



BLADE & BASTARD

—Dungeon Chronicle—

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Illustrations by so-bin



**“We’re
Sahm-and-
Rahm.”**

Two twins,
each with
their face
divided
down the
middle,
spoke in
turn.

**“We’re
Rahm-and-
Sahm.”**



Rabbit teeth filled
her vision, bizarrely
sharp. They were
getting closer.

The moment she
thought that, the
rabbit had already
sprung. Yeah, it was
a rabbit. Of course it
could jump. But her
thoughts couldn't
keep up with reality.

“Ah.”

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
ALL-STARS

CHAPTER 2
RING OF DEATH

CHAPTER 3
INTELLIGENT SWORD

CHAPTER 4
SHIP IN A BOTTLE

CHAPTER 5
RUBBER DUCK

CHAPTER 6
**POOL OF CLEAR
BLUE WATER**

Table of Contents

1. [Cover](#)
2. [Color Illustrations](#)
3. [Jnovels](#)
4. [Chapter 1: All-Stars](#)
5. [Chapter 2: Ring of Death](#)
6. [Chapter 3: Intelligent Sword](#)
7. [Chapter 4: Ship in a Bottle](#)
8. [Chapter 5: Rubber Duck](#)
9. [Chapter 6: Pool of Clear Blue Water](#)
10. [Afterword](#)
11. [Bonus Textless Images](#)
12. [About J-Novel Club](#)
13. [Copyright](#)



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Chapter 1 All-Stars

The town of Scale was like a calm sea.

The wind blew at times, and there were even storms, but they would pass as if they had never been. Only the daily hustle and bustle continued on.

That was true of the demon horde, which had never even come to the public's attention, as well as the uproar with the red dragon, which most definitely had. Those incidents had left lotus flowers floating on the surface of Scale's glassy pool, but no more than that.

Heroes would always be treated like heroes, but their praises were only sung far and wide for a time...

And when it came to the thief who was their companion, he never drew any public attention at all.

The boy ran down the main street of Scale again today. No one gave him any trouble.

As far as Raraja was concerned, that was something to be grateful for—any thief who stood out from the crowd was inexperienced at best. He was happy he could avoid standing out, certainly, but *acting* happy about that would just be childish.

Hold on. I am a kid.

That was why he did his best not to swagger. He took care to walk no differently than he normally did. Still, if someone who knew better had been looking—Moradin, for instance—they wouldn't have been able to keep from grinning.

This was how a truly experienced thief ought to be, and Raraja aspired to rise to those heights.

He was heading toward a shop with a sign that bore the gracefully arching tail of a cat—Catlob's Trading Post. There was a small placard on the door declaring the trading post “open.”

This business was frequented by many adventurers, yet despite its success, it was always incredibly quiet. Only that small sign on the door indicated it was open for business. However, Raraja had never once seen it flipped to the “closed” side. He wasn’t even sure it *had* one.

“Hey, I’m here.”

He opened the door without hesitation, but that shop—which was like a shady den—greeted him with nothing but silence. There was no sign of anyone else being there.

But that’s just how it feels.

In this shop packed tightly with arms and equipment (similar to a burial chamber in the dungeon), one man was always present. If you looked for him, there he was. But *only* if you looked for him. And no one would do that if they didn't already know he was there.

As expected, there he was behind the register, melding with the shadows. He wasn't even dampening his presence. It was as if he'd been there all along, like one of the shelves or armor stands.

After calling out to him, Raraja casually hopped over the counter and joined him in the back of the shop. Only at this point did Mr. Catlob turn his unseeing eyes toward the boy.

"So you've come."

Had he been polishing an item, maintaining his collection, or doing something else entirely? Raraja didn't know what Catlob got up to behind the counter, and he did his best not to pry. Raraja was forthright, but he always felt the need to remain respectful—or perhaps wary. He was here to learn something, after all.

"Well then, here is what I have for you today," Catlob said, pulling out a box. He set it down with a heavy clunk.

It was the unassuming sort of chest one might find in the dungeon. Trap included.

Did Catlob deal in such things here?

Raraja had once asked, and he'd been told, "It's for sale." The elf had then added, "But I couldn't put a price on it."

Catlob turned to Raraja. "Take all the time with it you need. And watch the shop for me while you do."

"Yeah, yeah..."

In short, this was Raraja's lesson—and also his tuition.

The boy couldn't object to that. He was being allowed to learn how to open chests in a safe environment, with direction. He couldn't have asked for a better arrangement. If he had to watch the shop or stock shelves in exchange, he would gladly pay the price.

And while Raraja was working, Catlob could go into the back of the shop to do whatever he liked.

Raraja lifted the treasure chest—a heavy one—up onto the counter and immediately set to work on it. Of course, he used the thieves' tools he'd fashioned for himself while under Catlob's direction.

According to Catlob, that was just how thieves' tools were. "You'll find picks in the dungeon at times, but they're only good for dealing with

poison needle traps.”

In the end, a successful thief was measured by how quick he was with his hands, as well as the knowledge and experience he’d put into his skills and tools. But obviously, there was more to Raraja’s arrangement at Catlob’s than merely poking at treasure chests—or dealing with customers.

For instance, one day, an ordinary, run-of-the-mill adventurer had entered the dimly lit trading post.

“Welcome.”

Was he a fighter? It was hard to remember. Raraja’s focus had been fixed on the treasure chest, not the customer.

“I want to sell some items.”

“Sure thing... There!”

It went without saying, but Raraja could not identify items, nor could he appraise them. And yet, even *his* eyes had widened at the ring this customer placed on the counter.

No, it was not so much the ring that had stunned him—it was the words Catlob murmured.

“That’s a Ring of Healing. I can take it off your hands for one hundred fifty thousand gold.”

“One hundred fifty—!”

The boy glanced at Catlob, but the dour elf showed no reaction. Did that mean this sort of trade was nothing out of the ordinary here? Maybe here in Scale—and for a magic ring, no less—such a price was within the realm of possibility.

The customer took note of Raraja’s awkward reaction, then curtly said, “If you would, please.”

Now that he’d asked, Raraja would have to comply. The boy took bags of gold from behind the register, counted them twice to be sure he had the amount correct, and then laid the money out on the counter.

Even though Raraja was weak at math, this was a calculation that even he could manage. Fifteen bags. He couldn’t possibly mess it up.

The man nodded, and the deal was done. Raraja reached for the ring.

If there was any failure on the boy’s part, it was that, for the briefest of instants, he took his eyes off the man.

“H-Huh?!?”

A moment later, the man, the ring, and the money sacks were suddenly gone. In short, the customer had been a thief, a swindler, or something of the sort, but Raraja only found out after the fact.

Catlob didn't seem upset. "It's a common tactic," he explained.

"He's probably back at the tavern by now," said Raraja.

It wouldn't do them any good to go looking for the man—or so Catlob had said. No one would know that adventurer or where he'd gone. And even if they ventured to Durga's Tavern and started searching, they'd never recognize him.

"They like to call my shop a rip-off joint," said Catlob, "but there are enough of his sort too."

Oh jeez!

The most vexing thing about the situation was that Raraja knew he wouldn't be able to find the guy. His face had already slipped from the boy's memory—it was as if he'd never visited the shop at all.

One hundred fifty thousand gold. What a massive loss. Raraja felt terrible about it.

Fortunately, it was also a price that could be repaid—for an adventurer in Scale, that is. Still, he shuddered to think about what Orlaya would say if she ever heard about this blunder. He couldn't tell Iarumas or Berkanaan, or even Garbage for that matter.

Speaking of Garbage...

"So that sword's really special, huh?"

Raraja was talking about that old sword she'd picked up who knows where. That redhead, doglike girl had been swinging it around like an ordinary longsword, but it was clear that the thing was magical in some way. Orlaya's eyes had widened when she'd first seen it, and even Iarumas had been surprised.

Yeah, even *Iarumas*.

The arms and equipment that lay sleeping in the dungeon were the stuff of myth—or rather, it would be more accurate to say the stuff of legend. However, that sword had seemed to stand out, even in such incredible company.

Hrathnir, was it?

He didn't envy Garbage for it, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't dream of such things. Every boy, at some point in his life, had dreamed of drawing a sword that would make him a hero.

Thinking about it now, ever since that adventure, Iarumas had reduced the frequency at which he delved into the dungeon to collect corpses. It wasn't as if something had changed about him—there wasn't some kind of problem. Lately, however, the man would just sit silently in the tavern.

Of course, that was the reason Raraja now had time to train like this. He wasn't about to complain.

I guess it just means Iarumas is human—like the rest of us.

Even as he focused intently on the locks in front of him, Raraja's mind would sometimes wander to other things. It wasn't that he lacked a suitable sense of tension. He was focusing. No, he'd just been taught that it was important to separate his mind from his hands. After all, staying in front of a lock, completely immersed in his work even as an alarm sounded, would be no laughing matter.

Analyzing the condition of his allies and the state of the dungeon—thinking about how the party would continue exploring and discussing options with his comrades. All of this was also part of his training.

Raraja's drifting mind suddenly returned to focus on one thing in particular: a sword that Catlob had apparently been asked to perform maintenance on.

The thick blade had felled who knows how many monsters, and yet it was not even slightly tarnished. Frankly, that made it all the more terrifying. This sword, as sharp and cold as moonlight, seemed to proclaim that man was just another beast before its might.

And the name of that frightful blade was...

“Were Slayer...?”

“You knew?” Catlob murmured.

“Mm-hmm,” Raraja answered vaguely.

Were Slayer—a magic sword that was most effective against lycanthropes and beastmen. Raraja had heard that, among the best adventurers who delved into the dungeon, many fighters relied upon such a blade as their weapon of choice.

However, this particular Were Slayer drew his attention because *he knew it well.*

“That’s Sezmar’s sword, isn’t it?”

“You can tell?”

“Well, after all the times I’ve seen it... Yeah.”

The six adventurers who had made the most headway in exploring the dungeon were known as the All-Stars. Their leader, Sezmar, was one fine specimen of a man, and he was the fighter who wielded this Were Slayer.

There’d been no talk of him having died—no rumors about him having to sell off his sword to pay for a resurrection after a party wipe. If any of that had happened, news would’ve made it all around town before Raraja

heard from them directly.

Which meant...

“Did he find himself a new weapon or something?” asked Raraja.

Catlob shook his head. “No, that’s not it. This is simply routine maintenance.” He held Were Slayer up to the light, testing its blade by running his finger along the edge.

Raraja had no idea what kind of maintenance a magical sword could possibly require.

“He sometimes goes to the first level with only a regular sword and armor,” Catlob explained further. “I hold on to it for him when he does.”

“Huh?”

This was of even greater interest to Raraja.

What does he do that for?

He would have understood if they’d been talking about Iarumas, but couldn’t imagine why one of the All-Stars would need to do such a thing.

Was it for training purposes? Treasure hunting? Or perhaps to search for dead bodies...

It was unclear whether Catlob sensed what the boy was thinking, but he remained focused on the magical blade as he spoke in a dispassionate tone. “Do you remember your first delve into the dungeon?”

“Me? Uh...”

What was it like?

Raraja couldn’t remember.

He had only a vague recollection of life before coming to this town. The details and timeline were a little fuzzy, though the outlines of events floated through his memory like bubbles until they burst.

But the days after that...after Goerz (rest his soul in the city of death) and his gang got their hands on him—that part of his memory had been blotted out.

Maybe something had happened, but he didn’t have the emotional space to remember it.

Hearing this, Catlob replied, “I see.” He nodded, then said, “It seems *he* does remember, though.”

§

The end of the world.

The deepest dungeon.

Monsters that overflow from the depths.

A witch's cauldron.

A crucible of chaos.

What even is a crucible anyway?

A young knight wearing pristine armor—not a scratch in sight—mused to himself as he gazed upon a certain scene. The sight of it was even more incredible than the stories described.

It was Scale.

The records depicted Scale as a small, cold village, and there was very little written about it in the ledgers of the tax collectors, but it looked nothing like that now.

High walls rose over a chaotic mess of streets. People milled about, even after the sun went down, in this town that never slept. The scene reflected in young Sezmar's eyes spoke of a world that could be described with one word: prosperity.

"Well, this sure is a...lively place we've come to."

The towns of his homeland seemed like backwater nothing. Even the castle town paled in comparison. This was the boomtown given life by dungeon gold—Scale.

Sezmar had never seen so many people in one place before, not even at the jousting tournaments or in mock battles...

"Hey, hey, we can't have you gawking like some kind of tourist."

"Though, it's not like we expect you'll have the chance to do anything here."

As Sezmar raised the visor on his helmet and looked around, the knights riding past jeered at him.

It hadn't been long since he'd received his golden spurs. Now, he was no longer a mere squire, but a title alone didn't make him a real knight. Sezmar understood that quite well, and although their attitudes upset him, he was not dissatisfied with his place in the world.

"I'll be sure to relax and enjoy Scale enough for all of your sakes too," Sezmar said to the knights.

"You ass!"

Under the leaden sky of Scale, he let out a laugh as jolly as a pure blue day.

There were the Silver Wolf Knights, the Swordfrost Knights, the Tiger Cub Knights, and the Pelican Knights. This path wasn't restricted to only men—women's orders of knighthood existed too, such as the Laurel Knights and the Rose Lady Knights.

Those assembled here were one hundred of the best of the best—knights known throughout the whole of Llylgamyn.

No one felt even remotely worried. It wasn't complacency on their part. They understood that it would be dangerous to face the monsters they'd heard of. They knew that some would die.

Even with that knowledge, the knights' hearts danced at the prospect of adventure.

No knight anywhere in the world had ever battled a dragon before. Fighting evil wizards, putting down demons, searching for holy blades—it had all become the stuff of legend long, long ago, yet they grasped at the opportunity to throw themselves into one of those legends.

Morale was high. They were prepared. It was time to show the results of their regular training—a chance to test themselves.

"I would've liked some more cooperation from the Church of Fang, but who knows what they're plotting."

"Hey, once we show what we can do in battle, people will see that we're better than those occultists."

"Don't underestimate them. They were the ones who mapped the shallow floors for us."

"Right. First we'll need to clear out the first level and build ourselves a base of operations there."

"The place seems to be made up of multiple burial chambers. In a way, this will be like storming a castle."

"If there are gate houses, we could pour that burning water into them..."

"Maybe it would be better to just break down the walls?"

"Before we talk about that, we need to consider provisions. It wouldn't do for us to take logistics lightly."

The more than a hundred knights set up camp outside the dungeon at the edge of town. All of them got to work, preparing to go forward.

And so, as the sun shone down through the clouds and made their armor sparkle, they formed ranks and marched into the dungeon.

The knights were all highly capable. Without a doubt, they were among the finest the surface had to offer. They had equipment, determination, preparation, comrades, trust, hope, and courage.

They lacked just one thing...

Knowledge of the dungeon.

It would still be some time before word got out that entering with a group of greater than six...meant death.

§

“P-Please, s-somebody, it hurts... Treat me!”

“Waaah... Ahhhhhh...”

The noble knights were soon defeated. They fled.

The wounded were hauled, moaning, back to camp.

People had been cut to pieces through their armor, and the crushed metal edges tore into their flesh, opening up even more wounds.

Some crawled back with their bodies half dissolved by slime; some returned with bodies swollen dark red from exposure to poison. Manly men wept pitifully like children. That was how bad it was.

The straw mats were already covered with casualties, and there was nowhere to lay the newcomers except in the gaps between them.

Sezmar sat on a camp stool and let out a deep sigh.

“We got lucky again today...”

No one had actually died.

Even for a man as jovial as Sezmar, the work of going out into the wasteland to dig holes to bury his comrades in was still depressing.

The army bishops now held funeral services more often than worship of the divine. They no longer had time for individual burials—instead, they piled their dead into shared graves.

It's a bit too cramped, both for the living and the dead. Who could rest in peace here?

The Temple of Cant—those followers of the god Kadorto—were nowhere to be seen. Most knights who served the royal family worshipped the goddess who protected their country. They would be ashamed to borrow the power of those who preached transmigration and the resurrection of the dead...

Not that I really get their resistance to the idea. We can use all the help we can get.

Still, it wasn't like Sezmar didn't understand his fellow knights' feelings, though.

“I mean, resurrection does cost an awful lot,” he mused to himself before punctuating the statement with a laugh.

How many gold coins did it take to resurrect a single knight? The funds of the knightly orders were taken from their domains. Their coffers weren't as flush with cash as the common people liked to fantasize, so they couldn't spend what they had frivolously. In every sense, they had to look

at things realistically, or else their entire enterprise would fall apart.

That was why the knightly orders lacked the kind of clever fools who thought they might be able to conquer the dungeon using their own wits. Knights would build on their experiences, slowly but surely piecing together a foolproof plan to overcome the dungeon.

Large groups were out of the question. They'd have to go in with smaller numbers.

Even if the knights poured oil into the burial chambers and lit them aflame, such tactics would barely harm (damage) the mythic monsters that resided within. Even orcs shrugged off natural fire like it was nothing. If anything, the knights were more likely to burn themselves with their own flames.

Obviously, tactics developed to fight men were of no use against monsters.

It would have been fine if they could've just plundered the dungeon of its riches, but the traps on treasure chests proved to be another obstacle.

As they sallied forth again and again, only to beat yet another hasty retreat, the looks in the knights' eyes changed. No one tried to help them.

Battles with monsters caused their numbers to dwindle, their supplies to run out, and their reputations to be tarnished, until finally, all that remained was a defeated remnant of what had once been.

Perhaps they might have been on more stable footing if not for their first loss, which had dealt them a devastating, crippling blow.

What even was that...?

Sezmar didn't know what'd happened to the vanguard. None of the other knights knew either.

No one had returned to tell the tale.

As the knights pushed onward through a process of trial and error, their losses built up and always managed to outstrip whatever progress they managed to gain. It wasn't just that they were falling in the dungeon. The number of knights who were just choosing to defect had also begun to noticeably rise.

Sezmar wouldn't denounce their choice as cowardice. Each knight had their own family—their own domain. For some of them, the lives of those who depended on them, or other such circumstances, might have been more important.

Besides, Sezmar still hadn't set foot inside the dungeon.

But...

Yeah, that's not happening.

Sezmar rose from his seat. He stepped over one of the wounded with an “Oops, excuse me,” then tread carefully through the gaps between the patients, approaching a small—but still very thick—figure.

“High Priest Tuck.”

“What’s up, Sezmar?”

The old man with a soft beard covering his stony face looked up at the fighter. Sezmar liked this dwarven bishop who’d decided to stick with the knights.

If you considered their respective service records, there was no way Sezmar should have been able to strike up a conversation with the dwarf so casually, but...

“We’re all in the same boat here—rank or career doesn’t change that. But if you were the one in charge of accounting, I’d act *real* polite,” the bishop had once said, laughing and slapping Sezmar’s lower back like he was clapping him on the shoulder.

Even now, the eyes behind that beard were narrowed with a smile. It wasn’t a gaze that said, *Oh, look, the fledgling knight’s finally found the gumption to turn tail and run away.*

Proud to see that others had also recognized his courage, Sezmar gestured outside the camp with his chin.

“I’ve got something to talk to you about. Think you can come with me for a bit?”

“Gladly,” High Priest Tuck agreed with a nod. “I found a good spot recently. Would you mind if we went there?”

