others. He continued to appeal to her, begging her to return what she had taken.

Perhaps he just needed to explain the treasure's significance. Surely then his old companion would understand.

And so Roy told the woman the truth about the Crimson Gems—that they were the remnants of what had once been his ancestors. He explained that when a Lepifolk reached the end of their life span, they could flood their bodies with mana in a burst of strong emotion, transforming themselves into a unique gem—one more lustrous than any other—that contained a vast amount of mana.

Roy surrendered this information not knowing who—*what*—the woman truly was.

“I see... So this is a condensed form of the blood of your people? And...this is only *one of many*, you say? My, my... That is very pleasing news indeed.”

The being wore a smile so crooked it sent a shiver down Roy’s spine. The Astirra he knew would never have made such an expression.

“Astirra... I don’t know what you’re planning...but please, don’t take it out on the others. Do whatever you want with me, but you can’t take our treasure with you.”

“You’re saying I should make do with you? But that would be...such a *waste*.”

“A...waste...?”

As Roy stood in place, dumbfounded, Astirra’s expression morphed into one of delight. “After hearing what you’ve told me, I’ve changed my mind,” she said. “Henceforth, I shall dedicate *everything* here to my master. Indeed, I’m quite convinced that’s the best option. Thank you, Roy. Your information was very helpful.”

“Who...Who are you?” Roy asked. “Are you truly Astirra?”

“But of course. I am Astirra, who adventured together with you and Oken. But I am also Astirra, faithful servant of Holy Mithra.”

“Servant’...?”

Roy was struck speechless; such words would never have come from the mouth of the Astirra he knew. And that was when he finally realized—her appearance aside, this woman was nothing like his former companion.

But it was already too late. Far too late.

“I shall have your people become sustenance for Holy Mithra’s resurrection,” the woman declared. “This Crimson Gem is wonderful.

Such a perfect crystallization of blood and mana. To think there were living creatures in the outside world that could produce such a thing! Perhaps the twenty thousand years I spent waiting were not wasted after all.”

“Stop this! You aren’t making any sense! You have in your hand the very history of our people. Please... You cannot do this...”

But as Roy continued to plead, Astirra merely smiled, delighted and cold. “Fear not—your history will not go to waste. On the contrary, I shall put it toward the highest purpose there is. Consider it an honor. On another topic, though...your people have quite the curious power, don’t they? To be able to read the hearts of those around them... Hmm...”

“Wait. Astirra... How do you...?”

Roy had told neither Astirra nor Oken about his people’s ability. While he grappled with his confusion, the woman’s smile became broad and rapturous. He had never seen such an eerie grin before.

“I’ve just thought of an excellent idea,” the woman said. “Please do look forward to it.”

Then she vanished.

Roy was desperate in his search for the woman, using any and every resource at his disposal, but she was nowhere to be found. That day marked the beginning of the hell that was soon to befall the Lepifolk’s home.



“More of them have gone missing. It was Alon’s kids this time. They both vanished into thin air.”

“Have you...done a thorough search?”

“Yes! Of course! But like every abduction before this, they’re nowhere to be found. Eventually...it’ll be *our* child...”

First, the Crimson Gems had disappeared, stolen from the private shrines in the Lepifolk’s homes. A reprieve had then followed...before the settlement’s *children* started disappearing too. No matter how many days passed or where the adults searched, none of the lost were ever found.

The obvious conclusion was that an outsider—or several—had sneaked in to cause these atrocities.

“This is your fault. It’s because you broke our people’s code and invited that outsider into our home!”

“Yes, it is... I’m sorry. But I *will* make it right again. I need to.”

“You will...? Do you swear?”

“I do. No matter what happens, I’ll protect everyone.”

Yet as time passed, Roy’s vow went unfulfilled. Over several months, the Lepifolk population more than halved.

After the children, the women started disappearing. Then, the young men. It had also become common to find members of the elderly dead in out-of-the-way areas. But despite all this, the Lepifolk refused to fight back. They were a gentle people from a home that had enjoyed a long era of peace, which meant they had no means of enacting violence.

None they were willing to use, at least.

The Lepifolk had an innate ability to communicate with other living creatures. It was a power that, if put to the proper uses, would quickly secure them the strength to fight. But the act of using their natural talent for violence was strictly forbidden by their code. It was the greatest taboo in their culture.

“Thou must not harm others with the power bestowed upon thee by the heavens.”

In the past, breaking that commandment had almost led to their extinction. That was why the Lepifolk obeyed their ancestors’ teachings and their elder’s instructions, refusing to fight no matter what they were put through. Even as their women and children had vanished and their men had died around them, they hadn’t questioned their code. They had simply endured, showing not even the slightest sign of resistance.

Their population diminished, and their homes fell into disrepair, but all the Lepifolk did was pray for their tragedy to end. Not even Roy had opposed the elder’s policy. Beyond setting traps, tracking their foe, and acting as a sentry for his allies, he had remained passive. Like the others, he had waited for the storm to pass.

But then, while they were working the fields, Roy’s seven-year-old son disappeared. Roy turned the entire settlement upside down in a frantic search, but no matter where he looked, his precious boy was nowhere to be found.

It was on the third day of searching that Roy realized the truth: his people’s belief was nothing more than a forlorn hope.

“So it was all pointless in the end...” his wife lamented. “Our people are powerless. What good could ever have come of dealing with the outside world...?”

Roy’s wife was grief-stricken. Even drinking water became too much

for her, and Roy could do nothing but watch as she withered away and eventually took her last breath.

Shortly after, Roy left home without saying a word to anyone. In his heart, he knew he was entirely to blame for the tragedy befalling his people. That was why he had to be the one to fix it. All of it.

But in his current state, he wouldn't stand a chance. He needed strength. That was why Roy decided to break the rule his people had treasured since before living memory—to commit the greatest taboo, more forbidden than any other:

He would use his inborn ability to control monsters.

Roy headed for the mountains to the north, where the black dragons roosted. And the next day, he returned to his settlement with one in tow—a massive specimen, even for its species.

The elder flew into a rage when he saw Roy with the dragon. Their code was a warning from their ancestors, he bellowed. The Lepifolk were forbidden from wielding their power in anger, for doing so would doom their people.

Roy understood the meaning behind the code—or at least he thought he did—so he decided to cut ties with his people's settlement. He ignored the elder's attempts to dissuade him, told the others not to follow him, and then flew away on the back of the dragon.

In exchange for committing the most severe taboo among his people, Roy gained tremendous power overnight. He was able to bring more and more fearsome monsters under his control—and using them, he hunted down and annihilated all those who had raided the Lepifolk's home. His enemies fell to him easily. Almost *too* easily. The power he had gained was mighty indeed, living up to its infamous reputation.

Soon, the younger Lepifolk who had seen Roy's power came to a unanimous decision: they would follow his example. Whispers began to spread among them.

“If we have such great power available to us, why aren’t we using it?”

“It makes no sense to deem it forbidden.”

Each and every one of them embraced their power, rebuking their elder in the process. In no time at all, they formed an army capable of commanding enough monsters to flood an entire plain. Their military might surpassed that of every country on the continent, and amassing it had only taken them *a few days*.

Having acquired the strength to topple mountains with relative ease, the

young Lepifolk grew bitterly resentful. “Why did we not use this power sooner?” they asked themselves, overcome with regret. “If we hadn’t been so complacent, we might have been able to save so many of our kin.”

They began to view the code passed down by their ancestors as something to be scorned, not followed, and whatever trust they had placed in their elder quickly fell apart. It wasn’t long before they viewed their ancestors and seniors with outright resentment.

As those negative emotions continued to simmer, they slowly developed into something else: respect for the man who had shown them what their power could do. Roy had told them not to follow him, yet they had made him their leader. He couldn’t even stop them, for he had given in to the same emotion—a deep, burning hatred toward those who had done this to them.

Using their newfound power, the Lepifolk invaded one human settlement after another. They would avenge their slain kin, retrieve their ancestors’ Crimson Gems, and above all else, save the children who had been abducted to make new gems. On the surface, their cause was righteous—but as their fear of the outside world, hatred toward those who had taken their kind, and euphoria at having acquired such tremendous power took hold, the Lepifolk started acting like tyrants.

We’ve had so much taken from us. We can’t stop until we’ve taken it back.

Destroying everything in their path, they continued searching for their missing kin—and they found them one by one. Some were slaves. Others were corpses. Still others were mere shards of red gemstone in the possession of their buyers.

Each time the Lepifolk found another member of their “family,” their hatred grew even more intense. In the end, everyone who had witnessed the horrific fates of their kin had the same desire: to continue on their path of revenge.

Look how much has been taken from us. We must balance the scales and repay them in kind.

Although they didn’t know their foe’s true form, they aspired to obtain even more power. And as their strength grew, so did their ambitions. Their hatred birthed naught but more violence.

The Lepifolk killed and were killed in great numbers. A river of blood followed them wherever they went. But no matter how violent the situation became, Roy, who had come to lead his revenge-driven kin, found himself

unable to stop. Even through all their wanderings across the continent, they had yet to find his son.

Still clinging to a faint sliver of hope, Roy attacked human settlements indiscriminately in his search, following even the smallest leads wherever they took him. Any human who stood in his way was dispatched without a second thought. He even took on armies and crushed them entirely.

The tragedy of the Lepifolk could no longer be stopped. They had become the enemies of humanity, locked in a ruthless rampage that would continue for years to come. In their heart of hearts, they believed their bloodshed would one day return them to a quiet, peaceful existence in the mountains. That was why they killed with no regard for the consequences.

But that day never arrived. Instead, the Lepifolk came to be known by a new name: *demonfolk*. They were wicked beings who hated humans and used monsters to carry out their evil deeds.

By the time Oken—who had traveled deep into the mountains to train his magic in isolation—met his former companion again, the demonfolk had been the enemy of all other races for over a decade. Their leader, Roy, had also adopted a new identity:

The Demon King.

Chapter 88: The Philosopher's Goblet, Part 3

“A demonfolk hunt, huh...?”

Oken was well into middle age—the prime years of one’s life—when the commission fell into his lap. Through his solitary training, he had become able to perform twofold casting, a technique thought to be a mere fantasy among magicians. The feat had secured him the title “Twinspell,” and rumors of his prowess had already begun to spread across the land.

However, since Oken had spent more than two decades alone in the mountains, he had very little knowledge of the demonfolk. At most, he had been told they were a recent phenomenon, having suddenly appeared on the continent between ten and twenty years ago, and that they possessed the mystifying ability to control monsters. All in all, they were a hostile race known for massacring humans.

During his old adventuring days, Oken hadn’t heard even a whisper about these “demonfolk,” but they were said to be a most formidable enemy. In the blink of an eye, they could whip up an army so frighteningly large and powerful that the armed forces of many countries paled in comparison. This wasn’t just speculation either; they had already crushed many large cities and armies.

The demonfolk were strong—not only because they held the yoke of dragons, magical beasts, and other fearsome kinds of monsters, but also because they were exceedingly resourceful. It was said that their merciless strikes on human settlements could occur anywhere on the continent without the slightest indication.

Because the demonfolk posed such a serious threat, Adventurers Guilds across the continent had started putting bounties on them. However, of all the adventurers who took these commissions, only a few ever returned alive—those who turned tail and ran before the fight could even begin. One such example was the survivor of a failed offensive by a clan of more than five hundred veteran adventurers. He had fled in terror to report their defeat, saying their entire force had been wiped out in about as long as it would take someone to blink.

“Humans won’t ever stand a chance against them!”

Of course, such rumors had only piqued Oken’s interest in the demonfolk. “If they’re as powerful as everyone says,” he mused, “then they might just be the perfect opponents for me...”

Oken had returned from his training in the mountains and was now once again completing commissions as an adventurer. Still, he was devoted to a single purpose: further delving into the secrets of magic. So long as he could do that, nothing else mattered to him. He wasn’t even particularly concerned about rushing headlong into danger; if he died as a result of his own shortcomings, then he would consider it his destiny.

Embracing this mindset, Oken had accepted one dangerous commission after another—even some meant for Gold-rank adventurers—and completed them all alone. Yet none of them had satisfied him, which was why these “demonfolk” sounded so promising. They were the perfect opponents against whom he could test his skill.

Thus, Oken accepted the new commission put to him. It was supposed to be for a large group, but he set off alone to meet the rumored vanguard of the demonfolk’s offensive against humanity.



The vast, open plain that was Oken’s destination was teeming with swarms of monsters. It was an abnormal sight, to say the least; one wouldn’t see such large gatherings even inside dungeons.

There had to be demonfolk here, the magician thought. And with that conviction, he confronted the horde before him, easily over several thousand strong. The battle of one man against an entire army was about to unfold.

First, he unleashed his specialty: scores of maximum-potency lightning strikes capable of blasting his opponents to smithereens. His opening salvo provoked every monster he could see, and they all surged toward their assailant.

Oken pushed his twofold casting as far as it could go, using continuous support spells alongside his devastating offensive, cutting through the veritable avalanche of oncoming monsters as easily as one would cut down weeds. Cacophonous *booms* ran across the open plain as fire, ice, and lightning danced together, creating destruction that could only be described in terms of natural disasters.

Such a tremendous army of monsters would have put an ordinary man

on the brink of despair, but Oken was overwhelming them all alone. He remained perfectly calm as he reduced the horde to cinders with meticulous care. After all, the true reason for his being there had yet to appear.

Only when the number of monsters annihilated passed a thousand did their masters make an entrance. At once, Oken's expression became the ghost of a grin.

Finally.

He squinted, attempting to get a good look at his new opponents. He didn't doubt that the individuals sitting atop their titanic monsters were the rumored "demonfolk," but their appearance took him by surprise. This was his first encounter with them, yet he felt as though he'd seen them before. They had the same pallid skin and distinct pale blue hair as a man Oken had once traveled with.

"No, I must be mistaken."

Oken was quick to disregard the thought. Yes, these demonfolk bore a striking resemblance to the kin of his former companion, but they couldn't be the same people. He remembered the Lepifolk as a kind and mild-mannered race, utterly incapable of any sort of violence. They certainly wouldn't have worn such twisted, hateful expressions.

Still, the comparison was hard to ignore. Even as he continued his assault, tearing through the oncoming threat with arcane might, Oken couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was wrong.

The demonfolk were strong. Some sat astride massive dragons, commanding them to douse Oken in flame, while others directed packs of smaller beasts to make swift, coordinated attacks. Yet neither Flamedrakes—enormous, fire-breathing dragon monsters—nor Black Direwolves, so fearsome and imposing that a mere handful could rule over vast swathes of open plain, stood a chance against a man who had acquired twofold casting.

As long as Oken's mana lasted, he could maintain his barrage of magic at full potency, laying waste to his opponents—and that was precisely what he did. His momentum was so impressive that he started to believe his victory was set in stone.

But that feeling didn't last long.

The demonfolk were much calmer than Oken had first assumed. They were also more cunning. Understanding that their opponent had challenged them alone, they gradually pulled back their forces and switched to

attacking him with small, continuous groups, denying him any time to rest.

Eventually, Oken ran out of the mana recovery potions he had prepared. And as soon as his fatigue began to show, the demonfolk gathered their forces together and put pressure on him all at once.

Oken had easily slain more than a thousand monsters, but that was only a fraction of the demonfolk's army. The number of monsters they could control was staggeringly high, far surpassing his expectations. As they closed in around him and the last dregs of his mana dried up, he recognized his defeat and dropped to his knees.

So this is all that I amount to.

Oken scoffed at himself. It was the only thing he could do. For the past few decades, he had pursued strength and nothing else. He had needed to do away with his weakness—the same weakness that had rendered him helpless when it mattered most and caused him to lose everything.

He thought he had grown a little stronger since then. But at this eleventh hour, he was forced to recognize his limits. No matter how much strength he gained, there was only so much he could do on his own. Conversely, no matter his shortcomings, there was always hope as long as he had companions by his side.

Oken scoffed again. Companions? It had been a good, long while since he'd had any of those. If he died now, there wouldn't be anyone to mourn him. But maybe that was a good thing. Perhaps it meant it was okay for him to die here.

Resigned to his fate, Oken remained motionless, waiting for the monsters surrounding him to tear him to pieces.

“Stop. Don’t move.”

But then he heard a familiar voice come from behind the horde. At once, the monsters and demonfolk all stopped in their tracks.

“Oken... Why are you here?”

The monsters parted to reveal a man. He rode atop a black dragon—a larger specimen than the rest—and was covered in scars. Oken had thought he recognized the voice, but when he saw the expression of the figure approaching him, he started to doubt his conviction. Could this person really be...?

“Roy? Is that you?”

Although he'd put his thoughts into words, wisps of doubt still clung to him. This man seemed so drastically at odds with the Roy he'd once known. The lines marking his face were deep and jagged, carved steadily

by hatred, making him look almost like a stranger. Nevertheless, he truly was Oken's former companion.

“Roy... Why are *you* here...?”

Suspicion overtook Oken's nostalgia. He had come to this plain as part of a commission to hunt demonfolk. But if Roy was here too, then that meant...

“*I asked you, Oken. What brings you here after all this time?*” Roy paused for a moment, considering. “Ah. Let me guess. A bounty?”



“Yes, the Adventurers Guild commissioned me to hunt demonfolk. But, Roy... Why are you...?”

“I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now. We *are* the demonfolk.”

Given the circumstances, there couldn’t have been any other explanation. But that didn’t make it any easier for Oken to accept. Roy, who had never been able to kill so much as an insect, was one of the demonfolk massacring people across the continent...? As Oken studied his old companion’s face, which bore the scars of pain and anguish, he spoke the doubts that had come unbidden to his mind.

“What happened, Roy? You were never the kind of man to wear that expression. Something must have happened, right? And... ‘demonfolk’? What’s the meaning of this?”

For a while, Roy was silent, and a dry gust of wind blew across the plain. Then he quietly said, “It was Astirra. She’s alive.”

“Astirra’s...? Truly? But why would that lead to—?”

“She came to my home, stole a Crimson Gem, and immediately left.”

“A Crimson Gem? What’s that?”

Roy didn’t answer the question. Instead, his voice became a deep growl, as though he’d suddenly become another person entirely.

“It wasn’t long after that our children started to go missing. Then our women.”

Roy spoke as though cursing the world—a cry of rage and a weeping lament delivered in a single breath. Paying no mind to Oken’s surprised stare, he continued, directing his venom-filled words at someone unknown.

“Next, they killed our men. Our elderly. They tore up our river and fields and set fire to our homes. In the end, our settlement was a ruin. It was peaceful and beautiful once. *She came and destroyed it all.*”

Oken could no longer see his reflection in Roy’s eyes. The glimmer he remembered was overcast with an overwhelming hatred toward a single person, more intense than anything he had ever witnessed. Once again, he struggled to believe that the man before him was his former companion; it was like being in the presence of an entirely different person.

“Wait, that can’t be right...” Oken murmured. “Why would Astirra do something like that? I know you were never the type to lie, but...is what you’re telling me really the truth?”

“That was what I wondered too. I never even considered that she would do such things. I wanted to believe in her, so I did. And this is the result. She’s changed, Oken. She’s no longer the Astirra we knew.”

“Roy...? What do you mean by...?”

“I’m not the same person either.”

Oken could only grapple with his bewilderment as Roy raised one hand to signal the other demonfolk. The hundreds of monsters surrounding Oken parted immediately to make a path for him.

“Leave, Oken. You’re nothing to me now, much less my companion, so don’t get involved. This is *our* problem and ours alone.” Roy turned away and commanded, “Let’s go,” though his voice came out as barely a whisper.

The earth rumbled as the horde of monsters departed, following Oken’s old companion.

“Roy...”

Oken wanted to call out for him to wait, but the word caught in his throat. As his former friend faded into the distance atop a titanic black dragon, a horde of monsters large enough to blanket the entire plain trailing behind, he could only watch silently.



Astirra was alive.

Desperate to confirm the truth of what Roy had said, Oken devoted all of his time and resources to gathering information. His hard work was rewarded when he discovered the tale of the half-elf who had conquered the Dungeon of Lamentation *alone* and then founded a country atop it around the same time the demonfolk had started to draw attention to themselves. His path decided, Oken departed for Mithra, the capital of that very country.

The self-proclaimed Holy Theocracy of Mithra was centered around its grand Cathedral, where High Priestess Astirra was said to reside. After forcing his way through its heavily guarded doors, Oken demanded an audience with the woman bearing the name of his old friend. His brute-force approach was acceded to, and the next thing he knew, he was being led to a room decorated with dazzling gemstones—High Priestess Astirra’s room, if his guides were to be believed.

“This room...? But...”

Oken couldn’t help but frown as he took it all in. The sheer gaudiness was precisely the opposite of what he’d come to expect from the Astirra he remembered. But before he could contemplate much longer, a woman who was the spitting image of the one he’d once known appeared.

“Oken. It’s been too long. I’ve missed you.”

She was unmistakably Astirra, the irreplaceable friend he’d once lost to death’s embrace. Their reunion should have been a relief.

“Astirra. I spoke with Roy. Is it true what you did to his home?”

However, the first words out of Oken’s mouth weren’t an exclamation of delight but a sharp, pressing question.

“Roy? Who might that be...?” the woman replied. “Ah, you mean the leader of the demonfolk? They’re giving me quite a headache at the moment, you know. I really must stamp them out as soon as I am able.”

Astirra sounded far colder than Oken had ever imagined. He was quick to voice his doubt.

“Who...*are* you? Are you truly Astirra?”

In terms of appearance, she matched the Astirra in Oken’s memories to every detail. There wasn’t the slightest discrepancy. She really hadn’t changed at all. But at the same time, he could no longer sense the gentle air she had always possessed. What was the meaning of this?

“What a strange question,” the woman replied. “I don’t believe my appearance has changed in any way, has it? Or are you somehow misremembering me? *I am* Astirra, the one and only. Here, look.”

She approached Oken so that he could examine her face more closely and smiled. The action only deepened his conviction that she hadn’t changed at all; her appearance was exactly the same as that of the Astirra from his past. Just seeing her was enough to make his eyes unconsciously well up with tears.

But despite his nostalgia, Oken turned away from her. “You’re not the Astirra I remember.” It was true that they looked alike, but she wasn’t the friend from his memories—the irreplaceable companion he’d once had. Astirra would never have acted in this manner. It was unthinkable that she would speak about Roy, someone she had entrusted her life to, with such open disdain.

“What a terrible thing to say...” the woman replied with a light chuckle. “Aren’t we such close companions?”

After a moment of silence, Oken replied, “The Philosopher’s Goblet disbanded. We’re not companions anymore.”

“Is that so? What a shame.”

Astirra gave an amused smile. There was nothing left in this woman that he could understand; she had changed, completely and utterly. So had Roy. So had Oken himself. None of what he and his companions had

shared remained, and once that was clear to him, he could no longer stand to be around them.

“I’m...done here,” he said. “I’m leaving.”

“It appears that our guest is making his departure. Guide him outside.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll make my own way out.”

As Oken left—practically fled—the Cathedral, he muttered under his breath. “Roy... Astirra... What happened to you?”



Before he realized it, everything had changed. Roy and Astirra were nothing like their former selves. Despite all the strength he had gained, he could no longer do anything for his old friends—and as that cold reality sank in, Oken vanished into the world alone, with only his feelings of powerlessness for company.

Time passed.

It wouldn't be until several months later that Oken would receive news of the offensive launched against the demonfolk army and its leader, Demon King Roy. Using the Theocracy's barrier techniques and the combined military forces of the continent, High Priestess Astirra had spearheaded the attack—and as the reports went, she had brought about the utter destruction of her opponent.



The demonfolk army had been wiped out, but the Demon King's body had yet to be found. Upon hearing the news, Oken headed straight for one destination: the home of the Lepifolk, where Roy had once brought him.

But when he arrived, there was nothing there. He was sure he hadn't misremembered the way...yet when he looked around, he saw an expanse so barren it made him doubt his own eyes. There were no houses, fields, or plants. None of the bustle of activity that accompanied everyday life, nor the laughter of children. Every trace of the gentle, joyful world that had once existed here was gone, replaced by an expanse of desolate ruins.

"Is that...?"

All the same, Oken found the person for whom he was searching.

"Roy!"

Although he called out to him from afar, there was no response. He hurried over to the man's side...and recoiled at what he saw. Roy was here, just as Oken had thought, but...

"Hey, Roy... Are you all right?"

"O...ken...?"

Roy managed to eke out a response, but the life was gone from his face. His eyes were unfocused—and understandably so, given the wretched state he was in. He was missing every single one of his fingers, and what remained of his limbs had been torn to shreds. A tremendous chunk had been taken out of his torso as if something large had near enough bitten him in two. It was miraculous that he was even still alive.

"Hold on, Roy. I'll treat you right away. Don't worry, all right? I

thought something like this might happen, which is why I prepared the highest-quality potions I could—”

“Oken.”

As the magician made to uncork the stopper of his potion bottle, he felt one of Roy’s hands—fingerless though it was—come to rest atop his own.

“What?!” Oken sniped. “If I don’t do this quickly, you’ll bleed out!”

Roy smiled weakly. Then, in a strained voice, he said, “Sorry, but...don’t bother. Just let me die. My people...have already fought so much. And now...they’re all gone. I can’t be the only one to go on living.”

Oken remained motionless, still holding the potion bottle. “Roy... Why did things turn out like this?” He knew about the great war and that Roy had fought on the front line, but the truth was hard to swallow. How could he ever accept that his two best friends had come to blows and that this was the result?

“I...have a request for you, Oken. Will you...take this?” A faint light began to envelop Roy’s body.

“What? Roy, what are you doing? What’s that light?”

Roy didn’t answer the question. Instead, he whispered in a faintly trembling voice, “Hey, Oken... Where did we go wrong? Was it when I abandoned Astirra to die in that dungeon? Or was it when I first stepped foot outside of my home—when I broke my people’s code and started taking control of monsters? I suppose, whenever it might have been...it was all my fault in the end, huh?”

“Of course not! Don’t be stupid, Roy! That’s not true at all! It...wasn’t you. It wasn’t your fault!”

That was all Oken could say.

If only I’d been stronger back then. If only I hadn’t parted ways with Roy. No, if only I hadn’t formed a party with them in the first place.

If only I’d done things differently. Then it wouldn’t have ended up like this.

If only, if only, if only...

Regrets whirled around and around in Oken’s mind, leaving him unable to form words.

“Oken...” Roy said quietly. “Why did things turn out this way? Why did Astirra do what she did? Why...did I have to kill so many people? Why did so many of us have to be killed? I don’t get it, Oken. I can’t. After all this time—after everything I’ve done—I still don’t understand.”

Small cracks began to appear on Roy’s face, allowing red light to seep

through. Oken didn't know what was happening...but he could tell that Roy was giving up his life in an attempt to achieve something.

"Roy! No!" Oken held his dear friend close, pleading through his tears. "No more! Stop... *Please*, stop! Not yet! Please! I told you, I have potions! You can still...still..."

"Oken... I don't know right from wrong anymore. I've made so many mistakes that I can no longer tell the difference. I...just can't understand it. I can't believe in anything. I'm blind to it all. But this...this one thing...is clear to me."

For a moment, Roy's eyes became kind again, as they had always been when the three were companions. He met Oken's gaze and said with his dying breath:

"I'm glad to have you with me...here at the end."

Then he fell from Oken's arms, having turned from a man into a shining red gem.

These days, among those in the know, such gems were called Demons' Hearts. They were abnormally pure manastones, and unbeknownst to anyone, Oken had taken Roy's with him when leaving what had remained of the settlement. And for more than two centuries, he had kept it a secret, safeguarding it until...

One day, Oken fashioned the gemstone into a ring. He then gave that ring to a certain young boy who seemed to resemble his old, dear friend, all so the boy could seize the power that would allow him to realize his fate.

Chapter 89: The First Cry of a Newborn

The weather was lovely that day in the holy capital. The entire city was in a festive mood, celebrating Holy Prince Tirrence's coming of age. Music and laughter could be heard around every corner...

And then *something* burst out of the top of the Cathedral at the center of the city. It ascended into the sky, taking most of the roof with it.

"Hey...what's that up there?"

Those who bore witness to the strange occurrence strained their eyes to get a better look, confused. The thing that had shot up into the air looked almost like a person holding a sword. Nobody knew what it really was, though; it had already risen too high and was now out of sight.

"What's going on...?"

The townsfolk began to stir in consternation. Everybody knew a grand celebration was being held in the Cathedral, with foreign dignitaries from all over in attendance...yet the building's upper structure was now in ruins. Throughout the city, the lively music celebrating the holy prince's adulthood stopped as everyone stared up at the exploded roof.

Suddenly, the clear blue sky turned a dark, reddish black. Not a single person understood what was happening. The trees lining the paths and streets surrounding the Cathedral erupted with birds as they all took flight at once, and eerie tremors began to rumble through the ground around it, growing stronger and stronger with each passing moment.

Those watching from afar felt an indescribable sense of unease. The eerie quakes felt almost like an infant kicking about in the womb—like something gargantuan was crawling its way up from the depths of the earth.

As the stupefied onlookers stood frozen to the spot, the tremors abruptly stopped. Then, in an unprecedented turn of events, the sky went entirely black, even though it was barely past noon.

"What...in the world?"

Stillness enveloped the city. Though the citizens of Mithra knew not what they saw, they could tell from the strange phenomena they had just witnessed that something dark and sinister was on the horizon.



After sending that hindrance of a man flying up through the earth with a full-strength blow and crawling through the hole he had created, the monstrous Holy Mithra poked its head through the floor of the Cathedral's ballroom. As it watched the people below it cower and scream, it allowed itself a moment to indulge in deep emotion.

Ahh. Aboveground again at last.

How long had it been? Twenty thousand years, at least. That was how long Holy Mithra had spent trapped in the dark bowels of the earth.



Its journey had been a long one. So much time had passed since that crafty band of adventurers had sealed it within that small blue crystal and left it to rot. The crystal had drained its power, feeding the dungeon that had acted as its hated jail. And the more power it had taken, the more Holy Mithra's body had decayed, leaving it all but a desiccated skeleton.

Ahh. I need sustenance. I need flesh.

To sate twenty thousand years of hunger, Holy Mithra wanted blood—delicious, vitalizing blood. It evaluated the tiny figures beneath it, running around and attempting to escape.

“AHH...AHH...AHHHHH!”

Its unintentional cry of delight upon seeing so much flesh shook the walls of its very own Cathedral, but the cracks and fissures only amused the monstrosity as it slowly scanned the ballroom.

Ahh. It all looks so delectable.

Holy Mithra's tongue had yet to form properly, but it mentally licked its lips in anticipation. The high-ranking dignitaries of nations all over would make for a fine feast indeed. That might not have been its original reason for gathering them, but it was glad it had done so.

And yet, to the monstrosity's disappointment, the demonfolk boy was nowhere to be seen. Had he fled? Was he hiding? Now that Holy Mithra had finally ventured aboveground, that child was its foremost desire. Before the bloodred gems it had stockpiled below, it wanted to consume *him*.

So where was he?

“AH-AHH...AHHHHH!”

Irritated, it surveyed its surroundings again, confirming the demonfolk's absence. The flesh and blood of the half-elf woman it had resisted consuming for so long had been exquisite, but the child would surpass even that. Holy Mithra was sure of it.