“I can always count on your taste, High Priest,” Sezmar replied, also nodding. Quickly, he added, “We’ll go halves on the drinks.”

§

“Here’s what I need,” Sezmar began.

He was enjoying the food and drink at the place High Priest Tuck had picked—Durga’s Tavern. There was cold beer and steaming-hot meat. Both were to Sezmar’s satisfaction.

Adventurers gathered at the tavern, but that didn’t seem like the only reason business was booming.

“When it comes down to it, I need people who are good at sleight of hand.”

“Magicians and thieves, huh?” High Priest Tuck muttered. Foam from

his beer clung to his beard. “From the look on your face, it seems you’ve already got a priest.”

“You bet I do,” Sezmar replied with a nod, taking a swig from his own mug. A satisfying chill rolled down his throat. They didn’t have booze this good at the knights’ camp. Sezmar let out a sigh, staring hard at the mug in his hand. “This stuff sure is well chilled.”

“I’m sure the tavern’s got a mage on staff.”

“I’m jealous...” Sezmar murmured sullenly. “The knights sure don’t.”

“You’re right; they don’t. You won’t be able to get through to the knights.” High Priest Tuck reached for another piece of meat—he tore into it and even licked the bone clean. “No one there is going to listen to what you have to say.”

“Because I’m a novice?”

“Nah.” High Priest Tuck discarded the bone on the table and shook his head, which was like a craggy rock that had seen many long years. “No one really wants to delve into the dungeon anymore.”

Anyone with the will to challenge the dungeon had died in the first battle—and not just because they’d been struck down. There had been many waiting behind those who’d fallen, all filled with the determination to triumph. But then they saw that hope crushed before their very eyes.

Having seen the abyss of the dungeon from which none had returned, few had been able to stay true to their convictions. Those who had been able had gone forth in the second or third group. All of them had died too.

The only ones remaining either lacked the courage to run away or were in no position to do so. They only prayed that their turn wouldn’t come before someone gave the order to retreat.

Sezmar fell silent for a moment, but when he opened his mouth, his tone was cheerful and easygoing. “Well, if that’s how it is, I’m fine with it. It’s not like I want to change the knights. What I want is to take on the dungeon myself.”

“Oh?”

“So, yeah...” Sezmar crossed his arms, looking up to the ceiling as if hoping to find his next words there. The back of the chair groaned with protest under his weight.

Dwarves were known for their patience. High Priest Tuck made use of that skill and let Sezmar ponder for as long as he pleased.

“I’ll be a free knight,” Sezmar concluded nonchalantly. He would strike out from his order, becoming a wandering knight without liege or domain.

High Priest Tuck let out a hearty laugh at the contrast between Sezmar's determination and casual manner. "You're still going to call yourself a knight?"

"Yeah, of course." Sezmar laughed. "If I have to pick between being a fighter who made it through the dungeon or a knight who made it through, then being a knight is obviously cooler."

"Now you'll need to find yourself some comrades."

"A mage and a thief," said Sezmar. "And people to fight in the front row too..."

Sezmar counted them off on his fingers. This was really fun. Just thinking about it brought a smile to his face. Strangely, even after seeing all the dead and wounded, Sezmar wasn't scared. He didn't want to worry about that kind of stuff until just before he himself died.

"It's three in the front row, and three in back, right?" asked Sezmar.

"Well, there's no need to rush things," the aged dwarf said, his wrinkled face wrinkling even further. "If all you need is *four more people*, I think we can find that many here in town."

Sezmar nodded. The stray dog at his feet was gnawing on table scraps.

§

They managed to round up three people.

Now the five of them stood idly before the great hole, gouged into the earth in the wasteland at the edge of town.

"So, that means it's me, the high priest, and..."

"Me in the front row, huh? Yikes... Maybe I drew the short straw this time."

As the rhea thief scowled theatrically, the elf girl clicked her tongue.

"What? You want me to stand in the front row, then?" This girl, who called herself Sarah, wore a priest's garb. Her ears, long like bamboo leaves, were shaking angrily, but the way she moved was actually quite skillful.

In Sezmar's estimation, she had probably learned some self-defense.

But...

"If you're going to ask me to slug it out with monsters in this outfit, I'm going elsewhere!" she exclaimed, spreading her arms for them to look at her. She wasn't carrying so much as a knife.

Judging only by her appearance, you might assume that she was a mage of some sort. Or, if you weren't feeling charitable, maybe just an ordinary

village girl.

Sezmar could only smile wryly at the look she was giving him—it was definitely a glare.

“I doubt we’ll be asking that of you,” he said. “Not unless we get real desperate.”

“I should hope not,” came a cynical mutter from beside Sarah. The slender man with his body wrapped in a cloak couldn’t be mistaken for anything but a mage. “I’m ill-suited for such acts of barbarity. I have no desire to get my hands dirty.”



This man, who had briefly introduced himself as Prospero, gave an exaggerated shrug.

Sarah took exception to this overly theatrical gesture. “Then what’d you even come to this dungeon for, huh?” she snapped.

“Even if I were to explain, I doubt you would understand.”

The elf’s face—still beautiful, even now that members of her race were no longer long-lived—flashed with anger.

Those two were clearly not going to be getting along. Sezmar rolled his eyes. “Just checking, but...we put together a group of good-aligned folks, right?”

“I’m more neutral, actually,” the rhea said with a snicker. His name was Moradin, and he wasn’t even attempting to hide his smirk. Members of his race were peaceful and easygoing by nature, but they were cowards—or so Sezmar had heard. They saw living the quiet life in the *burrows* of their homeland as a virtue.

This basically meant that, nine times out of ten, any rhea found outside his homeland was an eccentric. Although, considering that Moradin wanted to challenge the dungeon, that went without saying...

Sezmar exchanged a look with High Priest Tuck. The aged dwarven bishop gazed at the four of them as though they were radiant. “Oh, it’s just because you’re all so youthful, Sezmar.”

Of course, good and evil were just handy labels. As for a dividing line between them, well...it was probably whether a person believed in the mother goddess of the land or not.

But even that wasn’t absolute.

As long as I think I can work with them...

Ultimately, High Priest Tuck had picked them out, and Sezmar had called them to the tavern entirely on the strength of that judgment. And now, they stood assembled.

The mage who had been grumbling to himself as he heated up and cooled down food in the back of the tavern.

The priest, just getting her start, who had been about to unleash a spell on a drunkard who’d harassed her.

And the thief, who’d rushed over when he’d heard trouble and had tried to smooth things over.

Sezmar was regretting it a little now. Back then, he’d really thought they might all get along.

“You’re no exception, you know?” said High Priest Tuck.

“Yeah, I know...”

Sezmar didn’t have any comeback to that. He was another who had been up to High Priest Tuck’s standards.

Oh, whatever! Sezmar liked to think that one of his best attributes was how fast he could change gears. He was going to be entrusting his life to these people from now on, and complaining about them wasn’t going to do anything to raise his chances of survival.

“All right,” he said, looking around at each of them once more. “It’ll be me, the high priest, and uhh...Moradin in the front row. I’m counting on you guys.”

High Priest Tuck nodded. “I will do as you ask.”

“Aye, aye,” said Moradin. “Well, I’ll do my best—at least, as long as it doesn’t get me killed.”

“Sarah and Prospero, you focus on spellcasting. We won’t let the enemy through.” Sezmar left the “if we can avoid it” unsaid.

The elf girl gave him a begrudging nod. “Yeah, we’ll do that, sure.”

“Hey,” Prospero interjected, “what do we do if the enemy’s behind us?”

Sezmar answered with a sharp voice, like a drill sergeant. “We’ll have to run past each other and switch rows.”

Prospero sighed. “Please, hurry up and find us another guy who can fight.”

Sezmar smiled. It was said that a mage’s words would come true, so that was a good omen. *I’m glad he’s got a complaint that assumes we’ll survive long enough for there to be a next time!*

“So...” Sezmar turned to Moradin. “I hear there’s a theory about how to do dungeon exploration.”

Moradin nodded. “Yeah. Not that it guarantees we’ll be safe or anything.” The thief, an expert in buttering people up, had been going around to anyone with experience and gathering information. “You go down the stairs. Go straight. Enter the first burial chamber. Fight. Return. And that’s it.”

“That’s it?” Sarah’s eyes widened. After a pause, she asked again. “That’s all?”

“What? I’m serious,” Moradin snapped at her, feeling as if his work had been disrespected. “If you doubt me, then go ask the other adventurers in the tavern for yourself.”

“It’s not that I doubt you...” Sarah mumbled with a guilty look. “It was

just a bit of a letdown.”

Sezmar, however, felt differently. He and the dwarf exchanged glances.

“Y’know, High Priest...”

“Neither of us had heard that...”

Charging into the enemy stronghold, only to return after a single battle. That would have been unthinkable for the knights. The idea was utterly foreign to military strategy.

And so...

That’s why they all got killed.

This was the dungeon. They couldn’t go on acting like it was a battlefield.

We’ve gotta change the way we’ve been doing things anyway.

Sezmar nodded. He slipped the white helmet he was holding onto his head. It was an heirloom with a dragon motif. The sword at his waist and his shield were also masterpieces produced by a famous smith.

Of course, the knights who had challenged the dungeon before him and died would have been outfitted with items of similar quality, but he did his best to put that inconvenient fact out of his mind.

“Let’s go,” he said, lowering his visor. There was a metallic clank as he fastened it in place.

“To start off, we’ll try doing it just like you said.”

§

“Whoa...” Sezmar groaned involuntarily as he took his first step.

The stonework corridor spread out before his eyes. There were walls and a floor, and that was it. He couldn’t imagine that there was any light source, but somehow, he could still faintly see a few steps ahead.

But the dungeon was different. It was like another world—another dimension—sucking him in.

The pressure in the air—the stench—the sensation of standing on the ground—the sounds entering his ears. *Something* was different.

As Sezmar’s breathing grew shallow, he came to a halt. A powerful hand slapped him on the lower back.

“What’s wrong, young’un?” High Priest Tuck said with his low, deep voice. “Trembling with anticipation?”

“Probably,” Sezmar replied, forcing himself to smile beneath the helmet.

His iron boots clanked as he stamped on the floor, and then he put his

hand on the wall.

They were there all right.

The floor and the walls—it wasn't clear when they'd been built. There was something ancient about them, but at the same time, something that felt incredibly new.

"Guess the idea of busting through the walls never worked out, huh?" he quipped.

"If this were an ordinary building or ruin," Prospero said, "then there wouldn't be monsters in it."

There was an awkward silence before Sarah began to complain. "Can't you try talking in a way that calms people down?"

"It's the way of a mage to speak truth," Prospero countered before sarcastically adding, "Unlike a priest, who leads others astray with her pretty words."

"Hmph!" Sarah exclaimed. Her ears stood on end.

Sezmar put a hand on the mage's shoulders. "Well, it's useful to have accurate information right now. We'll be counting on you, Prospero."

The mage fell silent. He hadn't expected his sarcastic remark to be met with such open approval.

"I hear there aren't that many monsters roaming the corridors..." said Moradin.

Sezmar hadn't been alone in cautiously inspecting the stone walls and floors. The rhea, who had been crouching down with his already diminutive body—searching—now rose to his feet.

"But there are *some*," he continued. "So maybe we should hurry up and get to the burial chamber, okay?"

"Where we know there'll be monsters for sure..." Sarah said with a shudder. She clenched her fists, bit her lip, and tried to swallow her fear, which would have been reduced somewhat if she'd had even a staff to defend herself with. "Just great. Bring it on."

Sezmar turned to Sarah. In hopes of calming her down, he made a point of talking to her. "I'll be counting on you when I get injured."

The tense-looking elf nodded repeatedly.

All right. At this point, Sezmar didn't know how many times he'd thought that exact phrase. He stepped forward resolutely.

There was a metallic clank. A first step. And after, he took another. Then he continued, cautiously, with a third and fourth.

Turning to look behind him, Sezmar realized that the shaft leading back

to the surface was already out of sight.

I feel like I'm gonna get lost.

The path was straight, at least as far as the first burial chamber. Or so he'd heard. But given this sensation he was feeling, it now made sense to him why some called this place a maze.

"We're going to need a dedicated cartographer..."

"Could you ask our high and mighty mage, since he's so accurate and detail-oriented?" Sarah asked peevishly.

"Ngh!" Prospero grunted in response.

Moradin snickered, while High Priest Tuck said, "That's all in the future."

What's going to happen to us?

Sezmar resumed his advance. If they stopped here, they would just be left in the darkness.

§

"Phew... Are we good to go?"

Standing in front of the wooden door that led to the burial chamber, Sezmar turned back to look at his party.

"From what I've been told," Moradin whispered, "the monsters in that chamber are things like orcs and kobolds."

"Either way, they're creatures out of myth, aren't they?" Sarah let out a thin, shaky sigh that expressed either dismay or fear—it was hard to tell which.

The path had been straight all the way to that point, but it wasn't clear just how far they'd walked. And it wasn't only the distance that felt nebulous.

How long have we been in the dungeon?

It felt like it had been mere minutes, but at the same time, several hours.

They had walked the path leading into murky darkness. That was all Sezmar could process. The rest was vague. He'd heard that one's senses became unreliable in the dungeon, but...

I never thought it was this bad. Of course things didn't work out.

Sezmar let out a low laugh, and Sarah's eyes went wide. She must have thought he'd lost it.

Sezmar laughed harder.

"All right, let's go!"

Maybe it was due to that moment of levity, but he no longer felt tense. He kicked the door down with a resounding crash, and they all rushed into the burial chamber.

Prospero and Sarah lagged a little behind the others, but fortunately, their error didn't prove fatal.

"Where's the enemy?!" Sarah demanded, her voice a bit shrill. Sezmar quickly glanced left and right. He could sense something slowly rising inside the darkness of the burial chamber.

"There! In the back!" Moradin shouted, brandishing his dagger in a reverse grip. "Look out!"

"You focus on parrying while Sezmar and I—!"

"Press in and crush 'em!" Sezmar finished with a laugh. "Let's go!"

The unsettling creature—only visible as a faint outline—began to move sluggishly. Sezmar leaped forward and swung his sword down.

The blade went wide. He'd misjudged the distance. It struck the floor instead of the enemy.

Sezmar cried out involuntarily and stumbled forward. "Whoa?!"

"What do you think you're doing?!" Sarah shouted shrilly.

As Sezmar tried to regain his balance, the monster's arms came toward him. He gritted his teeth and bent his body back, swaying just out of lethal striking distance. The monster's claws sent sparks flying as they scratched his armor.

It's okay! I'm still alive!

Sezmar steadied his breathing. He could practically hear his focus (hit points) being ground down.

Moradin was screaming pathetically as he deflected blows.

"Calm down and aim!" bellowed High Priest Tuck. The dwarven bishop put himself between the stumbling Sezmar and the monster, protecting his friend from the creature's attacks. One powerful swing of his hand axe struck home with a sickening splash of dark green blood.

The creature crumpled in front of Sezmar with a wet *splat*. It was humanoid. Normally, a blow like that would've been fatal—splitting a torso like firewood tended to end things rather quickly. But it's awkward, jerky movements continued, and then...

It got back up!

After a moment's hesitation, Sezmar let out a "Y-Yeah!" and pressed forward, swinging his blade with reckless abandon. By this point, all of the techniques he'd learned for cutting people down had fled his mind.

He took a big step into the fray, then slashed across his enemy diagonally—shoulder to hip. His blade tore through rotten flesh and shattered decaying bone. The sight left a sickening sensation in Sezmar’s stomach as he buried the sword in the creature’s guts.

This was nothing like slashing bundles of straw. Dark green ichor gushed from the wound.

“Ahhh...! Ahhhhhh!”

Man, I sound pathetic right now, Sezmar thought. His shouts lacked even a shred of the boldness of his fellow knights. But he couldn’t stop himself.

Was it fear? Or excitement? He couldn’t even tell. His sword techniques had all slipped away from him. He just swung and swung until the opponent before him stopped moving.

The hunk of rotten flesh fell with a loud thud. But before he even had time to catch his breath...

“Sezmar, there’s more flooding in from the back of the chamber!” That warning might have come from High Priest Tuck; it could just as easily have come from Prospero in the back row.

Out of the darkness, they emerged, seemingly innumerable—a horde of unsettling creatures shambling left and right, arms outstretched, groaning incoherently.

We shouldn’t have come here.

Sezmar backed away, his sword and shield suddenly feeling like the most unreliable equipment in the world. Still, his courage deserved praise—he stopped himself there, digging in his heels instead of continuing his retreat.

“What’re we gonna do now, Sezmar?!” Moradin cried.

“Hell if I know!” Sezmar shot back, his face twitching behind his visor until he forced a smile. “I’ll tell you one thing, though! These sure don’t look like orcs or kobolds to me!”

“Oh...” Suddenly, Prospero snapped his fingers in realization. “These are *zombies*!”

Zombies. The dead, risen once more by a curse. They were the stuff of legends—monsters in fables parents told to frighten children.

Was this dungeon a tomb? Were these adventurers who’d fallen? Or could they perhaps be...

Knights, huh?

As Prospero shouted, the blurry outlines of the creatures suddenly

solidified, as they came into focus.

Rotting flesh. No skin or hair left. Bodies decayed to dark shades of blue or green. They wore nothing but tattered scraps of clothing, making it impossible to infer who they might've been in life.

A thought suddenly crossed Sezmar's mind. *Will I end up like that too?*

It delayed his action, but Prospero spoke up for him. "Use Dispel! Break their curse!"

"Wh-Whaaa?!" Sarah exclaimed. "Err, umm... H-How do I do it again...?!" Slowly and inefficiently, Sarah twisted her fingers together as she attempted to form signs she only barely remembered.

Obviously, the zombies' instinctive response was quicker than her sluggish one. The undead battalion grabbed at her, uttering the ghoulish moans of those who'd crawled up from the depths of the earth to feed on the brains of the living.

"Eek!" A shriek of utter terror escaped Sarah's throat. Her body shuddered.

She was too far away for Sezmar to reach. Moradin was having a hard enough time defending himself. It fell to the High Priest to act.

"What are you doing?!"

The dwarf tackled the zombie with his small, stocky body. Both fell to the floor of the dungeon—already covered in dead bodies, gore, and other filth—where they rolled around in a continuous struggle.

Sezmar's eyes went wide. "Keep holding it down like that!"

High Priest Tuck was smaller than his opponent. Sezmar could take a swing at the zombie's head without worrying about hitting his companion.

The blade fell—the zombie's head rolled from its neck.

Kicking away the severed head like a ball, Sezmar shouted, "Okay, next...!"

§

"Hey, found it."

Sezmar raised his helmeted head to look at what Moradin was talking about. He couldn't help but blink.

A treasure chest had just appeared with a *clunking* sound. Now that the battle was finished, it felt like it had lasted mere seconds. And it had...probably. Though Sezmar felt like five or six hours had gone by, he hadn't used up any of his stamina. It was like he'd only been doing a few *practice swings*. His body was still ready for more. Yet at the same time,

he felt terribly exhausted.

There wasn't a scratch on him, but his entire body was heavy like lead. He was about ready to lean against the wall just to hold himself up.

Is this what they mean when they talk about losing your focus (hit points)?

In the dungeon, pure stamina was obviously important, but so, too, was the focus used to avoid fatal blows. Even when he dodged an attack, or if a blow merely grazed him, those maneuvers still ground down his focus.