Belowground, the monstrosity had stockpiled many of the remnants of what had once been the demonfolk's kin: superlative manastones it had decided to name “Demons' Hearts.” They were truly sublime specimens, preserving the most excellent blood even in death. In short, they would doubtless be delicious.

Nonetheless, Holy Mithra wanted a *living* specimen as its first. For years, it had patiently suppressed its gnawing hunger—and now that it could actually feast, it wanted not a hard gemstone but live flesh dripping with blood. Nothing could surpass a fresh meal.

Yet...as the monstrosity studied the high-quality morsels scurrying about the ballroom, it suddenly laughed, changing its mind. It supposed there was no need to be so particular about its first meal. It would eat everything in the end, so what did the order matter?

Holy Mithra's very next action would be to consume everything in the holy city. After all, that was why it had established the city in the first place.

Because the Demons' Hearts were such excellent sustenance, Holy Mithra would become stronger than it had ever been before. As such, there was no need to rush. Leaving the demonfolk child for last as an amusing "treasure hunt" might not be a bad idea. Even if weeding him out proved troublesome, it would only need to stroll about the city devouring every last structure until nothing was left. Who could blame it for allowing itself a little entertainment to celebrate its own resurrection?

Yes, its own enjoyment came first—and with that thought in mind, Holy Mithra once again unleashed a delighted cry.

"AGHH... AHHHH! AAAGGGHHH! AAAHHH, AHHHH!"

The monstrosity basked in its own freedom as it watched parts of the Cathedral crumble from the shock of its roar. The attendees in the ballroom were still screaming and attempting to escape.

Ahh. Everything. Everything will finally be mine.

At last, Holy Mithra would turn the entire city into its flesh. The thought made even the sight of the mithril-clad soldiers—whose order the monstrosity had established—pointing their blades at it invoke nothing more than tender affection.

Because of them and those like them, Holy Mithra would finally be reborn.

Everything the monstrosity saw with its half-formed eyeballs seemed to sparkle with radiant light. The rapture it was feeling from the bottom of its heart escaped its mouth again in the form of a shout.

**"AAAHH. AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH, AAAHHH HHHAAA,
AAAHHH!"**

The sound resembled a chain of thunderclaps. Each rumbling peal echoed throughout the holy city, striking fear into the heart of every citizen.

It was the cry of a newborn, of the monstrosity known as Holy Mithra. A shout and a blessing from and for itself. A cry to celebrate its new reign over the outside world. Today was a special day indeed. One to be

commemorated. Holy Mithra would devour all the living creatures—the *meat*—before it and, on this blessed occasion, be born into the world anew.

The Cathedral was in ruin; its floors, walls, and ceiling continued to crumble from the pressure of Holy Mithra’s cry. As the monstrosity reveled in the pleasure of knowing that no one here could ever hope to resist it, it slowly reached out to sample the awaiting banquet, trembling in anticipation of the first drop of blood it would taste here aboveground.

Holy Mithra was caught up in its own delight. It focused entirely on sating the hunger it had endured for twenty thousand years. That was why its unfinished eyes overlooked the speck high above the Cathedral it had ordered the city to construct in its name. Even as the dot in the sky became larger and larger, heading straight for it, the monstrosity remained entirely unaware.

“AH...?”

By the time Holy Mithra *did* notice the speck, it was already too late; the blotch had become the outline of a man. Its tiny hands held a long black object, which it was bringing down on its target below. Still savoring its delight and reaching toward its feast, the monstrosity could only stare blankly at the approaching figure.

Ah. I’ve seen both of those things somewhere before, have I not?

Yes, it most definitely had. It had seen the black object *and* the man not too long ago. As it recalled, they were—

Realization struck as Holy Mithra finally recognized the person bringing *the Black Blade* down upon its head. But there was nothing to be done.

[Parry]

Because no sooner had the monstrosity realized its situation than its head was smashed with a merciless *crunch*. Holy Mithra, which had just crawled aboveground and begun to approach its long-awaited first meal, dropped back down the deep, dark hole from whence it had emerged.

The War between Saint and Demon

Several years had passed since the first appearance of the unidentified race that led monsters and used them to attack humans. Fearing the threat they all posed, the populace had given them an equally threatening name: demonfolk. Intelligent and human in appearance, they could command giant monsters such as dragons at will. Combined with their canny tactical awareness, they were able to crush the garrisons of city after city in their path.

It was the first time humanity had ever encountered a calamity of this nature.

Despite their humanlike features, the demonfolk looked particularly sinister: their skin was pale, and their strange eyes were so deep that they almost seemed to suck you in. From out of nowhere, they appeared alongside hordes of monsters, always clad in black. They were the shadow at the door—an ill omen that none wished to encounter—and not a single soul knew where they hailed from.

Among them was a tall man with a long staff who commanded a black dragon even larger than the rest. He was rumored to be their chief and was the bane of all who sought to vanquish the demonfolk. No matter how mighty the regiment or army that challenged them, he would crush them by force in a direct fight, leaving a mountain of corpses in his wake. He was more feared than any other, and his unmistakable presence in the demonfolk's vanguard had earned him an appropriate moniker: the king of the demonfolk, or *the Demon King*.

Backed by many governments, the Adventurers Guild placed larger and larger bounties on the demonfolk, who were using their monster hordes to cause untold damage across the land. Skilled adventurers took notice of these tasks and banded together in great numbers to complete them.

However, the demonfolk were much stronger than anyone had expected. Not even veteran adventurers who staked their livelihoods on slaying savage monsters could rival a horde of the largest and most ferocious of them, unified under commanders with human intelligence. Word quickly spread that such bounties weren't worth the risk, so adventurers started giving them a wide berth. Nobody was willing to

challenge the demonfolk's incursions.

Many countries' governments were equally as intimidated. After losing their militaries to the demonfolk, their terror prevented them from further action.

For a long time, nobody dared oppose the demonfolk...

Until one person announced her intent to vanquish the threat entirely: Astirra, the head of state of the new Theocracy. This woman, who introduced herself as the high priestess of the Church of Mithra, was the very same individual who had gained fame for conquering the highly formidable Dungeon of Lamentation on her own and suddenly establishing a new country in the same location.

To the leaders of the biggest continental powers at the time, Astirra made a proposal: she would act as a decoy to lure the demonfolk onto an open plain, where a combination of armies would then surround them, leaving their foe vulnerable to a direct confrontation and subsequent extermination by the Theocracy's holy knights, a military force established and commanded by Astirra herself. Her sudden appearance and plan to confront the evildoers seemed to inspire the whole continent.

Few who attempted to slay the demonfolk came back alive, if at all; anyone who bared their swords at them were ultimately overrun by monsters until not even their bones remained. But at the same time, the demonfolk always allowed those who fled in terror to escape unharried. Because of this, those who ran away were generally able to return to tell tales of the gruesome spectacles they had witnessed. They spoke about the monsters under the demonfolk's control—how their claws tore through people with utter disregard, and their feet trampled upon piles and piles of corpses as they reduced the settlements in their path to rubble and ash. And as these stories passed from person to person, such cruelty and atrocities burgeoned. So, too, did the people's fears.

Some who heard the tales had lost family to the demonfolk, so each retelling only deepened their loathing.

As the war between humanity and the demonfolk continued, towns and villages gradually became battlefields. And as each settlement became lost to the ensuing devastation, more people became homeless.

Such people weren't without hope, however, for the Theocracy of Mithra extended a helping hand to those who were displaced. They provided sanitary dwellings and ample food, and readily accepted people from all walks of life.

Once those who moved to Mithra had their hunger and fear alleviated, their next need was revenge. And while High Priestess Astirra eased her way into their hearts with gentle kindness, she did not condemn their loathing.

"If that is what you wish, then you should strive to achieve it. Because, beyond a doubt, there was meaning in the pain you suffered. I'm sure the path that brought you to Mithra leads to that purpose. I have faith that Holy Mithra will bestow power upon those who take up the fight against evil."

One by one, those who sought revenge—even mere children—took up their blades and became holy knights of the Theocracy. They dreamed of the day they would avenge their slaughtered family members and incinerated homes, and with that deep loathing in their hearts, they threw themselves into their training. Their battle prowess improved rapidly thanks to the instruction of High Priestess Astirra, a half-elf proficient in the art of war, and it wasn't long before they could match the elite battalions of the greater powers that neighbored the Theocracy.

Indeed, the holy knights were strong. The source of their strength was twofold: their indomitable will, born from hatred dressed in cries for justice, and the red gemstones given to them by the high priestess.

High Priestess Astirra called these wondrous, miraculously high-purity manastones “Demons’ Hearts” and gave them freely to the holy knights who ventured out to hunt the demonfolk, inlaying them into their weapons and armor. Equipped with such strength-enhancing gear, a force of only several knights accomplished what entire armies had failed to do: they slew a demonfolk.

As the holy knights took down one band of demonfolk after another, proving that the feat once thought impossible was anything but, they drew the attention of the rest of the continent. These eyes naturally wandered to their equipment, especially the standard-breaking Demons’ Hearts they used.

None of the influential merchants at the time had ever laid eyes upon such products, and everybody wanted to know their origin. But no matter how much time and effort they devoted to their search, their queries led them to a single dead end: only High Priestess Astirra knew the production method. As such, the merchants all started attempting to ingratiate themselves with her, toadying and cajoling in their quest to secure immense profits.

Demons' Hearts were the perfect commodity in all regards, which made them immediately desirable in the eyes of anyone hoping to get rich. Their proven strength in battle had earned them fame across the continent, and equipment that incorporated them was seen as some of the most useful one could possess. Their production method and trade routes were strictly monitored, and they had an entrancing air of mystery about them, as dazzling as the shining armor of the holy knights who used them.

Incidentally, tales of the holy knights' heroics were likewise spreading across the land.

In the end, the high priestess gave a small selection of merchants the rights to deal in Demons' Hearts—though they had to make life-and-death pacts of confidentiality. In the blink of an eye, both these merchants and the Theocracy of Mithra accumulated a vast amount of wealth, and in the span of a few years, what had previously been a small, newly founded country accumulated enough power to join the influential players on its part of the continent. Alongside this growth, High Priestess Astirra's fame also grew, and many stood in awe of her ingenuity.

Meanwhile, almost as though acting in concert with the high priestess's rapid ascension, the demonfolk started raiding more frequently and with greater intensity. They had taken a particular interest in the holy knights' equipment, inlaid with Demons' Hearts from the high priestess, and attacked whatever towns the knights sojourned in with almost frenzied determination.

Although the holy knights were capable of turning the tables on their attackers, there were times when they failed to seize victory. On such occasions, the defeated knights would be mercilessly slaughtered by the demonfolk, who would then strip their equipment of Demons' Hearts.

This ebb-and-flow conflict between the holy knights and the demonfolk gradually became commonplace. The former despised their foe and saw it as their divine duty to vanquish them, while the latter leaned into their brutality in an apparent attempt to keep up with the knights, who were gaining in strength as time passed. Yet more ferocious monsters were brought into the fray as the demonfolk gathered larger and larger hosts for each of their strikes.

But none of their armies proved as formidable as the Demon King's own.

Once the Demon King's army settled in a location, it would remain there for some time to establish a fortified base of operations for the

demonfolk. But once it decided to move, no matter what terrain it traversed, it would reduce everything in its wake to a wasteland.

Each time the army relocated, it would also grow in size by absorbing the surrounding monster populations. The Demon King's host had used this method to become a vast, destructive, moving force of nature, far too great for any one country to challenge. And it continued on its path unchecked, for nobody on the continent could resist it.

The voices of those who feared the demonfolk soon reached a climax. Every living soul who wished for peace entrusted their hopes to the holy knights, humanity's last defense against an entire race of evildoers...

And that was when High Priestess Astirra announced her plan to vanquish the demonfolk once and for all.

The allied forces of the continent agreed to the high priestess's proposal and were quick to act. First, the entire cohort of holy knights took up a position on an open plain, serving as a decoy while the combined armies of cooperating nations acted in support. The Demon King appeared astride his black dragon soon enough with a teeming horde of several thousand monsters in tow, and with that, the stage was set: the full might of both sides had gathered in one place.

Although neither the holy knights nor the demonfolk moved, their presence filled the plain with the thick, heavy air of war. The two armies, each big enough to shake the earth with an advance, stood close enough to stare each other down—and amid the stillness, Roy and Astirra, their respective leaders, decided to break from their forces to parley. They were about to exchange words for the first time in years.

High Priestess Astirra spoke first. "Roy. We finally meet."

Silence. Then, in a low voice filled with hatred, the Demon King responded: "Astirra. Where are the members of my race you abducted?"

In the face of Roy's animosity, Astirra simply smiled. "Abducted?" she asked. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Don't play the fool with me. Give back my brethren and the Crimson Gems you took! All of them!"

"Ah, you mean the Demons' Hearts? I don't plan to part with those anytime soon, I'm afraid; they fetch quite a nice sum on the market. But if you truly are desperate, I suppose I could part with *some* for a *reasonable amount*. They're precious commodities, but I'll make an exception for an acquaintance."

Roy did not speak. His expression, twisted by hatred, said it all.

Astirra merely smiled again, thoroughly enjoying herself. "Ah, right," she said. "It might interest you to know that Oken paid me a visit."

"What nonsense are you spouting after all this time? He and I no longer have anything to do with each other."

Astirra chuckled. "So cold, Roy. We were all such close companions once, were we not? Oken was terribly saddened that you've become this way."

"You don't even deserve to speak his name. Not as you are now." As though responding to Roy's irritation, the black dragon behind him took a heavy step forward, creating a fissure in the earth. "You're my enemy now. I see no reason for us to speak any further."

"Is that so? But I was just about to let you surrender."

"There was never room for us to negotiate in the first place."

Roy's wrathful voice echoed across the open plain. At once, the black dragon to his rear opened its vast maw and released a violent burst of its breath weapon.

It seemed that Astirra had predicted such a move, however, as she immediately formed a barrier in front of herself. The black dragon's raging blast of light crashed into it and dissipated. Then she hopped back, drifting through the air as she returned to the ranks of her holy knights, and gave the signal for them to begin their charge:

"Very well. Let us begin."

Both armies charged, moving no way but forward. The Demon King's forces, bringers of death, clashed with the holy knights.

Mithra's soldiers were a force to be reckoned with; the holy knights who had devoted their lives to High Priestess Astirra crashed into one wave of monsters after another, cutting them all down. The flames of their hatred, which they had named justice, burned brighter than ever, giving them the will to fight. They did not fear death, and in terms of numbers, they had the advantage.

Nevertheless, the Demon King's army first gained the upper hand. Roy watched the battle with keen eyes and a composed mind, delivering orders to every host under his command. Though they were outnumbered, one would never have guessed it from how they tore through their enemy.

Yet the holy knights stood their ground.

The battle continued for seven days and seven nights without a single break in the tension hanging over both armies. The holy knights were receiving logistical support from the largest unified military the continent

had ever seen, whereas the Demon King's forces lacked a fixed base and even the most basic supplies, having already been short on food when the engagement started. The longer the fighting continued, the more fatigued the demonfolk became...but their might was so impressive that it barely even fazed them.

The demonfolk had refined their battle talents by commanding monsters across dozens of skirmishes. Now, there were many among them who could control scores of giant monsters at once, and their might was so impressive that not even a hundred holy knights could compare to them. Their physical bodies were exhausted, but when it came to massacring their opponents, the demonfolk had vigor to spare. Victory was well within their reach.

Or at least it would have been, had the fatigue in their hearts not been mounting.

Despite how relentlessly the demonfolk had searched, much of their family was still missing. Their days had consisted of unending raids and massacres, yet their enemies only seemed to increase in number. More and more of their comrades were dying around them, and while those who remained were all exhausted from their long and arduous journey, there was still no end in sight.

Their hearts, worn down by the path they had traveled, were lost.

The demonfolk knew by virtue of their inborn ability that the holy army they now faced comprised the family members of people they had once killed. Some of the knights were the children they had spared out of guilt after razing their towns. Yet the demonfolk couldn't stop fighting. They couldn't stop moving forward. There was still the chance that, somewhere out there in the world, their stolen family was waiting for them. If their kin were suffering, then they had to find and save them.

To that end, the demonfolk were willing to sacrifice anyone who got in their way. They had no other choice. Each and every one of them clung desperately to this excuse, using it to justify the deeds they had committed. They knew of their sins but continued to fight, believing that if they could just defeat the Theocracy, they would be able to see their family again.

Though the demonfolk were lost one and all, they tried to suppress their conflicting thoughts to focus on the enemy ahead. But it was no use. In a sweeping moment of clarity, they all came to the same realization: the halcyon days they had once enjoyed, the blissful scenery of their home—no matter what lengths they went to, such things would never return. Even

if they *did* one day find their family, they were no longer worthy of embracing them.

One faint, solitary voice became the catalyst for collapse—a single, isolated murmur.

“I don’t want to kill anymore.”

Because they could read hearts, the speaker’s brethren didn’t even need to hear the remark; in a flash, grief and sorrow disseminated among them until it had spread through their entire army.

The impact of that single lament was enough to make the demonfolk forget their task and rob them of the strength to keep fighting. The stifled emotions they had never put into words—that they had relegated to the deepest recesses of their hearts—abruptly began to overflow. Someone had opened the dam. They could no longer ignore the pain they all shared.

And amid that wave of sadness, they came to a profound understanding.

These holy knights baring their swords at us... We’re one and the same.

They were all mourning lost family. They were all driven by hatred. But only the knights were facing the cause of their suffering. The demonfolk had devastated their homes, killed their loved ones, and robbed them of their merry lives. Was it not just for them to face judgment at the hands of those who knew the same grief?

Just like that, most of the demonfolk lost the will to fight. Even as the holy knights bore down on them, swords ready to strike, they stood rooted to the spot, simply accepting their fate.

Mere moments ago, they had worried their journey would never end...yet here they were. This was their punishment for all the sins they had accrued. Somewhere, deep in their hearts, this was the demonfolk’s shared wish.

Even so, some of the Demon King’s army refused to give up. They bolstered themselves with their conviction that their family was still out there, waiting to be rescued, and threw themselves back into the fight with desperate fervor.

“Ah, right. I forgot to tell you. Regarding the *things* you have so desperately been searching for...”

Such ominous words had come from none other than High Priestess Astirra. She floated in the sky above her foe, looking down on them as if sneering at the exhausted remnants of their army. And with that mocking expression, she dealt her killing blow:

“I regret to inform you that you *shan’t ever find them*. They’ve all been used up, you see.”

Those who had once called themselves the Lepifolk doubted the high priestess, so they took it upon themselves to ascertain the truth. Using the power bestowed upon them at birth, they peered into her mind...and immediately regretted what they saw.

Astirra was telling the truth—the kin they were searching for had already been turned into Crimson Gems. Worse still, within the high priestess’s memories was a kaleidoscope of gruesome horrors they would never have dared to imagine: the final days of their beloved family members.

Those who had been turned into gems shortly after being abducted were the lucky ones. Others had been dissected alive, forced to endure the agony as they were slowly hacked apart in the name of experimentation, or had vast amounts of mana forced through their bodies, dooming them to excruciating deaths.

The demonfolk heard the screams of their loved ones in the high priestess’s heart—heard their own names being cried in desperation—and could only watch as those they cared about most died weeping.

At once, every demonfolk on the battlefield dropped to their knees, their hearts full not of anger or hatred but of emptiness. Everything they had done, everything they had striven toward for the past however many years...it had all been for nothing. The rivers of blood they had forced themselves to spill served no purpose. Their last thread of hope had now been severed, leaving them to wallow in their own powerlessness.

High Priestess Astirra’s tone was almost mocking as she continued, “I congratulate you on your tireless efforts thus far. I am more grateful to you and your families than you could ever imagine. I must admit, not even *I* thought you would play the role of the ‘villain’ so well. You have truly left your mark on history. Because of you, the people’s hearts have come together, and my work is progressing excellently. You have been the most wonderful assistants, aiding the development of the paradise I wish to create. Thank you. I feel nothing but gratitude toward you.”

At last, the demonfolk came to a realization: this entire time, they had been in the palm of this monster’s hand.

Astirra had planned everything that had occurred since the Crimson Gems were stolen. Like a farmer waiting for her crops to ripen, she had anticipated the hatred that had grown and then flooded the continent, and

eagerly awaited the perfect time to harvest it. She had stolen one “crop” to sow something even more bountiful.

Though they hadn’t known it, the demonfolk had been used. Their internal conflicts, their ceaseless rampage, the blood they had spilled to take back their loved ones—nothing had been too sacred to exploit. To this monster, even the comrades they had lost while traveling their cruel path were but a source of amusement.

The Lepifolk’s tragedy had been a comedy for Astirra—one of her own making. And the demonfolk had yet to leave center stage.

In her heart, the monster already knew how she would use her foes: as commodities to acquire vast amounts of wealth, as convenient eternal “enemies” to bring others under her banner...and as mere sustenance for some sinister, unknown creature. She would wring as much worth from them as she could until nothing remained.

The demonfolk had realized too late—although they now stood on opposite ends of the battlefield, the holy knights were not their enemies. They had only ever had one foe: this monster in the form of a woman.

Truly, they had been fools.

Breaking their people’s code had been a grave mistake. They had considered it their last option and clung to it, believing it would allow them to save their family, but the power they had gained had been naught but an illusion. It had wrought only meaningless slaughter and sorrow, and now it was time for them to pay the price.

Because of their foolishness, the demonfolk would meet the same fate as their abducted kin. Because of their stupidity, they had taken the path of an unknown monster’s devising...

And the holy knights would surely follow.

Because they could read the monster’s heart, the demonfolk—no, *the Lepifolk*—were able to glimpse the cursed future awaiting the holy knights. They, too, would be manipulated. And when their usefulness ran out, they would simply be discarded.

The sole cause of all this suffering was upon this very battlefield, laughing...yet nobody even tried to oppose her. The only things driving them forward—their friends and family—had been lost a long time ago.

The battle raged on, but it was entirely one-sided. The demonfolk, having recognized their powerlessness and the sins they had committed, were no longer capable of putting up a fight. Many simply wished for death to come quicker, with some going so far as to say it was the last

remaining salvation afforded to them. They fell to the holy knights' blades as though chasing after their fallen brethren.

Nobody could persuade the demonfolk to carry on living—not when they saw death as the punishment they deserved. Not even Roy, their leader, had the power to change their minds.

Following the high priestess's command, the holy knights of the Theocracy showed no mercy. They cut the throat of any "evildoer" who dared to stand and immediately hobbled those who had crumpled to the ground, removing their extremities before cramming them into iron cages to be transported someplace unknown.

The battle had stretched on much too long for any normal soldier to endure, but the holy knights threw themselves into exterminating their foe. Their strength came from many sources: their hatred of those who had murdered their loved ones; their lust for vengeance; their profound sorrow at the thought that their homes, where they had enjoyed such peace, were now little more than rubble...

And above all else, their faith in the teachings of Holy Mithra, whose guidance had brought them to this battlefield in the first place.

In their hearts, the holy knights believed they had nothing to fear—that Holy Mithra would reward them even in death. They needed only face and vanquish the evil before them, for that was the sacred duty entrusted to them.

In their eyes, it was the one true path to salvation.

As the slaughter—for it could no longer be called a battle—continued, more and more demonfolk vanished from the open plain, captured or executed. Roy had led his brethren for the duration of their journey, so he burned their tragic fates into his memory even as the holy knights ran him through, covering his lower abdomen in stab wounds. But his suffering did not end there; his lower half was torn to pieces and thrown all over by the monsters now free from their yoke.

As the freed monsters rampaged across the battlefield, they lashed out at the hopeless demonfolk instead of the blade-wielding holy knights. Taking revenge on those who had commanded them against their will, they turned on their former masters and devoured them with fervor.

Amid the chaos, Demon King Roy's black dragon snapped up its master and unsteadily took to the sky, its body a honeycombed tapestry of gashes and punctures. There were no longer any demonfolk left on the battlefield.

High Priestess Astirra, who had quietly watched the scene unfold, erupted in high and exuberant laughter. Then she made a proud declaration:

“This divine war ends in a victory for the just. Henceforth, our great nation shall be known by a new name: the *Holy Theocracy of Mithra!*”

The surviving holy knights’ cheers were so uproarious that they shook the earth. Every step of their path had been righteous, and they found themselves feeling even more grateful to Holy Mithra, the reason for their victory and salvation. They all swore their undying allegiance to High Priestess Astirra, who had given them everything.

In the years that followed, the new Holy Theocracy of Mithra became more consolidated than ever. Using the wealth gained from the trade of Demons’ Hearts, its people gathered together and erected a great city. And in barely any time at all, the Theocracy developed into a major power with enough influence to shape the entire continent.

The Philosopher's Goblet

Hmm? Where am I...?

In a daze, Astirra examined her surroundings. The low light made it hard to see, but she seemed to be in a small, cramped crate of some kind. Her cheek was pressed against a hard wooden surface, and she could feel the rattling of a vehicle—probably a wagon or cart—traveling over a bumpy road.

Yep, I'm definitely inside a crate.

And with that realization came another: she was trapped.

A thin beam of light poked through a gap in the crate, allowing Astirra to see that her hands and feet were tightly bound with rope. Distressed, she attempted to wriggle free, but the strength had at some point left her body.

What was happening? How had she ended up in a place like this? And why were her limbs tied up? Astirra tried to recall the events that had gotten her in this predicament, but to no avail; she couldn't remember a thing. One fact was clear to her, though: she had been through a similar experience before.

On the day of her fifteenth birthday, in the blink of an eye, she had suddenly realized she was standing alone in a shaded forest. Not knowing why she was there, she had searched for anything that might have served as a clue...but she hadn't found anything.

She had known that her name was Astirra. She had also known it was the day of her fifteenth birthday. But curiously enough, she hadn't been able to remember anything else.

Why am I here?

Astirra hadn't been carrying anything in the way of possessions, and she had only been wearing a thin dress for everyday wear. Despite her lack of memories, she had also harbored some strange, conflicting emotions about the forest. On the one hand, it had seemed nostalgic, as though she had lived there her entire life. On the other, it had seemed completely unfamiliar. The two feelings had combined into a very odd sensation indeed.

And no matter how much she had tried to figure things out, she hadn't been able to find an explanation.

Having decided that standing lost in thought wouldn't get her anywhere, Astirra had ventured deeper into the forest—but her aimless wanderings hadn't helped at all. Soon, it had started to grow dark.

Once night had set in, Astirra had sensed the presence of terrifying monsters prowling the forest. She had tried to hide in the darkness, even holding her breath so as not to make a sound, but that hadn't been enough; one of the monsters had still noticed the vulnerable Astirra, and before she had realized it, a set of massive fangs had appeared in her vision.

A single thought had run through her mind: *This is the end for me.* She was going to be torn to shreds by this beast, her flesh sating its hunger as it lapped at whatever remained of her bones. That was her fate, she had concluded, and though she had cursed its transience and incomprehensible nature, she had ultimately accepted it.

Yet, for some reason, that *hadn't* been her end.

Astirra's body had moved on its own, and a large fireball had suddenly shot from her hand. Taken by surprise and intimidated by the potency of her spell, the beast bearing down on her had retreated back into the darkness from whence it had come.

Having somehow escaped danger, Astirra had spent the next few hours staying deathly quiet in the shadow of a large tree, shivering from the cold as she awaited morning. Then, when light had first broken through the trees, she had run as fast as she could, desperate to escape the forest.

Again, Astirra had moved aimlessly through the trees, but lady luck had smiled on her this time; after sprinting desperately for a while, she had managed to escape the forest. From there, she had stumbled upon a small town, but hunger and exhaustion had weighed so heavily on her that she had passed out upon reaching its gates.

Upon coming to, Astirra had discovered that one of the town's guards—a woman—had carried her to a clinic where she could recover. She had thanked the guard for her kindness and, in response to the woman's questions, explained that she didn't know who she was or where she had come from. She had also given an honest account of how she had used magic to escape the ferocious beast that had attacked her in the forest.

The guard had seemed a little perplexed, but her response had come rather quickly: "If your magic is that potent, then you should become an adventurer."

Although she hadn't known what an "adventurer" was, Astirra had obediently taken the woman's advice and registered with the town's

Adventurers Guild. Then, to earn her daily bread, she had started visiting the Guild on a regular basis, scoping out commissions she could complete on her own and using the money to pay for food and shelter.

Three years had passed since then, and Astirra was still an adventurer by trade. As she had gradually acquired experience and overcome dangers with the magic she was apparently quite skilled at—though she still wasn't sure how or when she had acquired it—she had also become someone whom the Adventurers Guild relied on. She was getting more and more accustomed to taking on tough commissions, her income had stabilized somewhat, and purchasing delicious food on the regular was now well within her budget. In short, she was gaining confidence.

Still, she must have made a mistake of some kind yesterday. She recalled that she had gone to the Adventurers Guild to hand in an herb-gathering commission and collect her pay. Then, on her way back to her inn, a shady-looking fellow had approached her.

The rest was a mystery.

All in all, Astirra didn't know much about her current situation. It certainly wasn't a good one, though.

Hmm... What to do...?

First, Astirra turned to her forte, magic, and tried to burn away the rope binding her. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't produce a decent flame. The crate she was trapped in must have been built to limit her magic in some way. And since there was a gag stuffed tightly into her mouth, she couldn't even call for help.

Now this is a problem.

Memories weren't the only thing she lacked; she had nobody she could count on to rescue her either.

Astirra's journey thus far had been aimless and solitary. She had encountered danger on more occasions than she could count, and this was far from the first time someone had attempted to ambush, abduct, and trap her. She had always managed to escape with her formidable magic, but that was because her assailants had never gone to such lengths to keep her restrained. Her every means of escape was gone, leaving her with nothing she could do.

She wondered where they were going to take her. Certainly nowhere good if they had resorted to such a heavy-handed invitation.

But why me...?

Astirra didn't know for sure why she was in this situation...but she had

a suspicion. She stood out from humans and beastfolk. Her appearance—horizontally long ears and rare, bright green hair—drew a lot of attention.

Because she was a woman journeying alone, Astirra frequently had men attempt to catch her attention and speak with her, if only out of sheer curiosity. At first, she had thought that others simply appreciated her appearance. It had even made her quite smug. But as time had gone on, such encounters had started to feel more dangerous, and she had taken to hiding how she looked.

As the threats to her safety had increased, Astirra had considered joining an adventurer party. The problem was that most adventurers were less-than-decent men who wouldn't have made her feel any safer. She had then thought about joining a party consisting only of women, but she had never met another female adventurer, let alone another solitary outcast who journeyed alone.

Astirra had also considered giving up on the adventuring life to find other work, but she lacked wisdom in the ways of the world and only caused problems wherever she went. Although she had tried her hand at several occupations in the towns she had visited—occupations such as waitressing and dishwashing—her rare appearance and poor common sense had always gotten those around her into trouble. Nothing had gone well, so she had ultimately settled back into the routine of a wandering adventurer, moving from town to town.

Then, somewhere along the way, Astirra had grown defiant. She had taken to thinking that because she had managed on her own thus far, she had no need to seek out companions. No matter how hard she had searched, she hadn't been able to find anyone else with her features, but that was just fine. She didn't know whether she had always had magic, but nobody else's was as potent. As long as she was careful, she thought, she could overcome any danger with her own strength.