And if that focus ever ran out, he'd die—Sezmar could feel it in his bones.

He couldn't just collapse here. There was still the road home, after all.

Walk a few spaces down the corridor—in a straight line—and return to the surface. That was starting to feel like a huge undertaking.

Sezmar decided to leave the chest to Moradin. He headed over to check on Sarah.

“Hey, you okay?”

The elven priest was sitting against the wall, holding her knees. As he approached, she raised her face—blessed with the unfamiliar beauty of her race—to look at him.

“Sorry...” Her voice was thin and weak. She'd had so much confidence—enough that she'd been constantly nagging her companions.

But she'd messed up the Dispel.

Either that had put a dent in her self-confidence, or she was traumatized to know that she'd let the party down. Sezmar couldn't tell which. He was in kind of a similar boat, after all.

“Hey, these things happen,” he murmured.

He didn't blame her. He didn't console her. He just openly accepted it for what it was.

Sezmar could demand perfection from others all he wanted, but that wasn't going to be what he got. There would be times like this—failures—and that was all there was to it.

Smiling inside his helmet, Sezmar added, “It's not like Prospero managed to use his spells either.”

“I chose not to use mine,” the scrawny mage corrected him sharply. His face was hidden in the cowl of his cloak. “I can only use them once or twice. I would hope you'd praise me for judiciously preserving them.”

Sarah said nothing—she just glanced over at Prospero. She didn't have it together enough to launch into a retort.

Well, this is bad.

Acting despondent wasn't the terrible part. No, Sarah seemed to be at her wit's end, and Sezmar thought she might do something drastic.

He was a novice knight, so while he did have experience hunting thieves, he'd never been in a pitched battle before. However, he had once led a group of servants while out hunting, and they'd hiked all over the mountains.

I ought to be grateful to dad for making me join them. He put that experience to use here, trying to act the part of a leader.

"Anyway, Sarah, we'll be counting on you on the way back. Although we may not run into anything along the way." He slapped her on the shoulder. Her body—more delicate than he'd thought—shuddered, and her ears shot up.

"Mm-hmm..." she answered in a tiny voice, nodding her head. The elven priest slowly rose to her feet, then patted down her priestly vestment to remove the dust. "That dwarf. High Priest...Tuck, was it? I'm going to go see how he's doing. I mean, he might be hurt, after all."

"Yeah. You do that."

I'd call that a success for now.

Sezmar let out a sigh as he watched Sarah run across the chamber. He turned to Prospero. "I'll be counting on you to figure out where to use those spells you saved."

He reached out to clap Prospero on the shoulder, but...

"You'd probably break my bones," the mage said, stopping him. "That said, leave it to me. There are benefits to keeping something in reserve."

"Sure."

I see. This guy likes it when people rely on him, huh?

Sezmar was pleased to discover that Prospero wasn't a bad guy after all. He then turned to the only one he hadn't yet checked on.

"Sweet, it's open!" Moradin exclaimed with glee.

Sezmar immediately snapped out of his pondering—he walked over to Moradin to take a look at the chest. The box sat open with its lid removed. Inside sparkled treasures so brilliant that he almost needed to shield his eyes.

If this were the world outside, just how long could he have fooled around on so much wealth?

"It's an even split, right?" the rhea thief inquired.

"Of course!" Sezmar nodded. "But having said that..."

He reached out, snatching a single sword for himself. The blade was so

white that he could scarcely believe it bore the weight of ages. Its hilt was studded with jewels. If Sezmar claimed that the sword was a treasure, no one would doubt that. And it wasn't that he had no emotional attachment to his own weapon, but...

Sezmar stared intently at it. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me use this."

"Sure thing, boss. You're about the only one in the group who could," Moradin said with a snicker. He then began stuffing the treasure into a sack. They would divide it later, but for now, it was *his* treasure, *his* contribution. Sezmar could understand why Moradin would be so giddy—he didn't fault him for it.

Besides, Sezmar was also in a good mood. It was just sinking in—he'd made it through his first battle, and he'd survived.

Y'know, maybe I'm not half bad at this?

It wasn't the product of complacency, but of self-confidence—or, more accurately, *experience*. Still, he would only benefit from that experience once he returned to the surface and had a good night's rest.

More than anything, though, it was the new blade in his hands that made his heart dance. He'd heard that weapons found within the dungeon were the stuff of myths and legends, be they sacred or demonic. Surely this sword would be a famous one too—though it wasn't like he could appraise it for himself. No, at times like this, the only thing he could do was ask High Priest Tuck. He was an experienced dwarf and a bishop to boot. There wasn't a better type of person to reveal the true value of a weapon.

"Hey, High Priest, you think you could take a look at this sword we..."

But Sezmar trailed off before he could finish his question. As he looked over, he saw Sarah, pale-faced and shaking her head.

"He got bit while he was struggling with the zombie. I've treated him, but..."

The old dwarf was lying down with his head resting on her slender knees. He was gasping, and he had to fight to force each word out.

"It's not...going to be enough..."

It was clear that his body had been invaded by a horrible paralyzing poison.

§

"Whaaa?! You want *me* in the front row?!"

"Sorry, but we need you to do it."

No matter how responsible she felt for what had happened, that didn't

make Sarah any less scared or any less likely to scream when battle was upon them.

Sarah's face was twitching. She made no attempt to hide how much Sezmar's proposal frightened her.

"With High Priest Tuck paralyzed, we don't have any other option."

"Well, maybe...but can't you and Moradin do it by yourselves?"

"With just the two of us, the enemies'll get past us, just like before."

If that happened, it wouldn't do her any good to be in the back row—she might actually be even worse off.

After hanging her head for some time, Sarah's ears drooped pathetically. "Okay," she finally mumbled. "But I'm going to insist that you give me *some* equipment. I don't want to get used as a meat shield."

"I know. We have High Priest Tuck's equipment. I don't know about the armor, but you should be able to use his weapon and shield."

"Yeah... I'll try the armor too."

Sezmar didn't have the heart to ask her to fight wearing nothing but her priest's vestment.

Sarah took off High Priest Tuck's armor and helmet, then picked up his battle axe and small shield, testing them for herself. It seemed some parts of the armor would actually fit her. She began donning them with unfamiliar hands.

Unable to stand watching any longer, Moradin stepped in to help. Sezmar sighed as he watched the two of them.

"Well, you can see the situation we're in... You don't need to worry, High Priest."

"Sorry about this..." he mumbled.

"Hey, once we get you to the Temple of Cant, you'll feel better. And this sure beats having to carry back your dead body."

Miracles that could fix paralysis were much more advanced than the layperson could imagine—and rarer too. This was probably because, rather than just closing up wounds, they also affected the inside of the body. Though, in the outside world, even the miracles that healed basic wounds were a rarity. Being able to perform them was enough to make someone a saint. In that sense, it might have been fair to call Sarah one.

But not even she could cure paralysis...

Only a divine spellcaster who had delved deep into the dungeon, and reached the realm of myth—the domain of heroes—could command such power.

With the sole exception of those in the Temple of Cant...

The priests who worshipped the god Kadorto, through some secret method, had constructed a holy place. Inside of it, even the dead could be raised to life. It was incredible.

Obviously, they demanded outrageous tithes, but that was because only heroes who delved into the dungeon were allowed another chance at life. Curing mere poison, paralysis, or petrification would probably be no big deal for the priests.

“Still, weren’t orcs or kobolds supposed to appear?” Sezmar whispered.

He’d been talking only to himself, but Prospero diligently provided an answer. “Nobody has all of the information on the dungeon. I’ve heard people talk about seeing pale corpses and ice phantoms.”

“Sounds dangerous...”

Though they had moved High Priest Tuck to the back row, the dwarf couldn’t fight. That left Prospero essentially by himself. If he sounded a little testy, then it was probably because he felt uneasy. Sezmar couldn’t blame him for it. In fact, at the moment, the fighter would have also preferred to flee.

I’m not cut out for this “leader” thing. He couldn’t help but crack a smile at that thought. The realization had helped him in some ways too.

Prospero cast a suspicious glance in Sezmar’s direction before shaking his head. “We’d better head back to the surface in a hurry. I don’t want to imagine what will happen if we are attacked from behind like this.”

Sezmar nodded. “Yeah, I know. I don’t want that any more than you do.”

I don’t wanna die like that down here.

“Look after the High Priest,” Sezmar concluded. This time, he made sure to clap Prospero on the shoulder. The mage winced in pain, making a show of rubbing his shoulder as he nodded.

From here, well, we’ll have to take each moment as it comes.

Outside the door he had kicked down earlier, he could see the straight corridor.

It’s weird. I know that’s the way home, and yet...

To Sezmar, the path seemed to stretch endlessly into the darkness.

§

The adventurers’ movements were awfully quiet. Sluggish too. After each space they moved—no, each step—they stopped and exhaled. It was

almost as if they thought this cautious advance might allow them to avoid encountering monsters.

In fact, Sezmar had heard of parties who spread rumors about that sort of jinx, but they had always brought it up with a laugh, further clarifying that the superstition did nothing more than put their minds at ease.

That wasn't what was slowing the party down now, though—they were confused and scared.

Their journey was the same as it had been when they'd entered the dungeon, except now they were going out instead of in. Still, they felt awfully unsettled.

The scenery felt unfamiliar. They even worried they had wandered down a different path.

"Hey, this is going to be okay, right?" asked Prospero, who was doing his best to support High Priest Tuck.

"Oh, shut up. Don't talk so much..." Sarah snapped at him with irritation.

Even just wearing a breastplate while carrying a battle axe and small shield was taking a tremendous physical toll on her. She'd broken out into an oily sweat. In theory, she knew how to use the equipment, but actually having to stand in the front row to fight the enemy was another matter entirely. She was even tenser than before, and her ears kept shuddering nervously.

Sezmar had Moradin lead the way. Sezmar was quiet, and he occasionally looked back to check behind them.

It's okay. Everything's the same as it was. His memory wasn't the best, but it put him at ease to see familiar scenery behind him. "How far to the stairs?" Sezmar asked.

"If I remember right," Moradin murmured, "we should see them after another space or two."

Those spaces felt unpleasantly long. Sezmar only cared about getting back to the surface. It made him want to break into a sprint.

Even so, he kept a steady pace, moving continuously forward. They were almost there. Just a little farther now...

Soon, he saw light shining through the holes in the walls. He breathed a sigh of relief.

"Look out!"

Who's shouting?

By the time Sezmar reacted, a harsh blow came rushing toward him out

of the surrounding darkness—a white arc, aiming for his neck. By the time he noticed it, the moment was already over.

Was the enemy incompetent? Or was he just lucky? Sezmar's sword had flown instinctively upward, knocking the blow away.

“Wagh?!”

There was a clear ringing sound as Sezmar's blade snapped and flew away—it had been one last act of service from his heirloom sword.

As Sezmar stumbled, a few seedy-looking men stepped out in front of him. *Who're these guys?!* These were no zombies. They were still alive. Had some fellow adventurers mistaken the party for monsters?

Sezmar was still confused, and the situation was already rapidly developing.

“Yipes?!”

“Eek?!”

Moradin used his dagger to ward off one enemy's blows, while Sarah shrieked and blocked them with her borrowed shield. The small shield creaked under the force of the blade, which dented it and threatened to break the elf's thin arms.

“Why, you...!”

Sezmar raised his foot and slammed his boot into one of the enemies—yes, enemies—with the same force he'd used to kick down the burial chamber door. The man went flying without so much as a grunt, rolled across the corridor floor, then nimbly got to his feet.

What the hell?! Sezmar had never considered that they might end up having to fight the other people they ran into down here.

These men were bushwhackers. Were they former robbers who'd fled into the dungeon? Were they adventurers?

Whichever they were, they had realized one simple truth: rather than fighting monsters themselves, there was more profit to be had in attacking adventurers who'd already killed monsters and looting their treasure.

It was clever, in its own petty, underhanded way. They had gone beyond the bounds of the alignment system and become nothing more than monsters themselves.

From this, Sezmar drew one conclusion. *These guys are experienced!*

A party of half-baked adventurers, let alone ones who were delving into the dungeon for the very first time, would be no match for them. The amount of focus (hit points) Sezmar lost in that one round told him as much.

We might die here today.

Could they break past these guys and flee headlong toward the surface? Realistically, no.

It was kill or be killed. No other option existed.

Sezmar cast aside his broken straight sword, then reached for the blade he didn't even know the name of. For some reason, he was really enjoying this. His lips, which were twitching with fear, warped into a smile.

“I'll give 'em all I've got!”

“Huh? Whoa, Sezmar?!?” Sarah cried out in confusion.

Sezmar ignored her. The sword he'd found felt light in his hands as he traded blows with the enemy. His opponents had the temerity to carry swords and shields, and they were even outfitted with armor and mail coifs.

Maybe these guys had dropped out of a knightly order. Still...

I'm not like you!

That wasn't an organized thought so much as an overwhelming feeling that chased everything else from Sezmar's head. Whether they were thieves, or knights, or whatever—he was different.

He was going to challenge the dungeon. He wouldn't give up. Wouldn't submit.

Whether he was defeated and left his corpse down here or was resurrected to rise once again—this was between him and the dungeon.

His field of view rapidly narrowed. Sezmar swung his sword left and right. He hit a shield. The bushwhacker's blade bit into his shield as well, scattering flakes of metal. But what did Sezmar care? He pressed in regardless.

Prospero eyed the intense battle. He never once forgot his own role in it.

“Kafaref tai nuunzanme (*Stop, O soul, thy name is sleep.*).”

The spell unleashed a thin, white mist from his fingertips that wrapped itself around the bushwhackers. Just how much practice and talent must it have taken to master this secret magic, which robbed a person of their consciousness? And to learn it outside Scale... To think they'd been able to find such a mage working in the kitchen at Durga's Tavern. It had been nothing short of good fortune. It just showed how good High Priest Tuck's eye for talent was. Casting HALITO wouldn't have been nearly so effective.

One of the bushwhackers slumped over groggily under the effect of

KATINO.

“Nice work!” Moradin said with a grin as he mercilessly stabbed through the man’s throat. The burrow-dwelling rhea were known for their piercing attacks, so surely nothing more needed to be said about the sharpness of his blow.

These bushwhackers were little more than beasts wearing the faces of men, but perhaps even *they* were shaken up when they saw one of their own killed?

It created an opening—one Sezmar didn’t miss. He thrust in with his sword. That blade had found a new master after centuries, and its sharpness was something to behold. Sezmar didn’t feel a bit of resistance as his sword sliced through the enemy’s chain mail. There was a gout of blood as the bushwhacker let out a scream, and the man struck once more as Sezmar’s blade swung back around.

No matter how well adapted to the dungeon these foes were, it seemed their bodies’ toughness hadn’t gone beyond the bounds of humanity.

And so, unable to endure his repeated slashes, the bushwhacker collapsed in a sea of blood.

There was only one man left—that is, if these monsters were still fit to be called men.

“Sarah!” Sezmar yelled.

“Eagh...?! Eek! Stop...it...?!”

Was the beast of a man trying to take her down with him? Trying to get his hands on a hostage? Or just satisfying his own lust?

His blade swung relentlessly toward the young elf girl, chipping away at her life. Though she held up the shield to block, her priestly vestment was torn, and there were cuts in her fair skin.

Things weren’t looking good.

Even though they had lost their former lifespan, elves were still known for their sharp senses. Their focus was higher than a human’s, but that just meant hers was being rapidly stripped away in the heat of battle.

“Ragh!” Sezmar roared as he swung his blade. The bushwhacker raised his shield, blocking it.

The robber grinned with lips that looked like a gaping gash—a bloodred tongue peeked out between them. His face twisted in a look of warped pleasure as he raised his saber, about to split the young elf girl’s head open.

But then—

“Bearif darui zanmeseen (*O power of life, be reversed!*)!”

—that was when a divine miracle, BADIOS, burst forth.

Sarah swung out her hand, still holding the battle axe, and shouted the chant in a broken voice. This was the miracle of healing reversed.

The bushwhacker’s face visibly cracked before their very eyes. The skin tore—blood gushed forth from the fissures. The bushwhacker covered his face and stumbled backward with a silent wail of confusion.

There was no need for words. Sezmar and Moradin signaled one another with a glance.

“Hyah!!!”

“Oorah!”

Sezmar’s blow cleaved through mail coif and skull alike. Moradin’s dagger slipped into a soft spot between ribs.

The battle was over.

Three bodies lay on the floor. Five adventurers stood there, unsure of what to do next. They were out of breath, covered in the blood of their enemies, and mentally exhausted. In a word, they looked pathetic. One sat on the floor, while another leaned against the wall, and yet others leaned on weapons or staves for support. It was such a scene that when other adventurers descending from the surface passed by, their eyes widened with shock.

In short, this meant that the party had made it to the stairs leading out of the dungeon.

For a while, I was doubting we’d make it back alive.

Sezmar was unharmed. He looked around at each of his comrades.

He caught a wheezing Sarah wiping the sweat from her brow as she attempted to steady her breathing. The golden-haired elf’s blue eyes sparkled as she stared back at him.

A moment passed before a wan smile graced her delicate features, and in a voice that was clear as a bell, she asked, “So, when are we going to delve into the dungeon again?”

§

“Oh, there they are! Hey, guys, I brought him!”

Moradin’s voice carried well, even over the hubbub of Durga’s Tavern. Sezmar and the others looked over from where they were seated at a round table. As Moradin worked his small frame through the crowd calling out, “‘Scuse me!” a dark shadow followed behind him.

“Here’s to hoping he can fight in the front row,” Sarah muttered, resting a pale cheek—already slightly red from drinking—on the palm of one hand. Her priestly vestment had already been mended, and over it, she wore her own armor. She carried a mace at her waist.

She hadn’t had many chances to swing it, but she firmly insisted on maintaining her position in the back row. Sezmar had laughed when, despite her insistence, she’d been fussy about making sure she had a proper set of equipment.

“I wouldn’t mind him being in the back row. Attacks from behind are the one thing that worries me,” Prospero grumbled cynically. His equipment hadn’t changed much at all. However, he was more willing to lower his hood when they were out drinking.

The waitresses and female adventurers had all hooted and hollered when they’d seen how surprisingly attractive he was. According to Sarah, it was just because “they don’t know what he’s really like.”

“Well, if Moradin’s bringing him to us, then I’m sure he’s good at what he does,” said High Priest Tuck, who was hard at work identifying the treasure spread out on the table.

Since that first time in the dungeon, Sezmar and the party had made a couple of trips to the first burial chamber and back. Just two or three. They hadn’t done that many, but the change in them was surprising.

They knew how to walk the dungeon. How to fight. How to survive.

Was this what people called experience, or was it a degree of capability (level)?

Sezmar didn’t know. But it was fun. He enjoyed it. It made him want to keep progressing. And to do that...

“We definitely need a sixth person,” Sezmar said with a jovial laugh. “And if he’s a fun guy, you won’t hear any complaints from me.”

“Hey, who in this group do you think is *fun*?” Sarah asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Maybe everyone here but me,” Prospero shot back at her.

High Priest Tuck narrowed his eyes in amusement.

Not long after, Moradin reached the table. “I’ve brought someone interesting,” he said. “I dunno if he’s a thief, or a fighter, or something else entirely, but I can tell you he’s good.”

“Well, hey!”

Sezmar remained seated and looked up at the man dressed in all black. He even had black cloth wrapped around his head, completely covering it.

This man was obviously suspicious. He was probably a spy or something. Who knew? Not Sezmar. Even so...

Not knowing just makes him more interesting.

“That’s Sezmar, and this is Sarah, Prospero, and High Priest Tuck.” Moradin went around the table introducing his friends.

The man with the head wrap listened in silence—his eyes widened slightly. Then, suddenly, his shoulders heaved, and a suppressed laugh leaked from the depths of his throat.

Sarah cast him a dubious look, but he paid it no mind. He politely put his hands together and bowed his head to them.

“Hello. I’m Hawkwind of Skara Brae. Nice to meet you.”

“Sure, now let’s get started with some drinks!” Sezmar raised a hand to call over a waitress.

Their future adventures were sure to be full of excitement...

§

“So, the sword he got on that first trip was a Were Slayer?” Raraja asked.

“No, it was just an ordinary sword,” Mr. Catlob answered nonchalantly.

Even the most famous of swords from the outside world were nothing but ordinary swords inside the dungeon. Up against monsters, a weapon was little more than a hunk of lead—though, if it was cursed, that changed things.

“He came to possess this Were Slayer much later.”

“Aww... That’s boring,” Raraja groaned. His mind returned to his work. He couldn’t slack off while picking the lock and searching for traps.

Catlob’s unseeing eyes were always on Raraja’s back, monitoring him.

“The point of the story is this: while the weapons you use are an important part of adventuring, they are not the most important thing.”

“And so Sezmar deliberately leaves behind the good stuff and adventures without it?”

“It’s a good way to build up your instincts.”

Raraja cocked his head. “Instincts?”

“To confirm for yourself once more—are you simply good in battle, or can you also walk the dungeon?”

In his dispassionate tone, Catlob explained that the dungeon was not something you could conquer simply by being strong, by being able to cast a lot of spells, or by being careful.

“You’d do well to remember that. Unless you wish to die, that is.”

“Sure...” Raraja nodded. He didn’t complain, though he wasn’t happy to hear this advice. That lesson might have been too advanced for the person he was now, but he figured that Catlob was probably right.

Suddenly, there was a jingling of bells. The door to the trading post opened, and dust motes danced across the floor.

“Phew, what a haul. Even on just the first level, all sorts of stuff will show up if you just walk around a bit!”

Hearing that endlessly cheerful voice of his, one could plainly tell what sort of man he was, even without looking at his white suit of armor.

“Welcome, Sezmar,” Catlob greeted him.

Sezmar quickly spotted Raraja. “Hey, you’re training here again today, huh? What a hard worker! Here, I brought a little treat for you!”

He plopped a sack down on the counter in front of Raraja. Based on its size and the rattling sound it made, it was easy to guess that there was a lot of stuff inside.

When Raraja looked through the open mouth of the bag, he saw swords, armor, and leather pouches, among other things. None of them were identifiable.

“A treat...? This is just your haul from the dungeon,” the boy grumbled.

“Well, you see, High Priest Tuck told me I ought to bring them around so Orlaya can use them for practice!”

Hearing this, Catlob’s head shot up like a cat creeping near its prey. “That’s perfect,” he said. “Sort them before Orlaya arrives.”

“Yeah, okay,” Raraja replied.

“And the treasure chest too. Don’t slack off now.”

Raraja looked tired and exasperated. Sezmar’s raucous laughter echoed through the trading post.

Chapter 2

Ring of Death

“We can pay about fifty gold for them, assuming they’ve been identified,” Orlaya said curtly. She tossed the leather sack back on the counter with disinterest.

“Even with all these jewels packed inside it?!” the adventurer protested, eyes wide with disbelief. He probably hadn’t been in Scale for very long.

“This is all stuff you can find in the outside world,” she informed him coldly.

There was a rattling noise as gemstones spilled out of the open mouth of the bag, ranging from rubies no bigger than a pinkie fingertip to fist-sized diamonds. They sparkled and gleamed, even in the dim light of Catlob’s Trading Post.

However, here in Scale, such stones were as valuable as children’s marbles. It was similar to how swords were judged: unless it had magic cast upon it, no sword, no matter how brilliant its craftsmanship, was anything but “a sword” in Scale. What the young man had was nothing but “a pouch” or “a sack of jewels.”

“Well, if you insist, I can identify each individual stone for you, but...” Orlaya rolled one of the smaller jewels around on the counter using her patchwork fingers, then looked at the customer and concluded, “I would need to charge you fifty gold for my time.”

The man made no effort to hide his inner turmoil. He let out a low groan before finally managing to force out the words, “What if I were to sell it unappraised?”

“Nobody’s going to buy a bunch of ordinary rocks off you.”

The man cursed her, saying that the shop was a rip-off.

Well, he’s right about that.

Orlaya didn’t deny it. If she weren’t an employee, she probably would’ve smiled and agreed with him. The shop was a real racket—they bought goods for the same amount it cost to appraise them. That said...after factoring in the cost of labor, the trading post wasn’t making any money either.

Clearly, Mr. Catlob didn’t want to profit off of appraisals.

This was something Orlaya had come to realize as she’d tended the shop for him—as training, or perhaps as a public service. She didn’t really know why she did it. He was interested in cursed arms and equipment, which was why he charged high prices to remove those curses.

He has terrible taste...

When she thought back to the many curses that had eaten away at her own body, Orlaya stiffened. A shudder ran through her. They had all been dispelled under Catlob's care...but she would never forget. And...the items that had cursed her were *inside* the shop. In fact, only a single stone wall separated her from the area where they were now on display. That thought didn't make her feel any better.

"You're taking the piss!"

"Hm...?"

Orlaya's mind had wandered. It wasn't clear how the man had chosen to interpret her inaction, but he reached for his sword and started yelling.

A rookie, huh? I knew it.

He was the sort who had ventured into the dungeon once, maybe twice, and now he was starting to get the sense that he was rising to a higher level of ability. It was enough to make him think he could get what he wanted from surface-dwellers using violence—but not enough for him to think through what would happen once he tried it.

"Look, if you're going to kill me, you can go right ahead." Orlaya's one eye that wasn't covered with a bandage slowly turned to the man. Her gaze showed no fear of violence or death, only a coldness that could not easily be sorted into either resignation or exasperation. "But don't come crying to me if the spirits cut your head off for it."

The man jumped a little, then frantically looked left and right.

Catlob had formed a contract with the four great elemental spirits—fire, water, earth, and wind—to manage security for the trading post. At least, that was what the baseless rumors around town said. Apparently, this man had heard them.

Orlaya didn't know for a fact that Catlob *hadn't* done that. He would never tell her. However, there was one rumor she knew to be true: a robber who had forced his way inside the trading post had been decapitated. Many witnesses had seen the body being carried to the Temple of Cant. When she'd tried to ask Raraja about it, he'd dodged the issue with a vague smile.

I'll need to shake him down for answers later...

"Tch! Fine. I won't ask you, then!"

Once again, the man came to a decision while Orlaya was lost in thought. He snatched up his leather sack, then bolted out of the door in a hurry. Maybe he'd find an appraiser at Durga's Tavern or on the first level of the dungeon and have them look at it. Either way, it wouldn't change

the fact that he would need to pay someone.

Catlob, who'd been in the back working on something, suddenly murmured, "You let a customer get away." The way that he could slink out of the darkness without making a sound reminded Orlaya of an old cat. He wasn't nearly as cute, though.

"I'm just choosing my customers carefully," Orlaya countered, flashing her teeth at him ever so slightly in a mischievous smile. "I've never had that luxury before."

"Do as you like," Catlob said simply. "Though I'll set your wages as I see fit."

"Feel free," Orlaya replied. She rested her cheek on the palm of one hand.

In truth, she was in a really good mood. When compared to her old "shop," where she would sit on a straw mat like a beggar or harlot down on the first level of the dungeon, this arrangement was quite comfortable. Here, she sat behind the counter of a large store, identifying items for the owner and waiting for customers. It made her feel...

I sure have moved up in the world, haven't I?

The thought made her laugh—mostly at her own expense. Someday, eventually, she would make enough money to start her own business, and then she would be able to tell her parents back home and put them at ease.

However, when she opened the ledger of her finances in her head, she thought, *Even that's just a dream*. As things stood now, she couldn't hold her head high and tell the others she was getting by on her own.

Not Raraja. Not Garbage. And not...

"Berkana, huh."

Orlaya wasn't one to shy away from insulting the giantess's height—she had decided not to shy away from *anything* where Berkana was concerned.

I've never regretted being born a rhea, but isn't it incredible that, at her size, she still counts as a human?

If she was going to compete with that girl, who was big in every way possible, she was going to need to be able to do more than just identification and spellcasting. If nothing else, Orlaya wanted to have a big attitude.

"Oh."

The bells hanging by the door jangled, heralding the arrival of a new customer.

Orlaya didn't bother to adjust her sitting posture—she simply turned her eye in the right direction. There stood a young man, heavily bandaged, with painful-looking burn scars.

Of course, this was nothing unusual in Scale. Orlaya had scars of her own.

Nonetheless, she remembered this young man. Even if they didn't have all that strong of a connection, she recalled that he was...

“The shoemaker's son.”

“Schumacher,” he corrected her bitterly.

“I wasn't wrong, then, was I?” Orlaya responded with a snort.

Raraja—or rather, Garbage and Berkanan—had become famous for slaying a red dragon. This adventurer was one of the recounters of their tale and a living witness to it.

He is an adventurer, right?

His companions had been killed by the dragon, and he'd nearly died himself. Yet still, he lived on, unable to walk away from the dungeon.

Orlaya regarded him with interest—an almost catlike curiosity. Her solitary eye blinked. “You want something identified?” she asked. “Let me just say this up front: if you have an issue with our prices, then you talk to the owner about it, not me.”

Schumacher shook his head. “Sorry, I'm not here for that. I wanted to pick out some equipment...”

“All the more reason you should be talking to Mr. Catlob, then.”

That said...

Does he even need new equipment?

Obviously, the weapon hanging at Schumacher's hip was nothing compared to a Were Slayer or a Black Japanned, but it was a Sword of Slashing, and having that name meant it was more than a mundane blade. As for his armor, even if it had been pieced together from several different sets, it was still a fine suit of plate mail. He didn't look like a rookie who'd only challenged the dungeon for the first time recently. Schumacher had the poise of one who'd faced death several times and survived.

But more than any of that, this guy had faced the red dragon—even if that had been a crazy, reckless, thoughtless thing to attempt.

Orlaya gestured with her chin, calling his attention to a thick suit of armor on the racks behind her. “If a suit of sturdy plate will do, we've got one in stock.”

“Nah, this isn't for me.”

Having said that, Schumacher held open the door to the trading post and waited. Orlaya patiently went along with whatever he was up to.

After some time, in trotted...a diminutive figure.

It wasn't a rhea. No, this one wore shoes.

She was larger and stockier, but unlike a dwarf, her skin was as white as the freshly fallen snow. More distinctive yet were the two horns growing out of her head.

The girl was a gnome. Likely a mage too.

But the reason Orlaya's eye widened had nothing to do with any of that.

Red and blue.

"We are here to purchase equipment."

Her hair, horns, eyes, body—they were all split into those two colors, as though two different people had been stuck together as one.

§

"This is Rahm-and-Sahm."

"Rahm? Sahm?" Orlaya blinked. "Which is her family name?"

"No. Rahm-and-Sahm."

This made no sense. Orlaya glanced at the girl who was painted in red and blue. She just stood there, seeming adrift from the world, or at least, not mentally present. Her expression was airy and vacant.

I heard that gnomes have doglike ears, but...well, it looks like the bit about them having goatlike horns was correct, at least. No, weren't those supposed to grow out of their foreheads? Like an orc's...

The books she'd spent so much time reading back in her parents' home had always had wildly varying descriptions of gnomes. It seemed as though they'd been written by people who had never seen a gnome for themselves. Perhaps the only thing they knew was that gnomes had animal horns on their heads.

Being a scholar must be a pain.

Orlaya quickly abandoned that train of thought. She focused her eye on the gnome. Red and blue. Whether one looked at this girl from the left or the right completely changed the impression she gave off—it was like she was two different people.

After looking around the shop at this and that, the gnome girl murmured something quietly and then chuckled at whatever she'd said.

Right... Almost as if she were *two people*.

Orlaya was silent. *Just another typical mage—although, maybe it's too harsh to lump Berkana into such a sweeping generalization. Iarumas, though? Nah, it's fine for him.*

“Is she off in the head...?” Orlaya asked.

“There’s a...whole situation here,” Schumacher replied forbearingly before explaining.

Allegedly, twins Rahm and Sahm had been adventurers who’d died in the dungeon and been carried back to the Temple of Cant. Their resurrection failed—although Sister Aine would strongly disagree—and they were reduced to ash.

The party had given up on raising more funds for their resurrection, so they disbanded. There was nothing particularly uncommon about this: a party would weigh the trouble of raising money for a resurrection against continuing on with a new member, and if the scales tilted toward the latter...well, nobody would fault them for it. And if only one or two of the other party members were left alive, it was probably fastest for them to go join another party altogether.

This meant that the twins’ ashes had been kept by the Temple of Cant, waiting for the day they would be resurrected. And if they weren’t so lucky, their souls would be lost, and they would be buried.

Fortunately, Schumacher had been in need of an experienced mage to join him. He’d arranged for one to be resurrected, but...

“It seems their ashes got *mixed together*.”

“Whuh?” Orlaya’s eye widened. “Is that even possible?”

“It must be, because that’s how things ended up this way...”

Schumacher let out a deep sigh. “And I only wanted *one* mage.”

“Whatever happened, isn’t it the temple’s fault?”

“They said that since the twins came back to life, it must be a sign from God.”

“That’s some racket they’re running...” It went without saying that the Priests of Cant wouldn’t be refunding his tithe. Orlaya might have stood up for Ainikki, who had done a lot for her, but she had no reason to defend the temple otherwise.

What an awful thing to have happen, she thought, resting her cheek on one palm as she regarded the red-and-blue girl. “So, which are you? Rahm? Or Sahm?”

Hearing her name, the red-and-blue girl said nothing for a moment. Then she vacantly turned to face Orlaya.

“Who knows?” she said in a whisper. “Which do you think?” she added energetically, as though a different person were speaking.

I don’t know what to say to that.

“It’s not impossible,” came a voice from behind Orlaya—sharp like a sudden dagger in the back.

It was Catlob, slowly emerging from the gloom in the back of the shop.

Orlaya shuddered as she turned to face the lanky elf. She could glare at him with her one eye all she wanted, but it would have no effect on the blind man.

“There are many methods of resurrecting a person. One of them involves using something known as the ritual of transfer.”

He explained that this ritual involved connecting two coffins using a soul cord (cable). If successful, the person’s remains would disappear from one coffin, and they’d emerge from the other alive. However...

“If the soul tie were to break during the ritual, their soul would be split, resulting in two copies of the same adventurer. It’s been known to happen.”

“That doesn’t sound plausible...”

Too appalled to say any more, Orlaya pressed on her temples to suppress a headache. Was he suggesting that something similar had happened here? Honestly...the idea was enough to make her forehead throb.

She decided it was time to change the subject. Other things had caught her attention. She turned to Schumacher. “Still, you seem awfully flush with cash.”

He’d resurrected a mage from ashes at the temple and was even purchasing a set of equipment for her. That meant his party had been missing a mage. And yet, they had money—it sure didn’t look like he’d been scraping gold together in a desperate attempt to rebuild his team.

Schumacher nodded. “Yeah, we were given money to prepare ourselves.”

“For what?”

“For a job...” He stopped himself for a moment. “We’ll be going to the Monster Allocation Center.”

Eagh! Orlaya openly scowled. To think that anyone would be eccentric enough to go to that place of their own volition. She just couldn’t understand it.

I thought only Iarumas would do something like that. Or maybe

Garbage...

It was unclear how Schumacher interpreted her reaction, but he hastily added, “It’s true, okay? We do have money. It’s an advance so we can go pick up the ring.”

“Ring?” Orlaya repeated suspiciously.

“Listen, I get why one of your kind would be wary of rings...”

Some enthusiast or researcher from the outside world was putting down large piles of gold to gather items from the dungeon. That was nothing unusual in and of itself. But for a single ring? And they’d even provided an advance payment to help the party prepare...

Orlaya sensed that something was fishy. But there was nothing more she could point to than her instinct, so she left it at a snarky, “You’re sure they’re not tricking you?”

Schumacher frowned and let out a groan.

That was when Rahm-and-Sahm—the only name Orlaya could think to call the girl—walked over. Her slender arms and tiny hands held the staff she’d selected. It was carved from old wood and studded with gems.

But it’s still just an ordinary staff.

The vacant look on the gnome mage’s face gave no hint as to why she’d chosen this one in particular.

Orlaya decided to simply focus on her own job. She extended her hands—even smaller than the gnome’s—to take the staff.

“That’ll be five gold.”

“Right.” Schumacher nodded. He took the coins out of a leather pouch and handed them over. There was a heavy jangling noise when he did, so apparently what he’d said about receiving money was true.

Well, whatever.

No matter how concerned Orlaya was, it wasn’t as though she could do anything. She had enough on her hands looking after herself and those immediately around her. She wasn’t inclined to go reaching out to aid anyone else on top of that. And certainly she wasn’t going to be one of those who went around helping anyone and everyone, only to act like it was no big deal. She didn’t even *like* people who would grit their teeth as they desperately tried to extend a helping hand to others.

“A ring in the Monster Allocation Center, hmm?” Catlob suddenly murmured. Orlaya looked up with her one eye.

The owner of the trading post fixed his lightless eyes on Schumacher and said, “It would do you good to remember that there are some jobs even

a corpse can do.”

§

I don't get it.

Schumacher crossed his arms and let out a deep sigh. Catlob's cryptic words were perplexing on their own, but there were lots of other things he didn't understand too.

Ever since the day he'd delved into the dungeon to fight the red dragon, he'd been confused about everything. That was why he'd just kept his mouth shut and plodded on. He turned to look at his companions.

Companions. Now there's an ironic word.

His first party—made up of his friends, the sons of merchants—was no more.

Some were gone because the red dragon had killed them. Others because their parents had gotten angry and forced them to come back home. The adventurers who'd joined after them died, or left, or were constantly being swapped out for others.

At some point, Schumacher was left alone. Even his current team had only been assembled for this one job.

“Hm?”

Rahm, or perhaps Sahm, looked up at him, cocking her head to the side quizzically.

He'd rounded up three more companions in addition to her—they were a party of five now. One of them was unusually small. She wore a white cloak over a grungy suit of gusoku armor. Her feet were bare. In her hands, she held a thin, curved blade. A braided white ponytail spilled out from her cloak, and her skin was bizarrely pale. Red eyes peered out from inside her hood.



This albino female rhea called herself a strider.

As she noticed Schumacher looking, she grinned. It was a catlike smile, one that seemed to hold deeper meaning.

The next member of the group was a large human, completely clad in strange armor. At least, Schumacher thought they were human—he had never actually seen their face, and he didn’t know the color of their skin. Anytime he said anything to them, they simply nodded or shook their head in response. Upon closer inspection, their dark, sinister suit of armor was actually several different suits worn on top of each other. In a similar fashion, the adventurer held multiple swords in each hand, bundled together like talons. They seemed willing to stand in the front row, but as for how agile they were...well, their moves were not particularly impressive.