In truth, Astirra found it lonesome being on her own, having to work everything out herself. It was the life she was used to, though. Maybe...it was even more comfortable not having anyone who would get in her way. She could do whatever she wanted on her solo journey. Three cheers for Astirra! Long live her independence!

And where had that half-desperate optimism gotten her? Bound and gagged inside a magic-limiting crate, without a single person who could come to her rescue.

Astirra wondered if she was going to be sold to a freak show and turned

into an exhibit. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad. She'd never had anywhere she belonged, and since she was always alone, nobody would mourn her if she one day up and vanished. She didn't know what was going to happen to her, but she hoped it would give her a purpose.

Having more or less given up, Astirra slumped down in her crate and tried to focus on the rattling of the wagon.

Then she heard a voice.

"Hey, show me what's in that crate, will you? I swear it just made a noise."

And another.

"What? You think a hired adventurer gets to make demands like that? You've got some nerve. Who do you think's paying you?"

"I just want a look. Or, what, do you have something dangerous crammed in there that you can't show anybody?"

"Hey! Oken! Shut your trap! We were hired to guard this wagon and nothing else, all right, rookie?! Don't stick your nose where it doesn't belong!"

"But it's an adventurer's right to check their client's cargo—to make sure they're not transporting something questionable! And... Hmm? Strange. This crate's practically sealed shut. Guess I'll need to smash it open!"

"HEY! What the blazes are you doing?! You lot! Get your friend to stop screwing around!"

"R-Right away! *Oken!* Get away from there!"

"But in *The Adventurers Code of Conduct*, clause six, paragraph two, it plainly states that adventurers working under an escort contract have the right to check their cargo for—"

"Just shut up, dumb rookie!"

The wagon had stopped. Thanks to the argument that had suddenly broken out, Astirra could tell there were several people outside the crate in which she was trapped.

"Tsk. I can't believe this nonsense. I only hired you lot because I was told you were *veterans* at escorting merchandise."

"S-Sorry! This guy's new! We only brought him along to fill a space!"

"Then teach your rookie the ropes, bottom-feeders! Or do you want me to hire someone else next time?"

"M-My sincerest apologies! *Come on, Oken! You apologize too!*"

"But it's an adventurer's *right* to check their client's cargo. If he can't

give us a proper explanation, I'll report him to the Guild!"

"Damn it, Oken! Cut it out already! Just listen to what the client and I tell you! Or do you *want* to lose us this job?"

The man who had noticed the noises Astirra had made was now arguing with the others. She tried shouting as loud as she could, hoping to confirm his suspicions. The best she could manage while gagged was a low groan, but that seemed to be enough.

"I *swear* there's a weird noise coming from that crate. It's almost like a person moaning. If you can't give me an explanation, I'm opening it."

"Hey! What the hell are you doing?! Stop! You won't get away with —!"

"It's your own fault for not meeting the terms of our contract. Now step aside! [Windblast]!"

There was a loud *boom*, then a violent impact. A short man peered into the large hole he had just opened in the crate.

"See? There's a person in there! I think an explanation is in order, dear client!"

"You little...! You're just an adventurer for hire! You think you won't face any consequences for this?!"

"O-Oken! Wh-What the hell have you done?!"

Ignoring the protests directed at him, the short man who had opened the crate removed the black cloth gag from Astirra's mouth. "Hey, are you all right? I'll get you out of those ropes right away. *Tsk*, someone tied them tight. Hold on, I'll use a knife."

"Who...are you?" Astirra asked, her voice hoarse and peppered with coughs, as the man she had never seen before cut the ropes binding her.

"Hey, Oken! Who said you could touch the cargo?! We're paid to be escorts—that's it!"

"Excuse me? '*Cargo*'? Do you have eyes, my good man? Do you see the 'agricultural equipment' that was listed on our commission? Reporting false cargo is a breach of contract!"

"Who cares?! If everyone keeps their eyes closed and their mouths shut, we all win! Do you understand what you've done?! You've just cost all of us our pay! We've gotta make a living here!"

"Ha! So it was hush money, was it? I don't remember hearing anything about that!"

"As if we'd tell you. We only brought you along to make up the numbers. You might be skilled for a rookie, but you're as stubborn as a

mule, damn it! And now you've gone and betrayed the party!"

"Am I *really* the traitor here, I wonder? If the truth gets out, I'd put good money on *you* getting in trouble."

"Tsk!"

Then, from behind the group of angry adventurers, the client interjected. "Hey. You lot," he said in a hushed voice. "Deal with your useless rookie. We can just say there was a surprise monster attack, right? If you still want your money, silence him."

"Ha!" Oken scoffed. "You've been exposed, so now you want me out of the picture? Talk about a second-rate client."

The other adventurers exchanged quick looks...then drew their blades.

"Deal," one muttered.

"Guess we're doing this," another said.

"Damn it..." cursed a third.

"Don't blame us for this, Oken. It's your own fault for disobeying orders!"

"Ha!" the short man laughed again. "I suppose a second-rate client means second-rate hires! Very well, then! I, Oken, the genius magician, will show you all what it means to be *first*-rate!"

In response to that long-winded declaration, the other adventurers charged at Oken with their blades ready. The short man seemed unreliable from his appearance...but he disproved that notion almost immediately. Though he faced seven veteran adventurers at once, he took not a single step back, flinging spells in retaliation to their offensive. His attackers soon sported a number of substantial wounds.

But while the short man was doing a good job of attacking and defending simultaneously, he was quickly losing the upper hand. Riffraff or not, his opponents were veterans; challenging all seven of them alone was the blunder of an overconfident rookie. No matter how much Oken believed in his talents, the outcome of the battle was already decided.

"It's over, Oken," the leader of the adventurers said. "You can apologize by dying." Then he swung his longsword, worn with use, at the short man's throat.

"[Float]."

But the blade didn't cleave through its intended target. Moments before it reached the short man, every one of the adventurers found themselves launched up into the air.

"Wh-What?! What's happening?! Why am I floating?!"

“Wh-What’s this?!”

The spell, which none of those present had ever seen before, had come from none other than Astirra. She had risen to her feet behind Oken and used wind magic—her best specialty after fire—to restrict the movements of the now-floating adventurers.

“That’s quite enough,” she said. “I wouldn’t want anyone to get *too* injured, after all.”

Seeing that the tide had turned, the client clicked his tongue and immediately ran for the forest. The floating adventurers could only stare dumbfounded as he disappeared into the shadows of the trees.

“Hey. Looks like your client’s cut and run,” the short man said.

There was a pause before the lead adventurer growled, “Fine. I swear we won’t keep trying to harm either one of you. Can you put us down already?”

“Hey, miss.” Oken turned to Astirra. “You heard them, but are you okay with that?”

“I suppose so...” she replied, then adjusted her spell to bring everyone back down to the ground. “Phew. There we go. [Float] really takes a lot of concentration.”

No sooner had the adventurers put away their weapons and adopted postures of surrender than the short man put his hands on his hips and started lording over them.

“All right, you lot—you can scurry away now. Since you’re intelligent enough to know when to concede, I’ll make an exception and turn a blind eye to your escape. Remember to learn from this experience, and don’t take another good-for-nothing commission ever again!”

“Ugh... You’re the only reason we’re in this mess, Oken! We’re veterans, you know! Do you seriously think you’ll make a decent living as an adventurer now that you’ve made an enemy of us?!”

“Ha! A pack of second-raters like you lot? I was going to quit anyway!”

“Tsk! Let’s get out of here!”

The group of adventurers disappeared into the forest, hurrying in the same direction as their client. Astirra quietly watched them go before suddenly remembering that she hadn’t yet thanked her rescuer.

“Um, thank you for helping me,” she said. “But...sorry. It seems like it’s my fault you had that falling-out with your friends.”

“Ha! Don’t be ridiculous. That lot? *Friends*? Of course not! I was

thinking about cutting ties with them long before they said all that. You gave me just the right excuse to send that flock of good-for-nothings running!"

His hands still on his hips, the short man let out a booming laugh. So much for Astirra's concern that she had cost her savior his companions.

"You know, you aren't half bad," he continued. "I doubt that even I, Oken, the genius magician, would succeed in casting that [Float] spell of yours— No, never mind that. I'm quite confident I'd manage it with a little practice. Still, it came in quite handy there. Where did you learn it?"

"Oh, I didn't learn it from anybody. I whipped it up on a whim."

Oken paused. "Hmm? You...created it yourself? You can *do* that? I...I see. Being able to match my excellence in the arcane arts means you must have great potential indeed... Hmm? Hmm...?" Now wearing an inquisitive expression, he drew closer to Astirra as he studied her face.

"Y-Yes?" she asked.

"You have some notably *rare* features."

"I... Yes, I get that quite often."

"In fact, given those ears of yours and the color of your hair..." The short man fell silent for a long moment. "It's almost like you're one of the elves of legend."

"The...elves'?" Astirra looked genuinely confused. "Who are they?"

The short man examined her strangely. "Hmm? You have those features but don't know? The elves are a race of people who look much the same as you."

"Really? So there *are* other people like me out there... Does that mean I could find a bunch of them by heading to the right place?"

"Goodness, no. To begin with, the only accounts of elves are in musty old books of dubious veracity. They're a fairy tale. No matter how hard you search, you won't find them anywhere."

"I...see..."

Astirra was a little disheartened by the man's response. She had no reason to doubt him, especially when she hadn't ever seen another person with her strange features. But at the same time, for a reason she couldn't quite place, she suspected that he was wrong. A whisper in her heart told her so.

Yes, I see. The elves aren't a fairy tale; they're just hiding themselves from the rest of the world.

That sudden thought caused more wisps of recollection to reveal

themselves.

Oh. I knew it all along.

Astirra could remember being raised by a woman with ears and hair like her own. There had been others around them too—others who shared their features. She tried to recall more about them...but then her head started to throb with intense pain.

“Ngh...” Astirra instinctively crouched down, holding her head in her hands.

“H-Hey. What’s the matter?” Oken asked.

Astirra took a moment to compose herself and then replied, “Sorry. I’m...not feeling well.”

“Are you hurt anywhere?” The short man fumbled around in the satchel at his waist, retrieving a small bottle. “I have a potion if you think you need it.”

Astirra refused it, instead putting the memories that had just returned to her into words. “Um, actually...I’ve just remembered a little of my past. The elves... They *do* exist. I lived in a forest—or someplace like one—until I was fifteen. And everyone there had my features. They...weren’t rare at all.”

“Wh-What?!” Oken practically leaped in surprise. “Then you truly *are* an elf?!”

There was a short pause before Astirra said, “No. Strictly speaking...I don’t think I am.”

“You don’t *think* you are? What do you mean?”

Astirra’s own words, based only on unreliable memories, caused indistinct visions of her past to float up from the depths of her mind. She had once lived in a forest—or someplace similar enough to be called one. Yet for a reason that eluded her, she couldn’t remember the faces of anyone there. No matter how hard she tried, there were gaping voids in her memory.

She thought she could remember having a mother and father. Though she couldn’t picture their faces, she was sure that they were real—well, as sure as someone in her predicament could be. She was also convinced that her mother had shared her unusual features and that the others around them had too.

But not her father. His clothes, ears, and hair color hadn’t matched those of the others in the forest. He alone had been forever bound in chains and relegated to the dark depths of what Astirra thought might have been a

prison.

Yes, that man had definitely been her father. That was why she had always stood out slightly from the others—why everyone had told her to leave their home on the day of her fifteenth birthday. And if she recalled correctly, even her mother—

“Ngh...”

“H-Hey! Hello?” The short man peered at her, looking worried. “Are you *sure* you’re okay?”

“Yes, I...just felt a little dizzy all of a sudden.” Astirra took another moment to gather herself and then looked up at Oken. “I don’t have any memories of when I was young, you see. Everything before my fifteenth birthday is gone. These headaches and dizziness are how my body reacts whenever I try to force myself to remember.”

“You...don’t have *any* memories of your past?”

“That’s right. No happy ones, no sad ones—nothing. Well...perhaps that isn’t strictly true. I *do* vaguely recall the feeling of being unwelcome wherever I went...”

Astirra couldn’t recall anything else, however. Even things she must have seen countless times—the forest where she’d lived, the faces of those who’d shared her home—were beyond her reach. Even the faces of her parents, whom she was sure had existed.

Traces of a conversation lingered in her mind, but she couldn’t remember whom she had spoken with or what they had discussed. It must not have been with her mother or father; she couldn’t remember speaking with them at all. And the harder she racked her brain, the more convinced she became that her past would forever remain a mystery.

But then her efforts bore fruit. She managed to grab hold of one particular recollection.

On the day of her fifteenth birthday, Astirra had been told that she didn’t deserve to live because of what she was. Everyone had surrounded her, told her to leave, and forced her from their home. Then, as she had gone, the people who looked so much like her had thrown stones, telling her never to associate with them again.

All the while, Astirra’s mother had simply looked on. Her sorrow had been evident on her face, but she hadn’t even tried to help.

Astirra wasn’t sure how she had managed to remember, but it was clear to her now: on that fateful day, she had been chased out of her home. Her people had cast her out with nothing except the clothes on her back, likely

expecting—nay, *hoping*—that she would die. Though the memories were as thin and elusive as mist, Astirra had managed to trace along their path.

“Come to think of it...” she said slowly, casting her head down, “memories aren’t the only thing I lack. I don’t have any dreams or goals, and despite my travels, I’ve never found a place where I belong. Sometimes, it’s hard to tell whether I’m even alive...”

The short man laughed uproariously. “Ha! No dreams or goals? With *that* much magical talent to your name? And you mentioned not having anywhere to go, right? Well, you’re in luck! From now on, you’re a member of my party! Mm-hmm. A superlative idea, if I do say so myself!”

The unmitigated cheer in Oken’s voice made Astirra look up out of her gloom. She spent a long, long while staring at his face as she processed what he’d just said.

“I beg your pardon?” she finally managed to reply.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! What’s with that limp reaction of yours? Did you not hear me? I, Oken, *the genius magician*, have deigned to allow you entry to the new party that I’m forming! I can’t let someone with such great magical skills wander aimlessly through life. What a waste that would be! You’re an adventurer, aren’t you? I can tell from your getup. And it doesn’t take a person of my superior intellect to see that you work solo!”

Though somewhat rankled by the short man’s assumptions about her appearance and status as a loner, Astirra had to concede the point. “Well, you’re not *wrong*...”

“Then it’s settled! There’s no reason for you to refuse me, after all.”

“Um... Hold on a moment. How did we end up here? Don’t get me wrong, I *am* grateful that you rescued me, but I haven’t said anything about forming a party.”

“Pishposh. You’re joining mine, and that’s final. As I said, it’s not like you have a reason to refuse.”

“Where exactly are you getting all this confidence from...?”

“What? Do you mean to say you’ve never heard of me? Oken, the genius magician?”

“Not once.”

“Well, I’ll admit that my fame is still a work in progress, but the adventurer party I plan to spearhead will one day have its name lauded across the entire continent! And you, my lucky friend, have the honor of becoming its first member! A momentous occasion indeed. So how about

it? Doesn't sound so bad, does it?"

Astirra took another doubtful look at the man calling himself "the genius magician." Where was all this vim and vigor coming from? He had just separated from his former companions. And what in the world was making him so confident?

"Have you not considered the possibility that I might turn you down?" she asked.

"Anyone who turns down an invitation from one such as I reveals a lot about their own talents—or their lack thereof. But you aren't like them, are you? I see *promise* in you."

"I'm almost impressed by your self-assurance. But wait, aren't you an amateur adventurer too? You certainly look the part."