The last member was a human girl—her long, black hair was tied back. Her leather armor had been painted with black ink. However, Schumacher didn’t recognize the design or the country it came from. With a spring in her step and eyes full of glee, she’d introduced herself as a thief. Schumacher had surmised that this would be her first trip to the dungeon. He resolved to put her in the back row.

“So, can I fight in the front?” asked the white-skinned burrow-dweller. Regnar the Strider, she called herself.

Schumacher nodded. “You *can* fight, right?”

“Well, yeah,” she said, stifling a laugh, though he didn’t know what was so funny. “Your big sis is pretty good at what she does.”

“I’ll be counting on you, then. I’ll fight in the front row too. As for the third—”

“Allow me!” the black-haired girl exclaimed energetically, cutting him off. She even raised her hand in a spur-of-the-moment gesture.

The gnome blinked her vacant eyes. Regnar smiled.

“For I am the gale that blows in the darkness, Shadowwind!” announced the black-haired girl. “I may be inexperienced now, but in due time, I shall make my worth apparent!”

“Err...”

Schumacher considered his words carefully. He didn’t want to suddenly wound her self-confidence. After all, any vitriol he expressed now might come back at him someday with the sharpness of a blade. “You stay in the back row, Shadow. I want to keep our mage safe, so I’d like you to watch out for trouble back there.”

“Indeed, I shall!”

Hearing the pride in her response, Schumacher was internally relieved. It seemed he'd played it right. Now he could trust her behind him without the fear of getting stabbed in the back.

“Instead, uhh...”

Schumacher looked at the suit of armor. He couldn't see their face because it was hidden behind a visor.

“Coretas,” came a weak, muffled response.

He thought for a moment. *That's got to be a name.*

“Coretas, you take the front row.”

If there was a response, he couldn't hear it. The armored head just shook up and down. That was affirmative.

All he'd done was assign positions, and Schumacher already felt exhausted. He just wanted to explore the dungeon. Why did he have to deal with all of this extra trouble? Of course, he realized it wasn't trivial or unimportant, but...

When I think about it, maybe the experience of slaving away for my dad—making shoes—is helping me out here. Though he realized now that his old man must not have had it easy either, he was still loath to accept it.

It's tough being the boss...

Schumacher let out a deep sigh.

“Okay, let's go. Our current goal is the third underground level. We'll avoid burial chambers on our way there.”

He shifted gears. It was time to move forward. To that end, he wanted a shared policy.

Schumacher looked to each of his companions. “We go there, get the ring, and come back. That's it.”

They each—no, Coretas and Shadowwind—nodded.

From a spot quite low to the ground, a tiny hand shot up, full of energy. “I have a question!” Regnar said in an amused, teasing tone of voice.

“Why are there only five of us?”

“Well...” Schumacher didn't dodge the question. “Because if this works out, we'll be getting another.”

The gnome girl looked up at him, seemingly mystified.

§

Schumacher always felt a shudder run down his spine whenever he left that first section of the dungeon where the adventurers hung out. For him,

the first level was a place where he felt the constant threat of death. Even here, a red dragon could appear. He'd learned that through experience. But death didn't have to take the form of a dragon; it could come as skeletons, humanoids, or even seedy-looking men.

His limbs tensed—the rhea girl strolled along past him, her bare feet slapping the floor.

"Are you one of those who doesn't feel safe walking without a coin or a ten-foot pole?" Regnar asked Schumacher with a sneering cackle.

"C'mon, it's this way. Let's get going. Big sis will show you the way."

Her white hair nearly vanished into the gloom in front of him. Schumacher moved forward, chasing after it. Coretas followed without a word, armor clanking loudly, and another set of footsteps pattered along behind them.

For a moment, Schumacher's eyes widened. He turned and looked back, but Shadowwind was there, right where she should be. When their eyes met, she puffed out her black-armored chest with pride and gave him a satisfied nod.

It seemed she'd been masking her footsteps. He didn't know whether she was a thief, a spy, or something else entirely...

Rahm—or Sahm—cocked her head to the side quizzically.

"It's nothing," he told her, turning to face forward.

If only the other sister had been a priest... Well, it was no use wishing for what he couldn't have.

Priest spells—healing and blessings of protection—were considered miracles in the outside world. While they might not have been unusual in Scale, spellcasters were always highly valued, and they never struggled to find parties. And after seeing what a fight that tall girl had put up during the battle against the red dragon, he could understand why...

(Schumacher couldn't have known that Berkana had struggled to find a party.)

When it came to priests, bishops, and others bestowed with divine miracles, recruiting one to a party was an active competition.

I'll have to be satisfied that we have even one mage in the group...

Suddenly, a clanking noise interrupted Schumacher's thoughts. Coretas had come to a stop.

"What is it...?" Schumacher asked, his voice cracking.

Coretas said nothing.

Enemies? Schumacher tensed.

The suit of armor raised its hand. “Mimuarif pezanme re feiche (O great shield, come quickly from beyond.)”

After that mumbled, muffled chant, a thin coating of light spread to cover the area.

“Wh-What was that?!” Shadowwind looked all around the area in an absurd overreaction.

“The miracle of MAPORFIC...” the gnome mage mumbled without emotion.

If Coretas was a fighter and they could also cast priest spells, that meant...

“You’re a lord?!”

Coretas once again said nothing. Instead, Regnar’s cackling echoed through the corridor.

“What, did you just forget to cast it?” the rhea asked with biting sarcasm. Then, stopping to wink, she added, “And here I was, assuming you hadn’t learned the spell yet.”

Of course, Coretas said nothing.

Schumacher stared at the suit of armor. *What the hell? Seriously...*

He was grateful for the strong shield spell, but nothing that’d just happened had reassured him in the slightest.

§

Walking through the dungeon like it was an empty field wasn’t Schumacher’s style. But with Regnar taking the lead, he couldn’t do things his way. She walked along with a spring in her step, as if she were just going out for a stroll down some minor street in her neighborhood.

Right...left...straight. Even though she didn’t have a map, she showed no sign of getting lost.

A strider, huh?

It had seemed unfitting for a rhea to claim a title that alluded to long, swift steps, but he could see how it suited her now. Schumacher had long since given up on checking the map—he just followed her. Even if he’d tried, he wouldn’t have been able to keep up. Or rather, any time he tried to look, Regnar would let out a derisive snort of laughter.

“What’s a fighter going to do with his hands full like that, huh?”

That was why Shadowwind was in the back row desperately working with a piece of parchment and a pen.

“I’ve got this!” she said enthusiastically. Schumacher figured he should

probably check her work later.

“Hey, aren’t the stairs the other way?” he asked.

“What, are you saying I’m lost?” Regnar countered without turning back. Her tone was sharp. “There’s no way, right? I’m no rank amateur. Look—you can see ‘em right there.”

What can I see?

Schumacher squinted. All he saw ahead was the darkness.

No, hold on...

“What...is this...?”

There was nothing but *literal darkness*.

It was true that the dungeon’s miasma had a way of limiting how far one could see, but even with that present, it was normal to be able to see some distance ahead.

Not here.

The dark zone spread out before Schumacher like the gaping maw of a monster.

He gulped. The noise as he swallowed sounded strangely louder to him than usual.

“How peculiar...”

As Shadowwind tried to figure out how to map this, Coretas began whispering something.

“Mimui—”

“Hey now, casting MILWA’s not going to do anything here,” Regnar interrupted. The corners of her lips turned up as the casting stopped. She narrowed her bloodred eyes, almost catlike, as she turned to Schumacher. “If you’re scared, you want me to hold your hand?”

“Didn’t you just tell me that a fighter needs to keep his hands free?”

It seemed Regnar liked Schumacher’s response. “Then keep your eyes on me and let’s go.”

Regnar sauntered off into the darkness, leaving behind only the sound of her bare feet padding against the stone floor. After a short silence, Coretas followed behind her, armor clanking.

Obviously, Schumacher wasn’t going to just stand there frightened.

“Can you keep going?” he asked the gnome girl.

There was a brief pause, then “Yes.” She nodded. Her red and blue horns bobbed up and down with the gesture. Her voice sounded airy, as if lost in a dream. There wasn’t any certainty in it.

“Okay. I’m counting on you two to take up the rear.”

“L-Leave it to us...!” Shadowwind replied, her voice shrill with enthusiasm as she vigorously nodded.

I really am going to have to check that map later. That is, assuming there's going to be a later.

§

“Where are we going?”

“The third level, right?”

In the darkness, the rhea’s red eyes seemed to glow as they turned back to look at Schumacher. It was just an illusion, though. There was nothing but literal darkness in front of him.

He heard the padding of her bare feet and her laughter, which was like a bell rolling around in the back of her throat.

“We’re going down...”

“Regnar-dono, did you say that there are stairs ahead?” Shadowwind asked, keeping up her strangely theatrical manner of speech despite how desperate she otherwise sounded.

Schumacher quickly realized she was doing it to mask her fear, though they had only been together a little while—a few minutes, a few hours, or a few days.

However, the answer to her question came not from the front row, but the back. “The elevator...” murmured the gnome girl faintly. The way her voice echoed made it hard to imagine that just one person was speaking.

Was it Rahm answering, or Sahm...?

No.

“Do you two know?” Schumacher asked, confusing Shadowwind.

The gnome came to a stop. There was a moment of silence, then she whispered, “It is an altar on which sacrifices are raised up to the heavens or lowered into the depths.”

“Brilliant deduction.” Regnar smiled faintly.

The gnome girl stopped walking only briefly. She quickly started tottering on again.

“I see,” Schumacher nodded at her—*their* answer. He didn’t really understand. What he did know was that Iarumas, or perhaps the All-Stars, had been the ones to discover it. And the elevator was in...

“The Monster Allocation Center. So shouldn’t it be on the third level?” he asked.

“The third level... The third level, huh? Hmph.” Regnar snorted

unhappily. He wasn't sure what had her so irritated. "That one's the private express service elevator... No, the elevator for privates who've finished their training. It's a little soon for any of you to be using it."

Regnar chuckled. Her laughter and footsteps were drowned out by the clanking of Coretas's armor.

Coretas barely said anything, just continuing on in silence. The suit of armor had stepped into the dark zone without hesitation. It was unclear what they were thinking. Despite that mystery, Schumacher was grateful for their quiet obedience.

He had too much else to think about.

Suddenly, Regnar said, "Look, we've arrived."

Mysteriously, as she took another casual step, he felt her presence vanish. She'd stepped out of the darkness.

Schumacher wouldn't be left behind. He stepped forward, resolute, and...

"I guess you'd call this one the workers' elevator," Regnar said, breaking into a cackle. He saw her knock on the double doors—shut tight—which resembled a monolith.

Next to her stood Coretas, and a little behind him were the gnome and the thief girl.

"W-We're going...in...there...?" stammered Shadowwind.

"We're going in..." repeated the red-and-blue girl before she paused for a moment of silent contemplation. Then, her tone slightly changed, and she asked, "Are we riding it?"

As if triggered by her words, the doors silently opened—they slid off to either side. Inside was a small room, just large enough for six. There were a number of panels on the walls.

Normally, enough space for six would have been a lot, but...it looked so cramped. So suffocating. Was that because of the miasma? It made one's sense of even basic concepts like big or small become vague.

For some reason Schumacher couldn't place, this small burial chamber felt like a coffin.

"Okay! I'm getting in first!"

Regnar, however, didn't share his view—or if she did, she didn't care. She literally jumped into the chamber. The room tilted with a creak.

"Did it just shake...?" asked Schumacher.

"Well, of course. It's hanging from up above."

You scared? The rhea's red eyes gleamed as she looked up at him. She

was totally different from that other girl—Orlaya—who was at Catlob's trading post.

Schumacher silently stepped into the elevator without answering. Coretas clanked in behind him.

“So...we are riding it, then.” The gnome tottered in after her.

“Wh-Whoa...!”

Finally, Shadowwind rushed in, her footsteps silent. The doors swished shut.

Ignoring the thief girl, whose hair bounced behind her as she came to a stop, Regnar turned to face the panel on the wall. “We want the third floor, right?”

“Yeah.” Schumacher nodded. “We go down, get the ring, and head back. That’s it.”

“Aye, aye.”

The rhea pressed a button with her tiny fingers, and they were all struck by an unsettling feeling. It was like they were floating.

The room—the box—was moving. Sinking. Falling. Downward, endlessly.

The dungeon was divided into level one, level two, and so on, but no one knew the depth of any of those levels. There were times when it felt like they were divided only by a single stone floor, and at other times it felt like there were great cavernous spaces between levels. Given that, it didn’t feel odd to Schumacher that the descent seemed to go on forever.

Worrying about such things would get him nowhere. Perhaps he just didn’t want Regnar to pick up on his insecurity and laugh at him again.

He fell silent, crossing his arms as he looked around at the rest of the party. He noticed those red eyes twist with amusement at his behavior—as he’d expected—but he decided to ignore her.

A rhea strider, an armored...*human* lord, a gnome mage, and a rookie thief.

It’s a good thing we haven’t run into wandering monsters, but...

He felt a little uneasy about breaking into a burial chamber when he still didn’t know how capable his party members were. He couldn’t count on good teamwork, and he didn’t know if he’d make it back alive.

Nah, it’s too late to worry about that.

It was past the point where he could do anything about it—he’d already decided to trust his life to a bunch of strangers he’d only just met. If someone died, well, it was all part of the plan. Once the job paid out, they

would be more than able to afford a resurrection. Ideally, everyone would make it back alive, but success was a higher priority. And in the most extreme case, all that mattered was that he alone survived.

Schumacher had begun to notice that there was something incredibly cold about his heart.

When did that happen?

When he'd fought the red dragon? When he'd given up on a companion reduced to ash? Or when he'd killed an enemy who had turned their back to him? He didn't know. Was everyone who delved into the dungeon like this? Or just him?

In short, this might have been what it felt like to become "evil."

§

Ding. The doors opened with an incongruously cheerful sound.

Regnar took off like the wind. Schumacher and Coretas followed. The back row trailed behind them.

This was the third level.

It didn't look much different from the first, and yet it felt far colder.

He'd heard that, as Scale's adventurers frequented the dungeon more and more, they strayed further and further from the domain of humanity. Each time Schumacher descended the stairs, he was reminded that this was not a place where people were meant to survive. Staying alive wasn't an impossibility here, but even so, he usually kept his exploration to the first and second levels. He didn't often challenge the third.

"The Monster Allocation Center is up ahead." Regnar pressed on as though she knew the place like the back of her hand. The silver braid spilling out from her hood swayed as she did. "Or if you're scared, we can turn back," she offered teasingly.

"I'm going," he shot back, meeting the challenge. Obviously, Schumacher hadn't taken this job unprepared.

The Monster Allocation Center—that was the name of a large burial chamber on the third level. It had previously been hidden.

Whenever monsters in the dungeon were defeated, after some time passed, they would reappear—along with their treasure. That had been true of every chamber. At least so far.

The Monster Allocation Center was no different. But what set it apart was the monsters' number and frequency. A party could defeat them again and again, and more would appear instantly. To return from this place

alive, and to gain the treasure, they had to endure the onslaught.

That was the rumor. The only party that had returned alive—at least, the only one Schumacher knew about with absolute certainty—was the All-Stars. Although many claimed to have ridden the elevator down to brave greater depths, it was hard to tell whether those other adventurers were telling the truth.

That was why Schumacher had personally assembled a group of companions, prepared equipment, gathered information, and was standing here now.

He'd let Regnar lead the way at first, but it wasn't long before Schumacher started to piece things together for himself. The directions he'd heard in the tavern, the dungeon scenery unfolding in front of his eyes —these images slowly began to overlap in his mind's eye.

"Only an idiot takes the dungeon slowly, one floor at a time," Regnar said. She looked up at Schumacher when she noticed he was now walking alongside her. "I like to do things all in one go. It's faster that way..."

She snickered. He thought he'd gotten used to her by now, but she still irritated and infuriated him. That feeling showed no sign of abating, even when they arrived in front of the heavy doors.

"This..." the red and blue girl whispered. "This is the place."

He wasn't about to turn back now. Schumacher ran his hand over the doors—they felt like iron to him—and paused to take a breath.

"The rumors say the monsters are humanoids...and that there are spellcasters too."

"We'll be wanting to put them to sleep with KATINO, silence them with MONTINO, and fizzle their spells with CORTU, then," Regnar said with a sneer before mockingly adding, "Here's hoping our only spellcaster doesn't die."

"I-I shall protect her!"

"Mm-hmm..."

Even though Shadowwind's guarantee didn't exactly inspire confidence, the gnome girl nodded.

Coretas, meanwhile...didn't say anything.

"Let's go," said Schumacher.

Taking their silence as consent, he vigorously kicked in the door. The adventurers rushed in like an avalanche. They had to get inside and assemble in formation swiftly or else the enemy would seize the initiative.

It was a tense moment for Schumacher. However, that tension was

broken by a single white figure racing ahead—Regnar.

“First blood goes to the burrow-dweller!!!”

Sparks flew as metal rang, and black figures rose up from the darkness. Humanoids. Three, four of them...? Wearing armor...

“Use KATINO!”

Schumacher wouldn’t have known that he could bark orders like that without missing a beat.

The gnome girl responded by chanting in what was almost a whisper. “Kafaref tai nuunzanme... (*Stop, O soul, thy name is sleep.*)” Her frail voice itself seemed more likely to put Schumacher to sleep than the mist her spell had conjured.

He raced through the magical smoke, running straight toward their enemies. Lifting his sword above his shoulders, he swung. Schumacher had never been formally trained in swordsmanship. However...

“Ooh-rahhh!!!”

I can’t imagine techniques invented to kill people would do me any good against dragons and other monsters.

Schumacher had polished his technique on his own—inside the dungeon. He swung his blade down from above with all his might, shouting as he did.

It was like he was splitting firewood.

Whether his enemies were real or illusions, he saw no need to distinguish. He’d mercilessly shatter their skulls.

They splattered him with blood and brain matter, then fell over without uttering a word and landed with a loud *thump*.

These guys aren’t human!

That one round of action—that instant in which he’d cut down a foe—chilled Schumacher to the bone. As he slammed his blade home, his eyes had met the red eyes of his enemy, wide open and burning with fire.

They’re not sleeping!

KATINO was ineffective. And not because the gnome had failed to cast the spell.

These enemies had a resistance to sleep!

Should they run away? Recast their support spells? Whatever they did, they would have to rethink their tactics.

However, the sign had already been given. There was a jangle of metal as Coretas ran forward. They used the swords held between the fingers of both of their hands like claws, swinging at the enemy in front of them. The

diminutive foe swung its machete-like weapon and swatted those claws away. However, Coretas was not limited to just one weapon. There was a claw in their left hand too.

“GRROOGGBB?!?!?”

With a muddled cry, the monster fell on its back, throat torn open, drowning in a froth of its own blood.

“A goblin.”

That was Coretas’s voice—muffled words, echoing from the suit of armor standing over a vanquished foe.

Schumacher squinted at it again. He saw that the goblin had brown skin and filthy, disheveled hair. He’d once imagined them as puckish fairies—an impression he’d gotten from children’s stories. He banished that notion. These were vile imps, living underground out of hatred for the light of day.

“Hmm, so this is what we get this time,” Regnar mused, cackling.

She easily swayed out of the way of the goblin’s strikes—they were all power and no finesse—then danced around it as she struck with her curved blade.

There was a high-pitched whistle as blood spurted, and she finished it off.

“You’re not gonna tell me you got spooked by a *goblin*, are you?” Her white clothes, hair, and skin were dyed dark red with her enemy’s blood. Shouldering her blade, Regnar turned and gave Schumacher an enraptured smile.

He tore his eyes away, ignoring her bewitching gaze. “It looks like they can’t be put to sleep. Try another spell,” he said.

“Right...” Rahm, or perhaps Sahm, trailed off, then said, “Understood.”

Interrupting them in a trembling voice, Shadowwind cried, “W-We’ve got more coming from the back of the chamber! Lots of them!”

“Even I can count...” Regnar sneered. Her smile from before had vanished like it’d never been there at all.

Schumacher followed Regnar with his eyes as she immediately took off running. She was headed toward the new batch of enemies.

Goblins, goblins, and more goblins—big ones, little ones, average ones.
I can’t tell the difference!

They were all just goblins to him. Were the rumors true? Could some cast spells?

Thinking about it wouldn’t change the situation. Pressed by urgency, Schumacher stepped forward.

It wasn't fair—while adventurers could only seem to stand three abreast at most, monsters had no such limitation. This was one of the ways in which the dungeon screwing with their perception could sometimes hurt adventurers.

A gang of goblins gathered. Their shouts grated on his ears. They swung their weapons without hesitation. Violence. Death.

"Damn it...!" Schumacher's focus (hit points) drained away as he resisted.

He bashed with his shield. Swung his sword. One goblin was bloodied. He turned to face the next.

Was the rest of the party okay? He didn't hear any screams. The goblin's voices were only coming from in front of him.

All he could do was fight, fight, fight. He attacked them over and over. The repetition numbed his thoughts. He could only swing on mindlessly.

It wasn't quite the same as being free from intrusive thoughts. That was why the big shield of MAPORFIC saved his life.

"Whoa?!"

The force field spell knocked away a club that had been about to brain him, protecting him from the blow, and the recoil forced Schumacher to stumble backward, gaining him distance. He looked at his attacker.

"A hobgoblin...!"

"Those guys aren't as tough as they look," Regnar said scornfully. "If you let 'em scare you, you lose!"

Schumacher steadied his breathing. Fair enough—it was a bit bigger than a goblin.

But that's all it is!

The creature could probably shrug off sleep effects, but there was nothing else particularly threatening about it.

The real threat...was behind it.

As he was trading blows with the hobgoblin's club, Schumacher noticed another goblin. An unusual one. Its entire body was covered in a layer of green paint, and on top of that, ominous red symbols had been drawn. The goblin was waggling its fingers, and—

"CORTU, MONTINO!!!" Schumacher ordered as the goblin began murmuring.

"Chuzanme re—"

"Mimuzanme nuun tai nuunzanme... (*Let sound stop like iron and words hang in the air...*)"

The party's spellcasters started chanting too, but they were a little too late.

The goblin shaman threw an orange ball of fire from its fingertips. It swelled up as it sailed through the void.

"G-Gwagh...?!"

"Eek?!"

The flames of MAHALITO struck all of them. Schumacher heard the girls screaming in anguish from the back row.

The gnome girl rolled around on the floor, completely wreathed in fire, while Shadowwind was blasted against the wall. She shuddered, then collapsed and ceased moving.

Is she dead?

He didn't know. What he did know, however, was this—the shaman kept opening and closing its mouth. Its eyes blinked with surprise.

Coretas's MONTINO had worked.

Schumacher knew one more thing.

This isn't so bad compared to a dragon.

He rushed toward the enemy, his body still on fire, and swung his blade sharply.

§

"Oww... It's hoooot...!" Shadowwind whined.

Her youthful features were twisted and burnt. Her breathing was shallow—ragged—and she struggled to draw in breath. Had the fire scorched her lungs?

Schumacher had always thought that this girl was fairly young. Perhaps it was fair to say that she was still a child.

I was right to stick her in the back row.

In that burial chamber, which was littered with corpses and spattered with blood, the smell of death hung in the air. Schumacher sighed. So long as she was still alive, he couldn't let her die just yet. There was still work for her to do.

He signaled Coretas with his eyes. They crouched down next to Shadow and held out a palm covered in sinister armor.

"Darui arifla (O life, well forth)..."

With the blessing of DIAL, Shadow finally breathed a sigh of relief.

Schumacher left her to Coretas and walked over to Rahm...or Sahm. Although the gnome girl had gotten off more lightly than Shadowwind,

she was still scorched all over. The only thing that separated the two was that one had previous experience delving into the dungeon, and the other didn't. Nothing more than that. It was due to a difference in their degree of ability (level)—or so some might say.

Red and blue horns shot up as the gnome girl noticed Schumacher's approach.

"Sorry..." she said, her throat raw. "I was useless."

"If that's how you feel, then try to be useful next time."

He pulled a potion of DIAL out of his pack and tossed it to her. Her little hands hesitated, then rushed to catch the tiny vial. Somehow, she managed.

Red and blue eyes stared blankly at him. "Okay." She gave a vacuous nod, uncorked the little bottle, and gulped down the potion inside.

That will do it for now.

The front row wasn't unharmed either. If any of them had died, it was going to cost even more money. In that sense, Schumacher's first priority was to—

"What, are you scared? I know just the spell for times like this." The rhea girl erupted in a cackle that seemed designed to annoy. "It goes 'mapiro mahama dilomat.'"

He had no idea what that sequence of syllables was supposed to mean. However, he did understand what she was trying to say. It was something like, "Turn tail and get out of here already."

Regnar smirked as she looked up at him. Schumacher simply replied, "All right. Let's finish up quickly and use the elevator to pull out."

Regnar was silent—she seemed caught off guard by this.

"I told you from the start we'd be doing that, right?"

"Yeah, you did." She nodded, seemingly pleased. "And to do that, we'll first need our thief to get up and get to work." She put her bare foot on the bloody treasure chest.

That was right. Their job here wasn't to clear the Monster Allocation Center. The item they were after—the ring—was in this chest. Or...somewhere else.

"Wahhh...hhh...hhh..."

As the thief—able to move now, if only barely—dragged herself over to the chest, Regnar pointed at her and said, "Come on! Get to it. If you mess this up, we've gotta do the whole thing over."

The girl turned her tear-filled eyes to Schumacher. He simply pointed

at the chest. “This is the whole reason we brought you. Come on.”

“V-Very well...” Despite her sobs, she seemed to take her work seriously.

At this point, there was nothing left for the other adventurers to comment on. A thief’s battle with a trap wasn’t like combat with a monster. Fighting relied on focus (hit points), but the act of disarming utilized something other than that. From an extreme perspective, as long as a thief wasn’t dead, no matter how badly they were hurt, they could still open chests.

We need her to get it open, or we’ve got a problem.

If she couldn’t, they would never get what was inside. He didn’t want to go all the way back to the inn to rest, only to have to come back down and try again.

The corpses littering the floor weren’t just goblins. If he looked for them, he was sure he’d find the bodies of adventurers too—those who’d challenged the Monster Allocation Center and failed.

This time, it so happened that they had only encountered a gang of goblins, which they had been able to defeat without any of the party dying. But next time, they could face a dragon. And even if it was only another gang of goblins, it was still possible that one of them might die.

Schumacher glanced over at the young gnome girl holding the potion bottle in both hands. She was steadily lapping up the rest of its contents.

If the one who died were their mage—Rahm-and-Sahm—the loss would be massive. He’d paid for her resurrection and even purchased her equipment. He wasn’t ready for her to die on him just yet.

If it were one of the others instead—Shadowwind, for instance—would that be better? A novice thief. No experience to speak of, nor any real equipment. He could probably find others like her at the training ground or the tavern. As long as he dumped her remains at the Temple of Cant, he could choose not to resurrect her, and no one would fault him for it.

The dead of Scale had been known to get back up and start talking, but they all knew that being abandoned was a possibility.

No...

After considering it, Schumacher had to shake his head. If Shadowwind were to die, that would mean needing to abandon the chest. That would be even more of a pain. He really didn’t want the extra hassle.

If someone had to die, he’d rather it be Coretas or Regnar—though the cost of reviving either would be higher.

“I-It’s open...I think. Indeed...” the girl, who had finally stopped crying, said with a sniffle.

“You sure?” he asked.

“P-Probably...”

“Well, open the lid, then,” Regnar said teasingly. The look on Shadowwind’s face only got more pitiful.

Schumacher sighed, then stepped forward. He kicked the box with the shoes he’d made for himself when he decided to become an adventurer.

“Wow,” Regnar said in an exaggerated way. She punctuated the statement with a poorly formed whistle. Shadow’s dark eyes widened.

Ignoring the two of them, Schumacher looked to see what was in the chest. *Just some gold.* It would have been a mountain of riches in the outside world. Also buried in the pile was a red staff, a blue ribbon, and...

A single, sparkling ring.

“Looks like this wasn’t a wasted trip...” Schumacher sighed. He’d picked up the habit of sighing at everything since he’d started adventuring.

Tension and relaxation. He was a swinging pendulum caught forever between the two.

“Oh look, of course there’s a blue ribbon. I’ve seen enough that I’m sick of them at this point, but...it’s your first, right?” asked Regnar. Her tiny fingers snatched the blue ribbon from the mound of treasure.

“Congratulations, brave private. Wear it with pride.”

Regnar stood on her tip-toes to pin the blue ribbon to Schumacher’s chest. He couldn’t help but cast a dubious glance at the thing, but...well, for now, it didn’t really matter.

“As for the staff... I guess the mage can carry it.”

They couldn’t use it until someone—probably Catlob—appraised it for them.

Schumacher passed the unidentified staff to the gnome girl. She had moved up to stand behind him at some point. The size and weight of the thing made her lean to one side comically. It amused Schumacher to see surprise on both sides of her normally expressionless face.

“That just leaves the ring...”

This was what they were delving for. They had to bring it back or else there would be no point in having come in the first place.

He held it between his fingers. It was awfully heavy for a little band of pure gold. Its weight seemed to sink into the palm of his hand...

It made him gulp.

Still, it doesn't look that unusual.

He scrutinized the ring closely, but his untrained eyes could tell him nothing. He'd have to send it to Catlob... No, wait, there was no reason *he* should have to cover the cost of the appraisal.

He just had to turn in the ring to the client. But as Schumacher went to pocket the ring...

Coretas, without a word, seized Schumacher's wrist with an armored hand and stopped him.

"Wh-What...?" Schumacher asked falteringly.

He received no reply to his question. Coretas glared at the ring through their visor, then after a brief pause, spoke.

"It's a Ring of Death. It drains the life of the one who holds it."

Schumacher's eyes widened. He wasn't shocked to find out what the ring was. No, he was marveling at the fact that Coretas could identify it at a glance. That could only mean one thing.

"You're not a lord...but a bishop?!"

Of course, there was no response. Coretas acted as if they had said all that they needed to.

The armored hand released Schumacher, and there was a metallic rustle as Coretas moved away. If Coretas had the ability to identify items, then they *had* to be a bishop. But were bishops able to wear that sort of armor?

Well, for now...I've got bigger concerns. Schumacher decided to stop trying to probe his companion's identity. He looked back to the ring. *It drains life?*

By the time he carried it back to the surface, it would have exhausted him further. In his current state, encounters with wandering monsters would already pose a significant risk.

"Who should carry it? It's a real head-scratcher." Regnar chuckled as if she could see right through him. It was like she had decided that it wasn't her problem. "Count me out. You'll have to ask someone else... Oh, and I guess Coretas *can't carry any more* either."

Ignoring Regnar's inscrutable comments, Schumacher silently looked at the other two members of his party. Shadowwind looked frightened. Rahm-and-Sahm raised her head and looked at him vacantly. There was also, well, himself.

Who would carry it? Who was he going to let die? Who was he going to kill?

He had to be the one to decide. Schumacher felt a horrible wave of

nausea. It felt like he was going to sink into the pile of corpses at his feet.

Corpses.

“There are jobs for corpses...”

As the adventurers stared each other down, those words fell from Schumacher’s lips and then faded away.

§

“So, in the end, what did you end up doing?”

“Looked for a corpse, rammed the ring on its finger, then hauled it back.”

Delving in a party of just five had paid off. It meant he hadn’t needed to kill anyone.

Schumacher let out a sigh in the gloom of Catlob’s Trading Post.

“Hrmm,” the rhea girl sitting in front of him said without emotion.

The shop’s owner...was nowhere to be seen. What was that gloomy elf doing in the back room? Schumacher couldn’t imagine. But if he hadn’t heard the elf’s insane declaration that there were jobs even corpses could do, then...

Just how much did he predict?

Where did he learn about the Ring of Death? And how much did he know?

Of course, maybe there was no need for Schumacher to read into it.

Maybe the elf had happened to murmur those words on a whim.

Maybe other customers had found such a ring and brought it in to be appraised.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

There’s got to be more to it.

Unable to shake the feeling, Schumacher felt a horrible chill come over him.

The nature of the dungeon—its truths—its mysteries. Even surrounded by all these unknowns, they were pushed to move forward. But it was a little late to bring that up now.

Scale was a town that prospered on the dungeon’s riches and on the backs of the adventurers sacrificed to attain them. Born and raised in this town, Schumacher knew that all too well.

Does the insect that has fattened itself on carrion grow afraid when it realizes it has been eating a dead body? Was the whole notion of that not absurd?

"Well, I suppose if you aren't having it appraised or selling it here, then it's got nothing to do with me," said Orlaya.

"I was surprised that Coretas was a bishop, though..."

"There are bishops like that too, huh?"

"If I get the chance, I'll introduce you."

The man who had made the request for the Ring of Death had been incredibly pleased to purchase it from them. As a result, Schumacher now had a fuller wallet...but what had the man wanted with a thing like that?

Could it be used in an assassination? That was about the only use Schumacher could think of for that troublesome ring. But before he started worrying about the lives and deaths of other people, he first had to think about his own.

Preparing equipment. Buying items. Paying for resurrections. Adventuring came with all sorts of expenses.

In that respect, it's the same as running a business.

His father hadn't said a word to him since he'd decided to become an adventurer, and he had no intention of breaking that silence. Still, there remained an unpleasant truth: all the things his old man had taught him had been coming in handy. His father had once said, "If you don't understand something, leave it that way." That went for the mysteries of the dungeon and also those of life and death. If Schumacher approached those things assuming he could understand and unravel them—well, usually, he was going to be in for a bad time.

He'd been forced to see that repeatedly as of late.

"So, did it go well?"

"Huh?"

"The resurrection."

Hearing Orlaya speak, Schumacher looked up from his contemplation and nodded. "Well, probably."

"Probably?" Orlaya narrowed her one eye dubiously. "Probably?"

"It's faster to see for yourself."

Not long after, the bells jangled as the door cracked open. Two small figures slipped through the gap and into the trading post.

Red and blue. Blue and red.

"We're Rahm-and-Sahm."

"We're Sahm-and-Rahm."

Two twins, each with their face divided down the middle, spoke in turn. After a beat, they looked at one another.

“No, it’s Rahm-and-Sahm, right?”
“But can’t it be Sahm-and-Rahm?”
“It’s harder to say that way.”
“You think?”
“I do.”
“I guess you have a point.”
“We’ll go with Rahm-and-Sahm, then.”
“Let’s do that.”

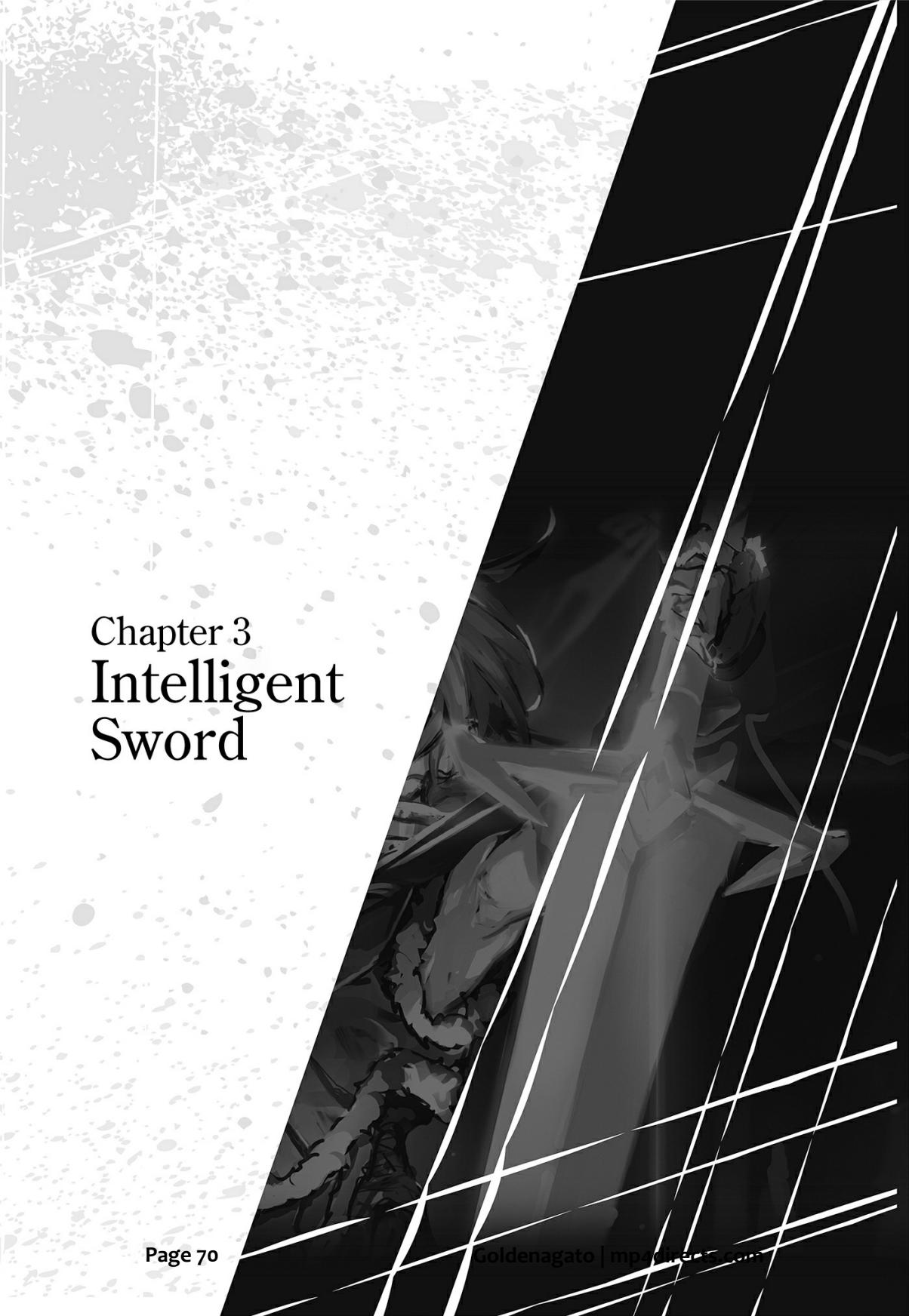
They whispered to one another, giggling. Even though they had distinct voices, when they overlapped with one another, it was hard to tell who was speaking. It was cute—or unsettling. Like there were two of the same person...or maybe not.

The other day, when there was only one of them, she had worn a vacant expression, like some part of her had been missing. That was gone now.