The wind seemed to leave the short man's sails momentarily before he stuck out his chest again. "Well, yes, that's *technically* true. But my confidence comes hand in hand with my ability. You'll regret lumping a genius like me in with those other amateurs running about!"

Astirra studied the man before her. He was so cocksure that it was almost contagious. As she continued to look at him, her worries started to feel more and more trivial.

"Pfft..."

"Hey. What's so funny?" Oken asked.

"Pardon me. It just occurred to me that you're...very, *very* odd."

"That's a rather rude thing to say to your savior, don't you think?"

"As I said, I *am* grateful for your help...but the situation was nowhere near as one-sided as you seem to think. If not for *my* assistance, *you* would have been poked full of holes."

"Hmph. They were a pack of nobodies. I would have figured out a way to deal with them on my own. Still, modesty is one of my many virtues, so I shall afford you some gratitude for your earlier contribution."

"That's a rather self-important way of thanking someone."

"Ha! I don't want to hear that from you, of all people!"

Astirra paused for a moment. "Do you...truly mean to invite me into your party?"

"On that note, actually—what's your name? You still haven't introduced yourself."

Astirra sighed under her breath; the short man was clearly the kind of person who did everything at his own pace, completely disregarding everyone else in the process. "I suppose I haven't, have I? My name is

Astirra. It's a pleasure to be working with you, Oken."

And to Astirra's own surprise, she really meant it. The gloom that had previously hung over her was nowhere to be seen.



Thus, Oken and Astirra formed a party and started working together. Though a team comprising two magicians was considered unthinkable by adventuring standards, their journeys were surprisingly smooth.

If one were to be more precise, Astirra was the main reason for the pair's lack of troubles; she spent her time watching over her cocksure companion and cleaning up whatever absurd messes he got them into. That was neither here nor there, however. The feats they achieved as adventurers became greater and greater until their accomplishments working solo paled in comparison.

Still, when tackling high-difficulty commissions, the pair quickly began to sense their limits. In battle, although they had access to far more firepower than they ever needed, neither one had a nose for danger, and their mutual carelessness invited all sorts of threats.

The outcome of a party with two such individuals was obvious.

Having learned their lessons firsthand, Oken and Astirra reached the same conclusion: *Two party members aren't enough*. As such, they wasted no time beginning their search for new members.

"Tsk! The nerve of that lot! My venerable self went to the express trouble of inviting them, yet they wouldn't even hear what I had to say?!"

"Considering how pompous you are when 'inviting' people, I think that's the normal reaction. Do you actually want more party members, Oken? It wouldn't hurt for you to be a *little* more friendly, even if only when making introductions."

"Hmph! What use is there in pandering to mediocre layabouts who don't have an eye for quality? I'm only interested in *true* companions. If that's all it takes for someone to leave, then good riddance, I say!"

"Haven't you been asking basically anyone and everyone you see?"

"Hmph! The chance to join the party of someone as august as I only comes once in a lifetime! Against my better judgment, it seems only fair that I also extend the opportunity to the mediocre masses."

"I...can't tell whether you're trying to be a haughty know-it-all or an upright gentleman right now."

Oken had approached every adventurer they had encountered, and not

one had agreed to join him. The reasons were obvious: his unbearable arrogance and the negative reputation he had acquired through many, many past incidents.

Thus, Oken and Astirra had spent the past few hours in a small tavern that provided home-cooked meals at a reasonable price, commiserating over their situation.

Suddenly, Oken's eyes stopped on a tall man sitting alone in the corner. "Hey, barman," he said to the innkeeper between swigs of beer. "That guy over there—who is he? Based on his attire, I'd say he's an adventurer. A scout, perhaps. Just the kind of fellow we've been looking for."

The tavern owner gave a slight shake of his head. "You shouldn't bother with him. Trust me."

"Why's that?"

"He's famous for only working solo. Rumor has it he used to belong to a strong party, but there was some kind of trouble—something big—and they gave him the boot. Same story with all the parties he's joined since. Nobody wants anything to do with him anymore."

"Trouble, huh? You don't say..." Oken stared at the man in question, who was slowly sipping at his drink in his dark corner of the tavern, and a daring smile flashed across his face. "Ha. I see. True, he comes across as the depressing kind of man who struggles to get along with others. And what's with those strange clothes of his? I wonder if they're tribal. Indeed, he looks exactly like the stubborn sort of adventurer who has no friends."

"That sounds more like a description of you, Oken," Astirra chimed in from beside him.

"Still, for him to have made it this far on his own, he must be a fine scout. I wouldn't pay any attention to those rumors about him; opinions and evaluations are so commonly founded in envy. How else would one explain all those rumors about me?"

"No, I think the ones about you are fairly accurate."

"All right, my mind is made up! I'm going to invite that fellow next, Astirra. I'll decide with my own two eyes whether or not he's the useful sort!"

"Why do I even bother?"

And so Oken marched over to the corner where the man was seated, tugging Astirra along with him. "You there. I'm told you always work alone despite being a scout."

"What's it to you?" the man asked slowly. He had pale skin and blue

hair.

“Am I right to assume you’re still on your own? Well, in that case, I shall deign to make a special exception and allow you to join my party. Feel free to shower me in nonstop gratitude.”

The man—Roy—looked up in surprise. But as he studied the short, haughty intruder, his expression lapsed back into disinterest. There were still people who came to him with such proposals, but that was because they knew nobody else would take him. Their invitations were thinly veiled attempts to take advantage of him, and this was sure to be more of the same.

“Your terms?” was the most he said in response.

Among adventurers, the “terms” discussed when someone joined or created a party were mainly about allocating rewards. Those who had more dangerous roles received a greater share, and the number of useful skills or spells a person could use determined their “market price,” so to speak.

As a scout who couldn’t cast even the most commonplace spells, Roy had only ever received poor terms. And while he had worked incessantly to shore up his weaknesses, it had done painfully little to raise his worth in the eyes of others.

In truth, what Roy lacked in the way of magic he more than made up for with his physical excellence, and his nose for danger was second to none. The problem was that his rustic upbringing had made him too compassionate. He opposed violence so strongly that he refused to harm even birds and other livestock bred as food, and nobody had any use for an adventurer who wouldn’t slay monsters.

Still, that wasn’t the only reason Roy was alone. To begin with, he was one of the Lepifolk, a people who could read the hearts of others. He had also grown up in their settlement, hidden deep in the mountains, where spoken words were equivalent to the truth. Since everyone could read each other’s hearts, what point was there in telling a lie? But of course, the same logic didn’t apply elsewhere. In the outside world, he had discovered that anyone was capable of skirting the truth. Some did it out of consideration for others, but people were rarely so gracious.

In most cases, those who lied did so to protect themselves. Then they added more and more falsehoods for the sake of personal gain. Roy had learned that lesson from the first party he had joined and wouldn’t soon forget it.

Roy had started training himself when he was still living among the

Lepifolk, and the hard work he had put in since then had made him physically exceptional. Thus, when he had debuted as an adventurer, he had managed to hit the ground running as an active and contributing scout of a considerably strong party. His dedication had quickly earned him the trust of his companions, and for a while, his adventuring days had seemed almost carefree.

Then, out of the blue, Roy had discovered through his innate ability to read hearts that the party's leader was embezzling a large portion of everyone's reward money. He had shared the information with his comrades, wanting to do what was best for them all, though he had kept the details of how he had found out hazy.

The leader's immediate response had been to deny the claim. Then, hoping to redirect any suspicion, he had asserted that Roy was lying—that the scout had only made such an outlandish accusation because *he* had recently been caught pilfering their reward money. The party had ended up accepting these lies as the truth.

Roy hadn't even attempted to dispute the allegations leveled against him. In the face of so many doubtful eyes, it would have been easy for him to prove his innocence. He had known exactly how the leader was embezzling their money and could easily have produced all sorts of evidence to win over the party—yet he chose not to.

The reason was simple: the Lepifolk code, which Roy had sworn to uphold before leaving the mountains, forbade him from revealing his people's power to the outside world.

As a result of growing up in a settlement where everybody was kind, Roy had believed in the inherent goodness of people. He had always assumed that if he wound up facing hardship of some kind, the truth would prevail, given enough patience, and everybody would be able to reach an amicable solution. But he was sorely mistaken. Rather than getting better, Roy's situation had taken a sharp turn for the worse.

Bearing the stigma of a made-up misdeed, Roy had been ostracized by the companions he had once been on such good terms with. Then he had been formally removed from his party. No evidence of his alleged theft had been found, nor had any charges been pressed against him, but the simple fact that he had been driven out of a prominent party for suspicion of embezzlement had been enough to drag his name through the mud.

Lacking the connections to pursue any other lines of work, Roy had ended up with no choice but to continue as an adventurer. He had

optimistically believed that time would resolve the baseless accusation made against him, but instead, the prejudice he faced took root. Anytime something went missing or a theft occurred, he was always the first suspect.

Soon enough, no decent party wanted anything to do with him.

In his isolation, Roy had grown sick and tired of the very idea of working with others. He had been a fool for believing in the kindness of strangers. Everybody in the outside world was a liar to the core, and the future he'd dreamed about as a child was nowhere to be seen.

In the several years since Roy left his home, his experiences had made him increasingly disillusioned with the outside world. He felt only the tired resignation that it had nothing worth believing in, which was why he saw no reason to trust the short, pompous busybody before him. He was convinced that the man was just another liar come to take advantage of him with an insultingly awful deal before discarding him once the job was done. Thus, while he had asked about his terms, he had already decided to refuse.

"Everyone in our party receives an equal cut," the man explained. "There's three of us—including you, if you join—so that should mean a rather pretty pile of coins. But in return, you'd better work hard, you hear?"

"An...equal cut?" Roy repeated, unable to mask his surprise. Putting aside the worrying issue that there were only three of them—and that was *counting him*—it was the best offer he'd ever received. "You *do* know that I'm a scout, right? I can't use any magic."

"Not a problem. I'm more than enough to cover our sorcerous needs. Astirra's no slouch either, but, well...she's basically my assistant, I suppose."

"Excuse me, Oken?" Astirra interjected. "Your *assistant*?"

"Ahem. That aside, we need a skilled scout to help us carry our things. You must be at least decent to have managed on your own this whole time, no?"

Roy eyed the short man carefully. "You'd give me an equal share for essentially being a porter?"

"What, do you want more?"

"No. Your terms are...reasonable."

Still wary that there was a catch of some kind, Roy looked into the short man's heart...and sighed. The man was telling the truth, which was

problematic in its own way. It meant he genuinely believed the absurd remarks he was making.

Roy could tell that the man's only objective was to find companions who could serve as his equals. That part was fine. The issue was the standards he expected them to meet. His heart screamed, "My comrades shall be magnificent—no, *legendary*—individuals worthy of matching me, the man who will go down in history as the greatest magician the continent has ever seen." There were no catches, disclaimers, or doubts—this man truly believed in his dream.

Despite the obvious fact that nobody worthy of such greatness would ever idle away an afternoon in such a run-down tavern.

Just as Roy was beginning to wonder who this man thought he was, the pieces fell into place. This had to be the infamous "Oken the Lunatic," known for charging with the vanguard despite being a magician. He threw himself at monsters so often that some people wondered whether he had a death wish. His overconfidence had caused more altercations than anyone could count, and the rants he forced on everyone, filled with delusions of grandeur as they were, had made him known as a nuisance whom nobody wanted to be around.

Though it was a fine thing to be confident, Oken the Lunatic was a prime example of what happened when one took it well past the point of moderation. The man's death was right around the corner, Roy suspected. He must have only resorted to making this request because nobody else had wanted to put up with him. That would explain why he was willing to give an equal share to someone who would only serve as the party's porter.

All in all, the man had no other options left.

Roy was about to decline when he caught sight of the woman standing beside his conversation partner. Her appearance was particularly unusual, so he decided to peek into her heart for just a moment. Though he always felt guilty about consciously using his ability on people in the outside world—especially on women, to the point that he tried to avoid reading them whenever possible—he was eager to know more about anyone who would keep such eccentric company.

As it turned out, the woman's heart was surprisingly unguarded. She lacked the caution that was so common in female adventurers her age.

Roy saw that the short man had saved the woman from being sold into slavery and that the two had traveled together ever since. He also saw that she had suffered a great many hardships in her life thus far. For a reason

unknown to him, her memories beyond a certain point were entirely blank, but he wasn't interested in her distant past anyway. He had determined that she was a good-natured soul—almost ridiculously so—and that was enough.

The pair weren't bad people at all, but a lopsided party with two magicians and no vanguard was destined to fail. That they had known about Roy's lousy reputation and gone to the trouble of approaching him nonetheless surely meant that nobody else had given them the time of day. They likely wouldn't be able to recruit any more members, *especially* if they ended up partying with him.

Roy had nothing to gain from joining these two, and the reverse was bound to be just as true. Their cooperation would serve as little more than a mutual act of suicidal charity. As such, he decided to decline politely.

"Sorry that you went out of your way to invite me, but—"

"Ah, before you answer, there's something I need to tell you," the short man interrupted, holding a hand up in front of Roy's face. "The people I'm looking for need to be supremely, magnificently, *splendiferously* talented. So if you end up being deadweight, you'll be out before you can say 'goodbye.' If you think you're prepared for that, then I suppose I could welcome you into my party."

Roy stared at the man for a long, long time. Then he voiced the single question in his mind: "What?"

What's this guy's deal...?

Roy had been mere moments from declining when the short man had pulled him back into the conversation, seemingly under the assumption that Roy wanted nothing more than to join his party. And once again, the man spoke not a single falsehood. The words that passed his lips were the same as those inside his heart.

Granted...they were still rather ludicrous.

Tired of all the lies he'd encountered since coming to the outside world, Roy found this man's honesty a breath of fresh air. It made him think that maybe—just maybe—accepting the proposal wouldn't be such a bad idea. Though he had a few choice opinions about the man's behavior and speech, they wouldn't exhaust him like the other humans' fake smiles and manipulative remarks. The man would surely still tire him out with his boisterous antics, but that future seemed so much better than the alternative.

And so Roy decided to accept the annoying man's proposal, though not

with any real enthusiasm. Despite his outward attitude, he rarely harbored such overt negative feelings toward anyone, but being talked down to had left him with a particularly bad taste in his mouth. Though he was quiet, mild-mannered, and seldom lost his temper, for the first time in a while, he was feeling sincerely irritated.

The good-natured woman standing to the side was another matter, but if Oken was going to be so pompous, then Roy wouldn't feel at all bad about cutting him down to size. The man seemed comfortable enough speaking his mind at every opportunity, so he wouldn't have any right to complain about a companion doing the same. It would put them on an equal footing and make their arrangement more comfortable for everyone.

"Fine," Roy eventually said. "But that goes both ways. If you turn out to be useless, I'm out. That sounds fair, right?"

The short man hummed in agreement. "Sure, I don't mind at all. But fair warning: once you've borne witness to my greatness, you won't even think about leaving!"

"Seriously, Oken, where *do* you get that confidence from...?" the woman muttered. Then she turned to Roy. "Ah, it's a pleasure to be working with you, um..."

"Roy."

"My name is Astirra. Oken here might *seem* like a disgustingly haughty oddball who spouts irritating nonsense, but that's only because he *is* and *does*. If you ever decide he's too much for you to deal with, there's no shame in leaving. I might even go with you."

"Right. I'll keep that in mind."

"A-Astirra?" Oken asked, tears welling up in his eyes. "Did you really need to go that far...? H-Huh? Wait, were you being serious?"

About half of that was a joke at your expense; the rest was entirely serious, Roy thought to himself. Apparently, the woman wasn't the type to lie either.

It was then that Roy came to a realization: this might have been the first time since he had ventured out into the world that he had come across people who were exactly the same on the outside as they were on the inside. Together with these two, maybe he could at last feel like he belonged somewhere.