Had these two always been like this? Or had it happened during the resurrection? Schumacher had long since lost any desire to look into it any further.

Peering past the inscrutable expression on Schumacher’s face, Orlaya turned a dubious glance toward the twins. “So, which of you is which?” she finally asked.

They looked at one another. Then, in perfect sync, they replied, “Who can say?”



Chapter 3

Intelligent

Sword

“Okay, we’re all good to go, right?”

“Y-Yeah...”

“C’mon, you don’t need to check every little thing.”

“Arf!”

It listened to the redhead girl’s fierce bark from where it hung on her back. This stray dog of a girl wasn’t barking because she understood what was being said, of course. She just wanted to get going already—to proceed to the first level of the dungeon. That was all.

But there was a reason she didn’t run off on her own, and it had nothing to do with her obeying anybody. She was just confident that these people couldn’t do anything right without her.

The boy who technically served as the party’s leader knew that painfully well. He ignored her, a big scowl on his face, and glanced around at his companions.

“The front row will be Garbage, me, and...” He paused briefly. “You, Berkanaan.”

“Y-Yeah...!” The big girl’s response was an octave higher than her earlier one.

It was clear from one look at her clothes that the mage had come to Scale from the land in the desert. Clothes, not equipment. She held her Dragon Slayer as if it were some sort of staff, then timidly looked toward the rhea girl.

Berkanaan had hoped that once they got a new companion, she would be able to fight in the back row. That wasn’t how it had played out—the new member of their group was a bishop. Berkanaan had no intention of hiding in the shadow of that girl, who never made any attempt to hide how dissatisfied she was.

“I-I’ll...do my best.”

“That’s great and all,” came the rhea girl’s voice near her feet. “But are you expecting me to watch the back all on my own?”

“Even if we get attacked from behind, they won’t hit you,” Raraja reasoned. “I mean, you’re tiny.”

“Maybe I ought to hit you with a spell from behind...”

They were trading sharp words. Both looked vexed. The bishop narrowed the only eye that the curses had left her with and glared at the thief. However, given that she didn’t argue against his decision beyond a slight click of her tongue, she was apparently going to accede to it.

“This is all ’cause we don’t have Iarumas today...” muttered Raraja.

Ever since their battle with the unseen being, that black-clad mage had been busy with something. Annoyance laced the thief's voice as he spat those words. Was his irritation due to how much Iarumas's absence lowered the party's combat potential? Was he upset that the mage was neglecting their exploration? Or was he simply uneasy?

No matter the reason, it did not feel like something worth raising a fuss about. Thinking that a single pair of adventurers would be able to make it to the bottom level of the dungeon alone—there was nothing more overconfident than that. The dungeon wasn't a place where one should ever feel safe and relaxed anyway.

After much groaning, Raraja seemed to come to a decision. He pursed his lips as he said, "For now, we'll do the usual. Look for bodies, go deeper, and then return. Got it."

"Um... To what floor?" the big girl asked.

"The third, if we can." He paused for a beat, then insisted, "But we're definitely *not* stopping by the Monster Allocation Center."

"By all means, go ahead..." the rhea girl said snidely.

The black-haired mage looked concerned. "I've heard that some people go to the fourth level...and never come back."

"It's not like parties getting wiped out is even uncommon," the thief boy shot back.

Orlaya shrugged. "That sort of rumor spreads because overconfident fools go down there, never to return."

Garbage had been keeping quiet as her companions discussed their plans and overall direction, but—

"Woof!"

—she finally barked and took off running.

"Hey, wait!" came the shout from behind her.

The adventure began from there.

Thinking back, it had always been at the side of experienced adventurers. In all its long years, it'd never had the chance to walk alongside the young and inexperienced.

It lacked human emotions, but if it'd possessed them, it would have been tired of it all.

It was the treasured sword hanging on the back of the red-headed girl. Its name was Hrathnir, and it was an intelligent sword.

§

“Groaaarrrr!!!”

Garbage built up momentum and sprang toward the ogre, slashing at it. The sword tried to adjust her rough swings, but she would forcibly bend it to her will.

Do as you’re told.

The result was that Garbage moved in an unnatural way in midair, bringing the blade down on the ogre with added momentum.

“Uggggghhhhaaaaa?!?!”

A scream—blood splatter. The decapitating strike was more than even such a massive monster could take.

The girl executed a nimble landing next to its crumpled remains. The head fell to the ground with an audible noise, then bounced and rolled away.

“Grruff!”

Garbage opened her mouth and bared her canines triumphantly, then immediately sprang at her next prey.

These monsters were described in the bedtime stories of the outside world—on rare occasions, they emerged to devour villagers. Garbage was slaying such creatures. It was a feat that put her in the same league as the heroes of those children’s stories.

However, in the dungeon, the vicious ogre was no more than a slightly advanced form of goblin. Ogres relied on brute force and numbers, and if they got into trouble, they would scatter in an instant. Of course, that was only if the adventurer were of a similar caliber to the ogres. If a rookie were to wander onto this floor and encounter them, then that careless novice would surely be eaten whole.

“Don’t run too far ahead!” shouted Raraja.

“Yap!”

It seemed the thief boy could imagine it happening. He was cautious. The redhead girl, who was the sword’s current master, had no such concerns for her own well-being. And even if she did, her response was unenthusiastic at best.

“These guys would go down to one blast of MAHALITO!” came an irate shout from the back row.

“I-I haven’t learned that spell...yet!” the black-haired mage exclaimed in response. Her voice sounded like she was halfway to crying.

MAHALITO was just a *minor* third-level spell. If she couldn’t even cast it, then she would have to do her part as a wall that protected the other

caster.

Berkanan, who was standing in the front row for no well-explained reason, swung her Dragon Slayer around in large arcs. Her opponent was an ogre—not a dragon. And to that ogre, her weapon was just a magical sword—nothing more than that. Still, considering that her blade could trade blows with an ogre despite her amateur swordsmanship, it was a fine sword indeed.

But that was all. The tall girl could serve as a shield—that was all. The same as the black-haired boy.

The bishop standing in the back row ground her teeth in frustration, unable to waste her spells. No, she was analyzing the combat situation and trying to convince herself of that. She tensed her body as she did.

That left Hrathnir—it was the only thing that could become a deciding factor in this battle.

Tearing through foes without resistance, the vacuum blade surrounding Hrathnir mercilessly slew ogres, filling the air with a fine red mist.

“Awoooooo!!!”

The redhead girl howled like a stray dog as she ripped the sword through the air, and the weapon tried to correct her course. However, the girl barked noisily, using her slender arms and the movement of her body to force it to submit.

This was treatment on the level of a common stick. And she was using it just like one too.

Hrathnir didn’t feel any shame as it descended upon such inferior monsters. A sword was a sword. There was nothing noble or disgraceful about cutting down foes. That shame belonged to the one who chose its enemies for it.

But to think that it would be used like a *cleaver!*

The sword’s hilt shook with indignation, but the redhead girl took no notice. Her slender fingers couldn’t be that powerful, yet their grip on the sword was tight. She wouldn’t let go.

A wild dog with a stick, she slammed it into her enemies and swung it around. Prince Alavik would have been mortified to see his treasured sword Hrathnir used in this manner. What would all the Diamond Knights of the past think if they could witness this?

In that sense, the sword still hadn’t accepted the girl as its master. Hadn’t all those knights of the past needed to overcome the sword before taking it into their hands?

But what was this...?

The girl held its hilt tight, swinging it around as if she were having fun performing some favorite trick of hers.

“Woof!”

When the battle ended, she rested it against her heaving shoulder and enthusiastically ran over to one corner of the burial chamber. Her eyes were on the chest sitting there. Satisfied with her handiwork, the redhead girl barked and kicked the chest.

“Don’t kick it! There could be a trap!”

“Ruff!”

The girl barked noisily at the thief boy who was rushing in their direction. It was like she was telling him that he was being too slow.

Behind the thief, the tall girl wore a resigned smile. The rhea girl shrugged her shoulders.

The sword watched on.

Perhaps it would have done so unwillingly, but...the sword did not have emotions.

§

There was a small rattling of metal.

The thief boy had his back to the rest of them as he attempted to open the chest.

No, not all of them.

“Yap!”

“I told you to cut that out!”

The redhead girl whacked the chest and then kicked the boy. It was as though she were trying to tell him to hurry up.

The sword felt exactly the same way. There was a world of difference between tearing through the flesh of monsters and being used to smack a box made of hard iron and wood. A lesser sword would have been chipped. This one, however, would not be harmed by such minor misuse. If it remained in the girl’s hands, would she continue treating it this way?

The sword didn’t have anything analogous to emotions or human will, but even so, it still had some sense of dignity. This was unthinkable treatment for a sword that once belonged in the hands of the Diamond Knight.

It didn’t know where the rest of the knight’s equipment lay sleeping, but it would have liked to have had its fellows’ input.

“Yeesh, you were so dejected after your old sword broke,” said the boy, “and now you’re already treating your new one like that.”

The redhead girl let out a whine.

As the sword thought about how the girl must have swung its predecessor, it felt a slight hint of compassion. However, at the same time, it came to suspect that it was its predecessor’s fault that she now treated her sword this way. Hrathnir wanted to hold that old sword to account.

“Garbage? Depressed? Really?” The rhea girl seemed doubtful.

“Y-Yeah... Probably?” the tall girl replied. “That was how she looked to me...”

Look at these three compared to the redhead girl! thought Hrathnir.

The boy was focused on opening the chest—the tall girl was drawing a circle on the ground using holy water. The rhea bishop was focusing her mind as she prepared to meditate, no doubt for the appraisal she would be doing later.

Unfortunately, that mental focus was rapidly dispelled by the next topic that came up.

“It was like...‘Aw, it broke,’ you know?” explained Berkana. “She tried a Cusinart and all sorts of others, but...none of them felt right to her.”

“Ah...” Orlaya nodded. “Now that you mention it, she came to my place too. Carrying a sword.”

Indeed, Hrathnir could not help but agree. The great smith Cusinart had crafted many fine blades, but none of them were really up to its level. They were fine old swords, but on their own, they were not the stuff of legends. It would have been hard for them not to come up short when compared with Hrathnir, the sword of the Diamond Knight.

“Arf!”

However, the girl seemed to notice they were talking about her in a way that cast her in a bad light. She rushed over to join in the conversation.

“Yap! Yip!”

“Oh, er, umm...” Berkana floundered for a moment. “W-We weren’t really making fun of you, okay? I mean it...really...”

Garbage sniffed. “Meh...”

“It’s a wonder how the two of you can communicate,” Orlaya muttered. Not that she didn’t vaguely understand the girl herself. She cast a dubious eye toward the treasure chest. “Raraja, would you get that thing open already? If Garbage keeps yapping like this, don’t blame me when I fail

the identification.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“If all that’s in there is a dull sword, I’m totally blaming you.”

“That’s not my fault either!”

The thief looked over his shoulder a little as he shouted, and Garbage picked up on it. Judging that the boy was no longer doing as she had commanded, she snapped her teeth at him and emitted a low growl.

“Yap!”

“Yeah, I know! Shut up, will ya?!”

The sword could not have agreed more.

§

“And after all that, it was just an ordinary sword...”

“There was no way we were going to find some famous magical blade on this shallow level of the dungeon.”

“Well, yeah... I guess we wouldn’t, huh?”

“Arf.”

Each of the four reacted in their own way.

The boy had opened the chest to find a single sword and a mound of gold. It was a fine blade that, when drawn from its scabbard, would shine even in the darkness of the dungeon. It was a sword befitting a hero—something able to trade blows with monsters without suffering so much as a single chip.

But that was all.

There were so many blades of its caliber that lay sleeping in this dungeon. One could easily toss it aside. That sword could have become famous in the outside world, but in the dungeon, it was just “a sword.” In fact, the boy had been far more appreciative of the gold.

When living among others, especially in Scale, one could never have enough money. The dungeon town was a place where one could trade away their life for money, so one might even say that the prices in Scale were cheap.

Indeed, indeed, the sword would have agreed if it had possessed human thoughts.

Money was a vulgar thing, yet at the same time, it was the finest measure of value in this world. Those with wealth knew the worth of the things they had, and they knew which things money could not buy.

Next to Hrathnir, the only thing that could compare was that cursed

sword. No lesser weapon could—

“Grrruff!”

That train of thought was interrupted by the girl’s bark.

Inside the circle drawn in holy water, Hrathnir was only useful as a stick for poking at the fire.

Yes, a fire poker. What degradation!

If it had been in possession of a mind and a body, it would have been shuddering with rage and humiliation. In fact, even now, it was rattling as it shook in the girl’s little hands.

But with a single “Arf!” she forcibly shut down Hrathnir’s meager protest.

“Whah...”

Surely this girl didn’t even understand how stirring a fire worked. It seemed as if she were simply enjoying poking around in the flames, knocking down logs, and sending sparks flying.

The rhea girl raised her voice in irritation, but not at the girl’s barbaric behavior. “A campfire in the dungeon? Really?”

“We’re just trying it out, okay?” said Raraja.

The tall girl looked on meekly. “Well, I’m the one...who started the fire...”

“I’ll bet you’d do anything he asked you.”

“Th-That’s not true, though...?” The tall girl added a slightly shrill “probably” under her breath.

The thief boy had proposed that they stop for a short rest, but that rest had turned into literally camping out in the dungeon. The boy had set up firewood that he had brought from the surface inside the magic circle drawn with holy water. They’d used it to start a campfire.

The dungeon made one’s sense of time vague. There was no such thing as starvation or thirst in the depths. The reason adventurers brought a small amount of food with them anyway was to help them keep their focus—and not the kind of focus used in battle. Unless they were prepared for a long stay, it wasn’t common to cook food like this.

“You won’t catch me eating any of those filthy capybaras, but I figure these guys should be good eating,” said the thief boy.

“Rabbit, huh...” The rhea girl watched as the boy butchered a small, white rabbit. He’d killed it before they’d encountered the ogres—though it was impossible to tell how long ago that had been—and then strapped it to his pack.

Perhaps the sharpness of the rabbit's front teeth concerned the rhea girl. She brought her face in for a closer look.

"Didn't Iarumas-san..." the tall girl interjected. "Well...didn't he say that you shouldn't do this?"

The boy scoffed. "I never got what he was going on about. What did he mean, 'rabbits are scary'?"

These were the words of an ignorant boy, but he wasn't wrong. They had nothing to fear from a motionless corpse. That was especially true when the people involved were adventurers.

"Well, there're four of us..." the rhea girl pointed out. "Are you planning to have everyone take a leg? That's not fair to the people who get the front ones."

"I'll make it even when we split the back meat."

"I-I've never had rabbit before..."

"Arf."

Three young girls were watching him dismember a rabbit that at least *looked* cute...and they were totally fine with it. The boy felt awkward being the center of attention, but he worked fast.

Soon, the rabbit meat was sizzling over the fire. The fat melted and dripped. A savory smell filled the air.

"Ruff!" The redhead girl stirred the fire, and her eyes lit up as she barked. It probably meant something like, "Hurry up." Even Hrathnir, which had been thrust into the flames, could tell that much.

The melting fat dripped down its blade. It burned and evaporated in the fire, then vanished.

The rhea girl watched with her cheek resting on one hand. Her tone was full of pity as she murmured, "I'll bet no one's ever used Hrathnir like this before. People will get mad."

"A-Ah ha ha...ha..." The tall girl let out a vague laugh in response. She watched as the redhead girl made a grab for the rabbit meat, only to have her hand slapped by the boy. A struggle ensued.

Hrathnir ignored this sequence of events, which couldn't have been more of an affront. Its hilt went on rattling.

How the rabbit was cooked—or what it tasted like—was of no concern to it. Although, as stated above, it had no shame about which foes it cut down, there was an addendum to be made: just as the Dragon Slayer could show its full power only when facing a dragon, the demon-slaying Hrathnir was best used in battle with denizens of the demon realm.

Even if it couldn't ask for a foe so great as an unseen being...well, something like a lesser demon would suit it just fine.

§

It did not begin to express itself again until much later, after they had finished camping.

“Huh...?”

The first to notice was the tall girl. She pitifully shrank into herself as she said, “Um, Garbage-chan...your sword...”

“Yap?”

“It's...shining?”

The entire party stopped as she said this. Four people—no, three people, since the redhead one didn't care—of differing heights turned to look at one another.

“Sorry, I can't see very well. Are you sure?” asked the rhea girl.

“Yeah... It's faint, though...” the tall girl confirmed.

“What'd you say?” The boy scowled and let out an involuntary groan. Ignoring the young girl's protests, he seized her by the scruff of the neck.

“Yap?! Yiiip?!”

The tall girl's timid assertion proved true. Lo and behold, the blade of the sword hanging from the redhead girl's back was wreathed in a pale light. The sword did not know what caused its own blade to shine—it must have been crafted that way. But the meaning of that light was clear.

The pale radiance was a warning—it announced the approach of an enemy fit to slay!

“Something's coming. Get ready!” the thief boy shouted. His voice was tense and shrill, but the speed of his reaction was praiseworthy. He must have instinctively understood the imminent danger.

“Grrrrr!”

With a deep growl, the girl seized the hilt of the sword on her back and fell into a fighting posture. Figures closing in on them through the miasma-filled gloom of the dungeon were illuminated by a beam of light from the blade.

Red bodies. Red. They were...

“Demons!” the rhea girl cried out—whether in fear or as a warning, it was hard to tell.

The four-armed, goat-headed fiend roared. This bizarre sound might have been in its infernal language, but in the material world, it was nothing

but an odious curse.

These were wandering monsters.

Who could know the intentions of the one who'd placed these monsters in the dungeon? If they served as guardians, then it was only natural that some protected the burial chambers while others roamed the corridors.

"A lesser demon!" the tall girl hollered as she drew the Dragon Slayer.

If Hrathnir had possessed humanlike thoughts, it might have let out a sigh of admiration. To recognize an enemy's true nature at first glance required either considerable experience...or a prior encounter. She had faced this monster before. And if she could draw her blade, having once battled such a fiend, then it meant she had emerged victorious from such an encounter.

Perhaps this girl had some actual combat experience.

However, just focusing on one enemy was not sufficient.

"There's more coming!"

The rhea girl was desperately trying to put up a strong front, but there was an unmistakable shudder in her voice—fear. And who could blame her? To see a demon and not be afraid, one had to either be a great hero or a fool.

Behind the demon stood dark red figures—foreign priests in the service of the void. How many of those indistinguishable figures were there? Five? Or six?

"Seriously?" Sweat dripped down the boy's face as he drew his dagger. As was always the case in the dungeon, they were outnumbered.

Should they fight? Or flee? Which carried a greater chance of survival? He felt a moment of indecision. However...

"Woof!"

The redhead girl did not hesitate. With a single bark, she pounced into the horde of monsters. This was what it meant to be fearless. Her slender white fingers squeezed tightly around the sword's hilt.

With the thoughts and feelings of an object, Hrathnir responded to its master's desires.

A flash of light.

"Groaar!!!" The blade's roar raised a gust of wind, forming a vacuum that ripped through the corridor. This whirlwind of death rivaled the blades of the sixth-level spell LORTO.

"AAAARGH?!"

"OOOOFF?!"

The attack tore into the helpless, screaming void priests. It wasn't lethal, but—

“Whah?!”