At the same time, he came to a decision: if working with this pair didn't pan out, he would consider his journey over and done with. He would give up and go back home. It would mean returning without having

achieved anything important enough to meet the expectations of those awaiting him, but at least his tales of the outside world would surely be of great value to his secluded kin.

Thus, Roy decided to embark on one last adventure.



“Tsk! It sure is nimble for something so big! Roy, distract it!”

“On it.”

Oken, Astirra, and Roy were in a fierce battle against a massive stone dragon. It was a gatekeeper, an appellation given to powerful enemies that guarded vital areas within high-difficulty dungeons.

“Right! Just you wait!” Oken declared. “In the blink of an eye, I’ll blast this fiend to smithereens with my magnificent magical might!”

“Stop grandstanding and do it already,” Roy shot back.

“You know what he’s like, Roy...” Astirra said. “The extra flashiness he adds to his magic always makes it take longer. Want me to step in and defeat this thing?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.”

“H-Hello?” Oken stammered. “Could you two just h-hang on a moment? I’m almost ready, I promise! Just a little more...and...there! Roy! Get clear! [Windblast]!”

The explosive wind spell—one of Oken’s specialties—blew the stone dragon to pieces and opened a giant hole in the dungeon’s wall.

“Phew. That makes the third gatekeeper we’ve taken out this dungeon,” Oken remarked. “This place isn’t anywhere near as tough as everyone says, don’t you think?”

“Sure,” Astirra replied, “if we don’t count the incident when a certain *somebody* charged too far ahead and was almost crushed to paste.”

“Seconded,” Roy added. “If not for Astirra being so quick on her feet, you’d have died *at least* three times by now, Oken.”

“H-Hmph. As members of an adventurer party, aren’t you *expected* to assist your leader?” Oken paused for a moment. “That being said, excellent work today. In my magnanimity, I shall make a special exception and increase your shares of our reward. Accept it with gratitude.”

“Is it really that hard for you to just say ‘thank you’...?” Astirra sighed.

Miraculously, the trio worked well together. Their party’s composition was highly irregular—two magicians and a scout—yet they had already begun accumulating results; even enemies that would normally be

formidable fell quickly to their combined efforts. Roy used his natural agility to charge straight into the fray and run their foes in circles, Oken managed their frontline offensive, and Astirra stayed at the back, providing support and keeping an eye on the whole situation while preserving her strength for when they needed it.

In fact, Astirra was a large part of the reason their party was doing so well. During her days as a solo adventurer, she had kept her true ability hidden so as not to stand out, but holding back wasn't an option now that she was working with the reckless Oken. Though the blundering magician took on commissions that were clearly too tough for him, Astirra was skilled enough to get the party through them.

It hadn't been too long after the trio had started working together that Astirra had naturally begun to distinguish herself. Though she played a supportive role and wasn't the leader—at least not on paper—it was no exaggeration to say that she was the heart of the party.

Roy was also good at supporting his companions. His physical excellence and keen senses, combined with his usual position a short distance ahead of the others, allowed him to notice threats before they became a problem, so he had saved the party from countless sticky situations. Oken did sometimes charge ahead in merry spirits and stumble into a trap or three, but even on those occasions, Roy still managed to foresee the danger and mitigate the damage.

The party also meshed well on a personal level. Roy hadn't let his guard down around anybody since leaving his home, yet he bore no ill feelings toward his two companions. On the contrary, somewhere along the line, he had come to find his time with them pleasantly comfortable. If not for the code he had sworn to uphold, he would have gone as far as to tell them that he could read other people's hearts—that was how much he had come to like them. Even back home, he had never felt this close to anybody who wasn't his family.

As for Oken, rumors that he had found some comrades were already circulating.

"Did you hear? That crank who's never gotten along with anyone formed a party. An actual, proper one."

"I doubt that's going to last."

Almost everyone who knew of Oken had drawn the same conclusion—yet when three months came and went, his party was still together.

"Are you sure, Astirra?" Roy asked. "I heard they offered you a much

better deal than the one you have with us.”

“Hmm...” Astirra paused for a moment, then shook her head. “You heard right, but still...”

As the trio flourished, so did Astirra’s renown—mostly because Oken kept boasting that his party contained a “half-elf.” Nobody had ever heard such a term before; the eccentric magician had coined it specifically to describe his companion.

Around the same time, Astirra had stopped trying to hide her appearance. She had always worn a low hood to avoid the trouble that came from drawing attention to herself, but the fuss kicked up by Oken’s constant antics made that rather pointless, so she had returned to striding around confidently instead. It hadn’t taken long for her to start standing out; everywhere she went, she heard that strange term “half-elf” alongside whispered rumors of her skill. Everyone found it odd that she was traveling with two companions with such negative reputations, and many prominent adventurer parties had already attempted to recruit her, claiming that her great talents were going to waste.

“I can’t quite explain it...” Astirra continued. “Their proposal just didn’t inspire me. In the first place, I didn’t become an adventurer because I wanted to be one; it was just that nothing else really worked out for me. So there’s not much point in trying to lure me with promises of vast rewards.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

“I mean, I could ask you the same thing. Word reached me that you’ve been approached by a fair few parties yourself.”

Roy’s work supporting his companions hadn’t gone unnoticed either; the proposals now dropped in his lap were far superior to anything he had received in the past. Oken’s poor reputation had actually helped in this regard: a lot of people had reevaluated their opinions of Roy and now saw him as someone with enough potential to succeed as an adventurer even while working under such an impossible leader.

“I don’t really like large groups,” Roy explained. “I prefer the peace and quiet I can get in this party.”

“‘Peace and quiet’? With you-know-who around?”

“Fair point... I guess it *does* seem kind of strange now that I’m saying it out loud.” Not even Roy knew what he’d meant; when he’d tried to express his feelings, “peace and quiet” had simply sprung to mind.

Roy encountered trouble so much more frequently now that he was

working alongside Oken and Astirra—generally when Oken did something unexpected, which always brought about negative consequences.

Sometimes this took the form of altercations with less-than-savory individuals, and matters got rather dicey. Roy couldn't even remember how many incidents like that he'd needed to deal with over the past three months.

But not once had they made him want to leave the party.

"That said...I think I'm in the same boat," Astirra pondered. "I couldn't explain why for the life of me, though."

"You too? Hmm... I wonder why that is..."

"Strange, isn't it? I just can't figure it out..."

As the two contemplated the mystery, Astirra reached out to grab her teacup, wearing her usual smile. That was when they heard a restless thumping coming down the inn's hallway—footsteps. The pair had grown so used to the noise that they immediately recognized who was making it.

A short man threw open the wooden door, carrying a small bundle in the crook of his arm. "Roy! Astirra! Rejoice!" Oken declared, a broad grin spread across his face. "For us, today is a day worth celebrating! Feast your eyes on...*this!*"

"And what exactly *is...that?*" Astirra asked.

"I'll wager you that he threw away his coin on another useless purchase," Roy said.

In contrast to Oken, who was positively overjoyed about whatever he'd arrived with, his companions looked resigned at best.

"'Useless'? Far from it, my man!" Oken boomed. "Ask yourself: has anything I've purchased ever *not* helped us out of a pinch?"

"Yes," Roy said flatly. "On many occasions."

"A better question would be if *any* of your purchases have helped us," Astirra added.

Oken paused for a moment before clearing his throat. "Anyway, what I have with me today are items of critical importance to our party! We still haven't decided on a name, have we?"

"You mean for our party? What does that have to do with anything?"

Oken laughed knowingly. "You'll understand once you've seen...these!" He opened the bundle and pulled out three small goblets, silver in color, which he set on the table. "The Philosopher's Goblet—that shall be our name! It came to me when I saw these. It has a nice ring to it, wouldn't you agree?"

The pair examined the silver goblets in front of them. The metal was faded in an antique sort of way.

"Huh. That's...actually a rather decent suggestion, coming from Oken," Astirra said to Roy.

"I'm relieved to hear it's so normal," Roy agreed. "I thought he'd come up with something far more embarrassing."

"I *can* hear you, you know..." Oken grumbled. "But that aside, go ahead and take your pick of them. I *did* say I'd increase your shares of today's reward, so I'll even let you go first. Make sure you're careful with them, though; they're reasonably valuable, in case you couldn't tell."

"Of course. Thank you," Astirra said. "'Reasonably valuable,' hmm? Just how valuable do...you...?"

Astirra was suddenly struck by the feeling that something was terribly wrong. Oken was an extravagant man at the best of times. Sums that she found excessive were a pittance in his eyes, so if he considered the goblets "reasonably valuable," they must have really been...

"Um, hold on one moment, Oken. How much *were* these? And how does giving us first pick have anything to do with the larger shares you promised us? You aren't making any sense."

"How much *were* they? I've already told you, haven't I? They were reasonably expensive."

"Hand me our coin pouch for a moment." Astirra snatched the leather bag containing the party's commission payment from Oken. "Huh? Why is it so...light? Don't tell me you..."

She dropped the bag out of sheer surprise, and it landed on the wooden floor with barely a sound. Oken had *just* gone to collect their pay...so why was their coin pouch empty?

"Tell me I'm mistaken," Astirra said. "You couldn't have spent it *all* on..."

"On these goblets?" Oken asked. "Of course I did. Every last coin."

"Excuse me? Every coin? On *these*?"

"Hmph! Today is a day for us—for The Philosopher's Goblet—to commemorate! We can't let our celebrations be cheap and shoddy, can we? As first-rate individuals, our accoutrements must also be of preeminent quality." Oken picked up one of the silver goblets and examined it, absorbed in the act. There wasn't a trace of guilt in his expression.

For a moment, his two companions were at a loss for words—but then

Astirra chuckled darkly. “Oken. Were you perhaps unaware that our coin pouch contained essentially *all* our funds?”

“I see...” Roy hummed. “I guess this means we’ll be out on the street from tomorrow. Hmm.”

The two exchanged a look, then laughed humorlessly. The sound echoed through the room.

“Hmph, what’s there to be so worried about?” Oken asked. “Tomorrow’s concerns are for tomorrow—not that we have any! We can easily make back the amount I spent. In fact, we could make ten or a hundred times more! The sky’s the limit!”

Astirra’s shoulders began to tremble silently. “Truly, Oken, where *do* you get all that confidence?”

“It’s no use, Astirra,” Roy said, forcing a smile. “Honestly, we’re also to blame for letting him hold on to the pouch in the first place.”

“Why are you going so easy on him? If we don’t give him a proper scolding at times like this, he’ll never learn.”

Roy thought for a moment. “Well, when I weighed our chances of getting through to him, I figured it would be much easier to earn the money back.”

“I agree with you, but we earned so much today, and now we don’t even have enough for food. It’s ridiculous.”

“There’s no need to fret over tonight’s dinner, Astirra,” Oken interjected. “I’ve already ordered it from the inn’s chef. We’ll be feasting like kings!”

“No, that’s not the prob— Oh! Right! If we hurry and change the order to something more normal, we should be able to get some of our coin back, right?!”

“They have a no-cancellation policy. Besides, our dinner should be arriving any moment now.”

“Oh...”

The food was delivered to their room shortly afterward. Astirra breathed a small sigh as she stared at the most extravagantly luxurious meal she’d ever seen. “What’s going to happen to us now...?” Even the least astute observer would realize she was worried about their party’s complete lack of money.

“Ha! Isn’t it obvious?” Oken asked. “We’ll win so much fame—so much glory—that we’ll become the most renowned adventurer party on the continent! This is but an anticipatory celebration of our future deeds!

Now, let us dig in!"

"That...isn't what I meant..." Astirra grumbled, looking profoundly dissatisfied with how things had turned out. However, unwilling to cede all the food to Oken, who hadn't hesitated to get stuck in, she began to eat.

"Oh. This is good."

"Isn't it?" Oken said. "That's why I always tip the chefs—so they'll put their absolute all into preparing our food!"

"Wha—?! Since when have you been doing that?! And, ugh, as much as I hate to admit it, this is *really* good! I can't stop eating!
It's...so...delicious!"

"Isn't it so? I shall happily accept your gratitude, Astirra!"

"Oh, no. If I'm grateful to anyone, it most certainly isn't you."

"Come now, there's no need to be shy. There's nothing embarrassing about thanking me profusely for my magnificent genius!"

A muscle twitched in Astirra's temple.

Roy watched with a wry smile as the pair alternated between arguing and vigorously digging into their food. Why *was* he traveling with them, anyway? Their days together were fraught with problems, and while Astirra threw her hands up in frustration every time Oken dropped them in hot water, she was far from being a model companion. There had been more than a few occasions when she'd ended up in trouble and needed to be rescued.

Not that those incidents had been nearly as bad as the nonsense Oken caused.

Roy had never expected the cocksure magician to spend the entirety of their (rather considerable) reward in a single day. Because of that foolish decision, the party couldn't even afford the next day's food and accommodation. Unless something changed, they'd be camping in the wilderness and munching on leftover jerky before long.

But even then, Roy couldn't bring himself to blame Oken. He wondered why he felt so at ease.

Roy knew that his companion was right: they wouldn't have trouble earning even a hundred times as much as they'd made today. But that wasn't the reason he felt so calm. Thinking back, he realized that no good had ever come of letting Oken hold the party's coin pouch; the eccentric fool wasted their money on odd trinkets and curios time and time again. And every time he would insist, "We absolutely need this!"

Indeed, with Oken, it was always "we."

On extremely—*extremely*—rare occasions, some of Oken’s useless-seeming curios really had saved their lives. So even though his purchases always appeared to be junk, Roy and Astirra had continuously let them slide, recognizing that their companion was looking out for them in his own way.

But how could they turn a blind eye to today’s antics?

These tiny goblets wouldn’t be the slightest bit useful for adventuring. They were sturdy mithril cups and nothing more, good only for sharing a drink with friends. Oken had known that, yet he had still spent all of their money on them.

Unbeknownst to Roy and Astirra, Oken had also told a lie. A white lie, but a lie nonetheless. Earlier, when he had admitted to using all of their reward money to buy the goblets, that hadn’t been strictly accurate.

The reward money hadn’t been enough.

The handsome sum the three had managed to earn had come up noticeably short of the price of what Oken had wanted, so he had secretly sold several of his most precious pieces of equipment to make up the difference. Since the party’s funds hadn’t been enough, he had used up his own as well.

Oken had desperately wanted the three silver goblets because seeing them had given him the idea for their party’s name—a name that Roy still wasn’t sure about. Since there were only three cups, what would Oken do if their party gained or lost a member? He must not have thought it was a problem, likely because he hadn’t thought at all. The magician had parted with almost everything he’d owned to buy mere trinkets, all for the simple, foolish reason of wanting to celebrate his party’s formation. In his eyes, that was far more important than the high-quality equipment that kept him safe.

Roy couldn’t help but laugh. A slow, quiet chuckle erupted into a chortle of pure delight. This man sitting across the table from him was without a doubt a fool of the highest order, but he was a fool whom Roy had come to trust—probably more than anyone else he’d ever met, including those he’d grown up with back home. It was this realization of the change in his feelings that had spurred the laughter now surging up from within him.

“R-Roy?” Oken asked. “What’s wrong?” He and Astirra had paused their argument out of sheer surprise. They had never seen Roy like this before.

“It’s *your* fault, Oken,” Astirra snapped. “You made him so mad that he’s finally lost it.”

Roy struggled to keep his laughter in check as he said, “Sh-She’s right, Oken. *Snrk.* It’s all your fault! Guys like you are...are... Aha ha ha!”

“S-See?! He’s snapped, Oken! Quick, apologize!”

“A-Are you *sure* he’s angry? I mean, look at him.”

As the two stared in bewilderment, Roy took the silver goblets and stood up.

“R-Roy?” Oken asked. “What are you...?”

“After all the trouble you went through to get these, it’d be a shame if we didn’t use them, right? I’ll ask to wash them in the inn’s kitchen.”

“Ho ho! You’re absolutely right! I knew you’d be able to see reason, Roy! When you get back, we’ll toast to the founding of The Philosopher’s Goblet! See, Astirra? He isn’t mad at—”

“I’ll get us something to drink while I’m gone,” Roy continued. “In the meantime, Astirra, you should give Oken a proper scolding. He needs to learn what happens when he gets too carried away.”

“Of course. Leave it to me.”

“Huh? Um... Astirra?” Oken asked nervously. “Hello? Could you please not silently cast [Float] on me without warning? P-Please put me down.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but you’ll stay exactly where you are until Roy returns.”

“U-Um, Astir—*Miss* Astirra? I shall endeavor to reflect upon my hastiness in spending all our reward money without consulting either of you. So...please let me down? R-Roy! Say something to her!”

“You know...” Roy examined the goblets. “Now that I’m seeing these up close, there really are quite a few stains on them. It might take me a while to scrub them all out.”

“You heard him, Oken.”

“Ngh! How can you be so heartless when I asked you so respectfully? Fine, then! Such a cheap trick of a spell is no match for the arcane might of Oken, the genius magician!”

There was silence, and then—

“Um, please stop spinning me around. P-Please? Astirra? Don’t you think you’re going a little too far? Hello? Miss Astirra? Can you hear me?”

“Well, I’ll be back soon,” Roy said.

“See you then,” Astirra replied with a smile. “Please wash them

thoroughly, okay?" Then she returned to watching Oken spin through the air, not even attempting to hide her enjoyment.

A while later, when Roy returned with three spick-and-span goblets in hand, the trio shared a toast, and the three-man adventurer party known as The Philosopher's Goblet was born. It would only be three and a half years before they would make a name for themselves all across the continent by conquering medium-sized dungeons on a regular basis.

Extra Chapter: Part-Time Job as a Waitress

“Take a bottle of Arshe wine to table three. And be quick about it.”

“Yes, sir! Right away!”

Inside a trendy tavern known for serving light meals, a young woman with looks that drew the eye responded cheerfully to the owner’s quick instructions. Two years had passed since her fifteenth birthday—since she had awoken in the woods without any memories—and she still couldn’t remember anything about her past.

The owner had been suspicious of the young woman’s unusual tale but had eventually caved to her pleas for a job. Her suspicious origins aside, she was attractive and clean-looking—just the right sort to work as a waitress in an establishment catered toward customers who liked their alcohol on the expensive side.

It had quickly become clear that the young woman was clumsier than most; on her first day, she had somehow managed to break ten times more plates than the owner had expected. However, because she tried her best and excelled at remembering the customers’ faces, she quickly settled into the tavern and became popular with its patrons.

As for the young woman’s name, it was Astirra.

Astirra had shown genuine enthusiasm during her interview, and there was no denying that she worked hard. She was always ready and willing to learn new things, but when it came to remembering them...

“Hmm... Um, which table is number three again?”

“Do you seriously need to ask? The second one by the window near the door. And that black bottle you’re holding is *not* Arshe wine. Give a drink that strong to that particular customer and they’ll be passed out in minutes!”

“Oh! S-Sorry! U-Um, is it this one?”

“No, that one’s *even stronger*.”

“Er, this one?”

“Not...quite. That’s from a brewery in a nearby region. You’re close but still wrong.”

“Hmm... Then it must be *this one*, right?! Ah, oops.”

Astirra had confidently and enthusiastically thrust a large, dark bottle toward the tavern owner, hoping for his confirmation, only to lose her grip on it at the very last moment. The bottle fell to the ground—and for the third time that day, the sound of something breaking rang through the tavern.

The tavern owner tearfully apologized to the customers, then put on a kind smile and turned back to Astirra, who was frantically trying to clean up the mess she’d made. “That...was the most expensive drink we serve,” he said. “Hey, Astirra? After we close, I need to have a little word with you.”

“Y-You do? What about?”

From the reluctant look on the tavern owner’s face, Astirra already had a decent idea of what he wanted to discuss. She suspected it wasn’t going to be good news—and as it turned out, her guess was correct.



“Ugh... Fired from another job...”

After assuring Astirra that he sincerely appreciated the joy she’d brought to his establishment, the tavern owner had announced that he could no longer afford to keep her on. He had explained the situation as slowly and as carefully as he prepared the soup dish he took such great pride in.

Though he held Astirra’s enthusiasm in high regard, the more hours she spent working for his business, the deeper it stooped into the red. Her excessive clumsiness was the reason; a week ago, she had dropped so much tableware that the tavern had finally cycled through to an entirely new inventory.

As the tavern had gained notoriety for having a waitress with such a rare appearance, the number of male customers with ulterior motives had increased. From a business perspective, this was favorable, but Astirra’s antics had also earned the tavern a reputation as “the place where plates fly on a daily basis.” Perhaps just having her sit still would turn a profit, but the owner didn’t much care for the idea; his establishment was a place to enjoy food and drinks, not gawk at pretty girls.

And those had only been the start of the tavern owner’s problems. He had said that he wanted to keep her on but, in the same breath, went into excruciating detail about all the reasons she had to be let go.

Astirra was largely oblivious to her shortcomings, so as far as she was concerned, the owner's explanation made no sense. She thought she had done quite well over the past three months, sticking with the job even when the cost of all the broken plates had sometimes put her salary in the negatives. The truth was that she loved working at the tavern and wanted to stay there, but asking the owner to reconsider was no longer an option.

And so, in tears, Astirra had said thank you and farewell to the tavern owner before taking her leave.

“What should I do now...?”

Though she was now unemployed, Astirra wasn't particularly concerned—there were other ways she could make money. She was relatively well-known in the region's Adventurers Guilds as Astirra the Herb Hunter, and most of their employees recognized her on sight.

Thanks to her naturally superior senses of smell, taste, and hearing—as well as her keen instincts in general—Astirra could always find the rare herbs and plants she was looking for. Herb gathering was a specialty of hers, and she enjoyed doing it. She had even started to wonder whether it was her life's calling.

Nevertheless, Astirra preferred staying in towns and cities to being out in the mountains. As much as she enjoyed napping on the warm forest floor when the weather was nice, it didn't even begin to make up for the random monster attacks that always happened come nightfall.

Thus, Astirra had decided she would rather work in a town—in a modern, trendy store, if possible. She knew that wishing for more than that was the height of greed, but she particularly loved the thought of wearing something cute and frilly when serving customers, like the clothes she saw young ladies wearing on the streets from time to time.

In her quest to live her dream, Astirra had tried her hand at various careers. But no matter where she went, the result was always the same: another lost job and a blow to her confidence. Today was simply more of the same.

Still, Astirra had developed a special countermeasure for days like today when she was feeling down. Her feet were carrying her straight to the theater.

“I've wanted to see this play for so long...” she said, humming cheerfully.

Astirra had adored the theater ever since discovering the existence of plays and would even go on trips to other towns to watch whatever caught

her fancy. Her love of performances was why she never had any savings, but she didn't mind; it wasn't like she had anything else to spend her money on, and if she ever ran out, there were always herb-gathering commissions up for grabs at the guild.

For someone with Astirra's talents, finding herbs was easy—the mountains and the forest were teeming with them, and she knew how to find the ones that others always missed. She could make as much money as she wanted on a leisurely stroll, which was why she hadn't thought twice about returning to the theater and purchasing one of the most expensive seats.

“One, please. As close to the front as possible.”

She was unemployed once again. It was sad, but now that she had some time on her hands, there was only one thing to do.

Her resolve steeled, Astirra took her ticket from the clerk. Life had its hard and sad times, but here at the theater, she could put all that aside and just have fun. It probably helped that she wasn't actually that down about losing the job in the first place.

At long last, she stepped into the theater...

...and the next thing she knew, the play was over. The time had positively flown by.

“I'm glad I came,” she said wistfully under her breath. “I really am. But...”

Astirra wanted a friend with whom she could share these experiences. She didn't have anyone to ask, though—nor would she ever—so she pushed the minor complaint from her thoughts, focusing instead on the satisfaction of having come to see a play.

Then, she decided to do a little something to refresh her spirits. She strode toward the nearest Adventurers Guild.

“Right! Just you wait, herbs! Astirra's coming for you!”

Wearing a cheerful smile and with her favorite lines from the play she had just watched dancing around in her head, Astirra began scouring the commission board for her usual work.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing this book. It was because of your support that *I Parry Everything* managed to reach its fourth volume.

As well as a revised version of the original manuscript, this volume contains two completely new stories: “The War between Saint and Demon” and “The Philosopher’s Goblet.” Initially, neither one was going to be included in this volume. In fact, I never planned to write them at all. My manuscript for this volume was going to include everything until the end of the web version’s second arc—a grand endeavor, to be sure, but one I was sure I could manage. You can imagine my surprise when I checked the final character count and realized that I’d written so much more than I’d anticipated. And when I nervously passed my work along to my editor, my fears were confirmed:

“This is too much to fit into a single volume.”

For a while, we were caught in this strange limbo of *maybe* being able to squeeze everything in if we pushed the boundaries enough but also not standing a chance. Then, following some discussion, the decision was made to divide what I’d written into two volumes. This sounded great, but then we had the opposite problem: this book that had initially been bursting at the seams now had a good amount of unused space.

As an author, I should have been reflecting on my mistake of completely upending our plans for the manuscript, but I was rejoicing on the inside when I asked my editor whether I could add two additional stories as a bonus. The web versions hadn’t been as fleshed out as I wanted, and they wouldn’t have been long enough to fill an entire volume, so I’d started to accept that the rest of the story floating around in my head would never be published. They were barely skeletons when the opportunity to include them in this volume appeared, but I was so overjoyed that I threw myself into giving them a proper form.

So yeah, the two stories were meant to be minor bonuses added to the end of the volume. Emphasis on “meant to be.” Somehow, writing them went better than expected, and they ended up being around nine thousand and twenty-five thousand characters, respectively. To give you some perspective, when I was writing the web version, I never uploaded a single

part that was longer than twenty-five thousand characters. (Some readers even considered nine thousand to be a bit much for a part.) I was worried about how these longer stories might be received...but I was confident in what I'd written. This was especially true for "The Philosopher's Goblet." Readers loved the web version (I think), so as an author, I wanted to add scenes to supplement it. I'm glad that I did, especially because it gave us such powerful illustrations from Kawaguchi-sensei.

If my editor hadn't been so flexible, I doubt either of these stories would have seen the light of day. So while I regret making the original manuscript for this volume so insanely long, I couldn't be more pleased with how things turned out.

There's so much more I want to discuss here, like Roy's and young Oken's character designs...but as I've already written so much, the most I'll say is this: Kawaguchi-sensei, from the bottom of my heart, thank you for your fantastic work.

And to KRSG-sensei—once again, you have my sincerest gratitude for your work on the manga adaptation. You depict every scene with such breathtaking clarity. I consider your depiction of Zadu one of the greatest parts of my 2021; his languid manner of speaking is amazing. When I first received the initial draft, I thought, "*This is exactly what I wanted to see!*" Thank you so much. It was amazing.

(Though I'm providing editorial supervision for the manga, like an excited reader, I'm always on the edge of my seat waiting for the next installment.)

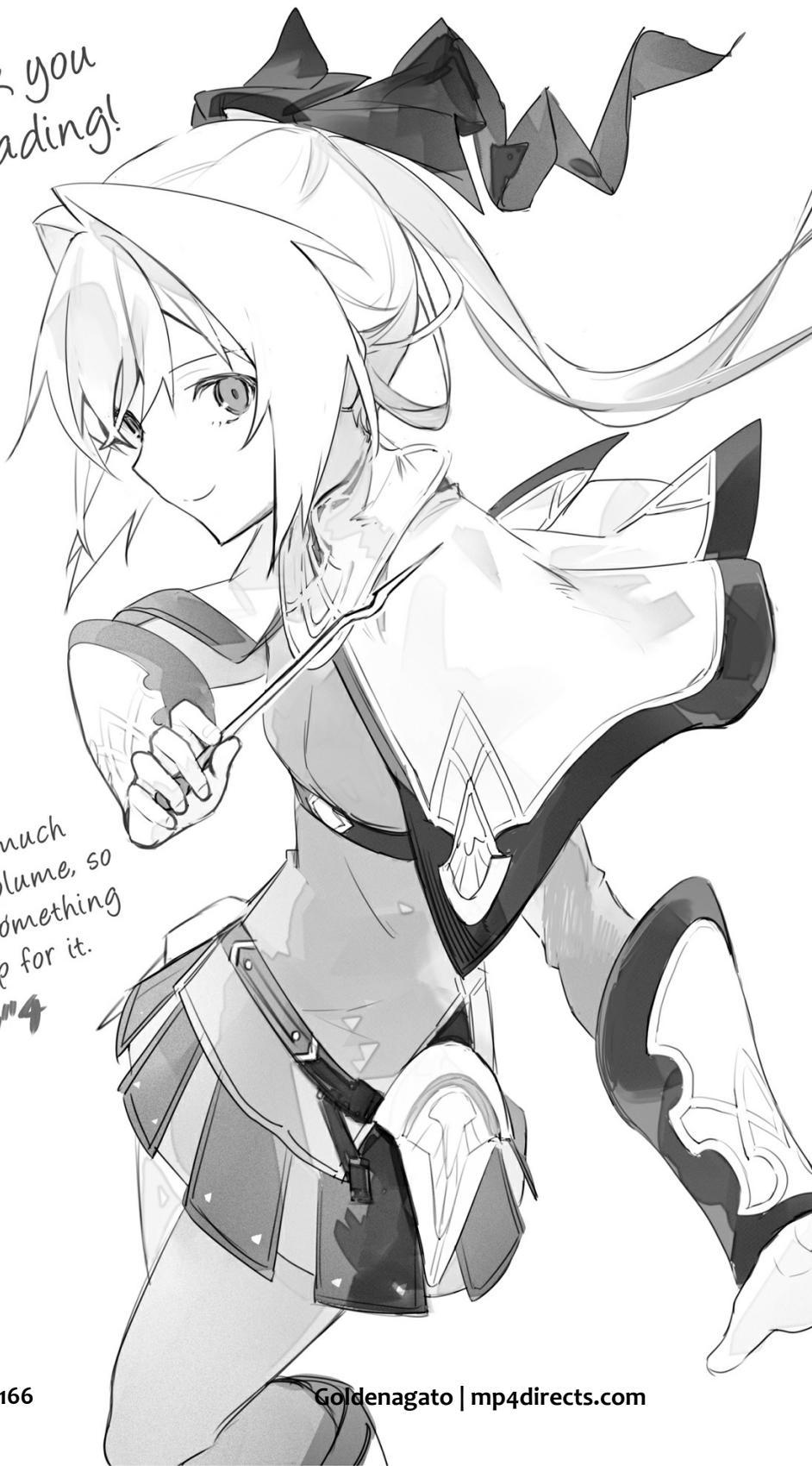
We're moving into the climax of the Holy Theocracy Arc, so please continue to lend this series your support.

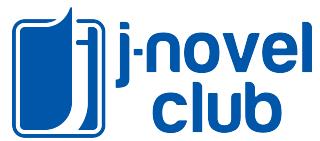
Nabeshiki

Thank you
for reading!

There wasn't much
Lynne in this volume, so
here's a little something
to make up for it.

tiny "4





Sign up for our mailing list at J-Novel Club to hear about new releases!

[Newsletter](#)

And you can read the latest chapters (like Vol. 5 of this series!) by becoming a J-Novel Club Member:

[J-Novel Club Membership](#)