—the redhead girl's eyes went wide. Her sweeping blow had reached much farther than she'd expected it to.

But she soon grinned. She charged toward the enemy with an excited “Arf!”



Who was the real monster here?

“Augh,” the boy groaned in frustration. “Anyway, the demon’s the real threat! The rest of you, uh...cast spells...or something!”

“R-Right...!”

The tall girl nodded as the boy raced to the front row. He had been confused at first, but he deserved a passing mark for being able to give orders once he’d had a moment to collect himself. He wasn’t bad—not for his age and level!

“Wouah!!!” The redhead girl swung Hrathnir—it whooshed through the air to collide with one of the lesser demon’s four arms.

“GOOOAHHHRRG!!!”

“Yap?!”

Although it wasn’t fit to be called a greater demon, it was a demon all the same. Its strength was incomparably mightier than that of an average monster. When blade locked with arm, it was inevitable that the girl would be overpowered.

“Ughhh!” She gritted her teeth and resisted with all her might, but still, the blade was slowly but surely pushed away.

Her clear blue eyes darted left and right. She was worried about the void priests pressing in on her. Even if the demon didn’t get her, the priests could surround her on all sides—they would surely stab her to death.

It had nothing to do with her focus. The attack would be a fatal one (critical hit).

They were getting closer, and she was going to desperately resist them. “Woof!” barked the girl. It was a meaningless effort.

“Aah...?!”

Her knees shook. Her tiny body was pressed down—would she soon be crushed?

But then...

“Take a look at...this!”

“GAAARRG?!”

“Arf!”

The boy’s dagger grazed the demon’s arm, and the girl freed her blade during the lapse in its attention. She rolled away, panting like a dog, and then let out a growl of intimidation.

Her will to fight showed no sign of flagging—the same went for Hrathnir.

Truly, there was no more suitable opponent for Hrathnir than a demon.

Though this demon was classified as lesser, there was still only a fifty percent chance that Hrathnir's power to inflict death would be effective against it. On top of that, the demon's ability to cast spells as easily as it breathed was on par with a certain famous mage's.

The demon was indeed fearsome—yet any who faltered before such a foe would be unfit to bear Hrathnir.

Now...what of the mage who was standing behind them? And what of the bishop girl?

“Erm... Uh...” the mage holding a Dragon Slayer murmured, a serious look on her face. “KATINO...won’t work on the lesser demon, but...”

“But?” the rhea girl repeated. Her single eye widened. “It’ll work on the rest?!”

“P-Probably?”

The rhea’s next action had a dramatic effect.

“Mimuein lai tazanme (*O fire, become wind and explode!*)!”

Those words of truth, uttered with conviction, transformed into the little sparks of MELITO. In an instant, the sparks wrapped around the dark red priests of the void, making them anxious and eager to escape.

Ahh, this was why her burrow-dwelling kind were such an admirable race.

Her vision must have been limited, yet the bishop grinned with obvious glee once she knew what was happening.

“Nice!”

“Oh, um, well, I’ll do something too...!”

In response, the black-haired mage raised her Dragon Slayer like a staff. Her chanting, unlike her usually timid voice, had a boldness to it.

“Kafaref tai nuunzanme (*Stop, O soul, thy name is sleep.*)!”

KATINO was a staple spell because of how powerful it was. The corridor was immediately consumed by mist. The void priests stood there dazed.

With them out of the way...they only needed to settle things with the demon.

“Hey, I’m gonna support you, so figure out the rest!” shouted the thief boy.

“Arf!”

It seemed unlikely that the redhead girl understood his words. Even so, the boy called out to her, and the girl enthusiastically responded.

And so, the sword would have to respond as well. Though it was lesser,

their foe was still a demon. Hrathnir wanted nothing more than to slay it. When faced with a demon, most would easily give in to its horror. They would be shattered—incapable of being made whole ever again.

But the girl howled. This group would face the demon without ever faltering. Their spirit was admirable.

“Awoooooo!!!”

The redhead girl pounced, and in her hands, the demon-slaying Hrathnir howled along with her.

What more could possibly be said? The outcome of the battle was a foregone conclusion.

§

“Man, that sword sure is something,” remarked the thief boy.

The rhea girl stated the obvious. “Of course it is. It’s *Hrathnir*.”

The redhead girl snorted proudly, as if to say, “*That’s right.*” She must have mistakenly believed the compliment was meant for her.

The black-haired girl watched over them, exasperation written on her face.

They were already close to the surface. In a few more spaces, they would be able to see the entrance where adventurers liked to hang around. However, it was apparently quite the ordeal to keep an eye on this redhead girl—they worked hard to make sure that she didn’t run off on her own somewhere.

“Listen, I’m willing to buy that her sword’s magic and all,” the exhausted boy said, pointing to the redhead with a look of deep suspicion. “But I just can’t believe that she’s the legendary Diamond Knight.”

“Yap!”

There was a dull thud, followed by a cry of “Ouch!” The girl had kicked the boy hard in the shins. He spewed curses as his belongings scattered across the floor with a series of clatters.

The redhead girl snorted. She shouldered her blade and looked down at the boy crawling on the ground.

“Why you...!”

The boy gritted his teeth against the pain, then suddenly rose and lunged at the redhead girl. The two other girls started raising a fuss, and from there, things descended into quite a cacophony.

Caught in the thick of it, the sword on the girl’s back began shaking its blade. Could this truly be the Diamond Knight and her companions?

Indeed... One could not help but heartily agree with its skepticism.

Chapter 4

Ship in a

Bottle

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing?!”

A voice, shrill yet beautiful, cut through Durga’s Tavern early in the morning. The priest Sarah’s words shot through one man like the arrows of her ancestors.

He was the black-clad adventurer—Iarumas of the Black Rod.

He turned toward the pointy-eared elf, his expression as vacant as ever. “About what?” he asked.

“About Ainikki!”

Sarah plopped herself down in the seat across from him. She glanced down at the gruel on the table and snorted with disinterest. Quickly raising her hand, she called over a waitress and ordered bacon and scrambled eggs.

It had been a long time since the elven race first began eating meat.

In short order, her meal came, and she slathered it with salt, pepper, and a healthy dollop of honey. By the time Sarah began stuffing her cheeks, the rest of the adventurers in the tavern had lost interest in the pair. Or rather, when the other patrons had turned toward them with the intention of rubbernecking, a sharp glare from the elf had dissuaded all of them.

Sarah ate with gusto, but her well-honed stare remained leveled at Iarumas’s throat.

“Ainikki tells me that ever since your last adventure, you’ve hardly been coming around the temple at all.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With what?”

“Adventure.”

Her stare turned into the warm but dubious look usually reserved for those she suspected were somewhat off in the head. Iarumas went on swallowing his gruel with all the carelessness of one who tries to push away a sword held at their throat using only a finger. It was like watching a dog eat. Iarumas ate only because it was necessary—he had to secure enough fuel to keep his body moving.

“It’s not how an adventurer should be eating,” Sarah recalled Ainikki complaining to her about him.

No, adventurers were meant to guzzle ale and gnaw at meat on the bone as they celebrated—to restore their heroic spirits, of course. Though, that elven nun’s views on such things tended to be a little old-school...

“I’m amazed you can go adventuring on just that,” Sarah remarked.

“You do realize that this bowl of gruel could be the last meal you ever eat, right?”

“The last step I’ll ever take, my last yawn, my last blink—once you start thinking about all those lasts, there’s no end to it,” Iarumas murmured back.

“I’m not going to tell you how you should live your life...” Sarah sighed. Then, taking on a more priestly tone and resting her cheek on her palm, she added, “But don’t go pushing your views on the kids—particularly Garbage-chan, Berka-chan, and Orlaya-chan.”

“You’re fine with me doing that to Raraja, though?”

“He’s a boy, after all.”

What a horrible thing for her to say. This time it was Iarumas’s turn to snort. He dropped his spoon, and it floated in the half-full bowl. “Well, it’s true that I’ve been busy adventuring,” said Iarumas. “There’s something I’m looking for.”

“Hmm... What is it?” Sarah asked. “That amulet, maybe?”

“Ultimately, yes.” Iarumas nodded—he didn’t deny it. “But this is something of a side trip.”

Sarah’s ears perked up at this.

Iarumas, taking a side trip? The guy who said that the dungeon was nothing but white lines on a black background to him? The guy who can probably only tell people apart by their names and abilities?

Sarah was a young girl starving for entertainment. She leaned in like a cat who’d just found a new toy. The bowl of gruel made a clattering sound as the weight of her chest fell upon it.

“Hey, what’re you looking for? Tell me,” she demanded.

“It’s nothing as interesting as you seem to be hoping for.”

Iarumas smiled faintly, then explained the specifics.

Sarah quietly nodded. She then grinned and said, “In that case, I’ve heard of it.”

“What did you say?”

§

A jangle of bells rang through the quiet shop.

No one called out to greet the customers.

Catlob’s Trading Post had recently acquired a number of young shop attendants, but customer service was nonexistent. Especially on a day like today, when it was just one unsociable elf—Mr. Catlob himself—behind

the counter.

The master of the trading post turned his unseeing eyes toward his customers.

Iarumas was grateful for this, actually. What he sought from the trading post was not good customer service, but a good selection, item identification, and curse removal.

After a quick perusal of the weapons and armor on display, he strode over to the medicine racks. For whatever reason, medicine in the town of Scale was strangely expensive. One or two potion bottles cost so much that, for the same price, one could buy a full suit of plate armor instead. Many whispered that it had to be because the potions were made by the priests from the Temple of Cant. But, well, the high cost was strange only in comparison to other places—it was an eye-opening discovery for newcomers, but that was all.

Besides, there was no way that a potion capable of healing wounds in a sip or two could possibly be cheap. The experienced adventurer knew that the price of a potion still cost less than their life. Though hardly any of those adventurers would join a party that didn't have a member who could cast recovery spells...

Still, there were always those who bought potions as a backup, and that was why these shelves were always stocked.

Thankfully, thought Iarumas. He looked at the shelves impassively before saying, “You have LATUMOFIS oil for poison, but no potions of DIALKO for paralysis?”

“How should I know?” That response came from behind the counter, where the elf stood like an old tree. “Just recently, that tall girl of yours bought up a bunch of my stock—she gave them as gifts to the boy.”

“I doubt she would have had the guts to buy your entire stock,” said Iarumas.

“Whatever the case, if you don’t see it, then I don’t have it. That’s how my stock works.”

“What an unfriendly shop attendant.”

While poison was life-threatening, paralysis was more insidious because it prevented one from taking action—or so many adventurers’ thinking went. Furthermore, DIALKO was a lower-level spell than LATUMOFIS. As long as the party had a priest, they wouldn’t struggle too badly—assuming, of course, that their priest didn’t get paralyzed.

And yet, until recently, he’d never seen potions of DIALKO. It had

been a struggle—really inconvenient, that was for sure—but it'd also kept things interesting.

“Potions of DIALKO...or potions of stimulate, huh?” Iarumas laughed. “We didn’t have these things back in my day.” The world sure had gotten convenient.

Spotting one bottle remaining at the back of the shelf, Iarumas took a look at the price tag on it.

Four hundred gold.

A small price to pay for your life.

He set the potion of DIALKO down on the counter. He then grabbed some more potions—ones to treat poison, wounds, and more—without even looking at their price tags. He set these on the counter as well.

Catlob watched impassively until, in the middle of this, he cocked an eyebrow. “A SOPIC philter? That won’t do anything more than ease your worries.”

“It makes me turn transparent. I happen to like that.”

“Well, aren’t you special?”

As long as he paid, Mr. Catlob was not going to complain. The gold jangled as Iarumas dropped it on the counter. Catlob glanced at it. That was all it took. His unseeing eyes had already finished the counting.

Noting the elf’s short nod, Iarumas quickly put his purchases away in his bag. As he shouldered it and was about to leave the store, the elf called after him, “Are you delving alone?”

“Yeah.” Iarumas nodded. “Because this is *my* adventure.”

§

The world as seen by Iarumas was simple.

In town, there was the tavern, inn, trading post, and temple. The edge of town had the training grounds and the dungeon.

Raraja had once teased him by saying, “I could almost imagine you sleeping at the edge of town, just outside the dungeon.”

Iarumas had simply shrugged at this. He’d had no further response.

On this day, at least, Iarumas had awoken in the inn. He’d then gone to the tavern to eat, shopped at Catlob’s, and finally, arrived at the dungeon.

Today, like every day, parties of adventurers were here to delve into that abyss. Some of them started whispering to one another when they saw the corpse hauler, Iarumas of the Black Rod. Others called out to him jocularly or even asked him to retrieve bodies for them.

Iarumas ignored the whispers and generously nodded in response to requests from those who knew him.

None of it provoked any great emotion.

When he made it through those waves of people, he headed toward the dungeon as though he were going for a leisurely stroll.

“Hold it!”

If someone behind him hadn’t shouted those words, then he likely would have begun his delve just like that.

Iarumas turned to look. He spotted an elven priest, her shoulders heaving with labored breaths—Sarah. It was humorous to think that running across town could drain her stamina just as much as fighting monsters.

Noting his amusement at her expense, Sarah’s tone grew sharp.
“You’re going to hunt for treasure alone?”

“What, will you cast CALFO for me?”

Iarumas smiled to himself as a famous scene played out in his mind: the elven priest held her hand out toward a chest, and green specks of light rained down upon it, which allowed them all to peek inside.

Sarah’s response was curt. Scowling hard, she told him, “We’d still need a thief to disarm the traps. Not happening.” She tossed him a package. “Have this.”

He caught it in midair. It was rather light.

“What is it?”

“Lunch,” she answered simply. “When I was talking to Ainikki about you, she decided to pack one for your adventure.” When she added that he should “be grateful,” one had to wonder whether she meant grateful to Ainikki or to herself.

Iarumas stared down at the bundle in his hands. *Ainikki* made it? That she had thought of him was not surprising...but how had she done it? With what hands?

Then there was Sarah’s current state. She’d run all the way from the tavern to the temple and then from the temple to the edge of town—indeed, that had certainly been exhausting. So, if Iarumas had seen this and decided that she was just acting selfishly, then...he might as well have been evil-aligned.

Dirty himself when too pure—cleanse himself when too filthy. Showing thanks to others once in a while was a necessary part of maintaining the right degree of neutrality.

Iarumas packed the lunch away with his other things. Even if it got jumbled up a little, it would still be edible.

“I’ll gratefully accept it.”

“You’d better.” Seemingly satisfied, Sarah shot him a defiant smile. Then, in a high-handed tone, she said, “If you die, I’ll go collect your body. At least try to die in a way that leaves one.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Having someone there to see him off on his adventure... Well, wasn’t this a luxury indeed?

§

Clink, clink.

The coin bounced along the dungeon floor.

Whether he was alone or in a group, Iarumas’s method of exploring never changed—even in areas he’d traversed more times than he could count and down paths he was able to follow without consulting the map.

However, today he was not wandering aimlessly on the lookout for dead bodies.

The way he tossed the coin and reeled it in was unchanged, but Iarumas advanced without any hesitation.

Sarah had told him, “If that’s what you’re after, I heard someone found it down on the third level.”

However, who the adventurer was, or where they could be found, she did not know. They had found it on the third floor, discarded it because it hadn’t been what they were seeking, and then moved on.

To the fourth level.

And they never returned...

“It sounds plausible enough.”

There were rumors—or ghost stories—that told of what happened to the mountain of adventurers who lay sleeping in the dungeon. He had no interest in the fate of someone who’d descended to the fourth level. If he happened across their body someday, then he would retrieve it.

Iarumas had another issue to worry about. The rumor stated that the item he was after had been found on the third level—was that intel true or not?

He would have to confirm it for himself. That was what he was thinking as he turned the corner.

It was almost akin to seeking the cursed sword, those suspicious star-

shaped weapons, or the garb of a lord. He would have to wander the dungeon, relying on uncertain rumors, and committing massacre after massacre. He could practically smell that familiar scent of blood, guts, and ashes already.

Still...there's something about working alone.

It was a caprice, he had to admit. Iarumas ventured through the dark zone in high spirits and came to stand in front of the elevator. He knew the location of the elevator, so if he was heading for the lower floors, there was no need to take the stairs.

Iarumas entered the box that sank into the depths. He pressed buttons on the wall panel. Blurred and fragmented memories stirred in his mind. Descending from the first floor down to the fourth—from the fourth down to the ninth.

Iarumas relaxed and enjoyed the sensation of falling to the other side of the distant abyss.

Eventually, a bell chimed—so cheery that it seemed out of place—and the box came to a stop.

The doors opened. Iarumas quickly stepped out onto the third level.

“Well, I have no business in the Monster Allocation Center.”

It would be amusing to enter the place alone, but he already knew far too well what he could hope to acquire there: Rods of Flame, Rings of Death, and blue ribbons. None of those things were the object of his current search.

Iarumas pulled out a map—his own, not the one he’d made Raraja draw.

Looking in all four directions, he confirmed his position and settled on what course he would be taking for the time being. He chose to go to a nearby burial chamber first.

Iarumas nodded. “All right.” He then pulled out a potion bottle, uncorked it, and drank it all. As he did, his body blurred and became hazy.

The potion of SOPIC would raise his defense in battle. Back in the day, that sort of thing (armor class) had held no meaning whatsoever. But what about now?

Iarumas was enjoying this. *It would be amusing if this potion let me avoid wandering monsters.*

Ultimately, that was just something to make him feel better. At certain coordinates, he was guaranteed to encounter something, and in specific burial chambers, he would have a high probability of getting something

out of a treasure chest.

The dungeon was awash with such rumors, and none of them were good for anything more than easing one's mind. But it could also be said that risking life and limb in the pursuit of such a thing was one of the chief amusements of adventuring.

Iarumas discarded the empty bottle, then tossed the coin and kept on moving.

It would be folly to worry about the passage of time down here. Oh, he'd be bursting into the burial chamber regardless. There was no need to fret about when he'd get there...

§

Bam.

He effortlessly kicked the door in, then slid into the chamber. This maneuver was an ironclad rule of adventuring—something they all did in order to keep the monsters from making the first move.

It wasn't as if dragons and demons were the only huge adversaries. Monsters were all threats of, well, *monstrous* proportions. Even a single goblin could easily kill a person. That was why they were monsters. If anyone was willing to let such creatures take the first move, then they would get the death they so richly deserved.

“Ah...!”

Therefore, Iarumas's caution was warranted.

More than just one or two creatures were writhing inside the shadows here. If they all rushed him at once and he couldn't avoid their attacks, then death would come as no surprise.

The gangs of giant, strange, primitive animals crowding the chamber all reacted to the intruder at the same time.

“Awoooooo!!!”

Blade bears, were lions, and were amoebas. Iarumas saw through the vague shadows to the true nature of the unidentified monsters.

He advanced.

Blade bears, as the name implied, were massive bears with bladelike claws. Their vitality was frightening, but they posed no greater threat than that.

The were lions and were amoebas posed a much greater threat. They were beastmen with the ability—either as a result of a curse or their inborn nature—to turn from man to beast.

Well, amoebas are beasts too, I guess.

They had the power of wild animals paired with human knowledge untempered by human reason. That, and claws that carried disease. If Iarumas caught that sickness, the poison would kill him long before he had the chance to turn into a beast himself.

Even if there weren't more than ten of each type of monster, with three groups, there could be nearly thirty enemies.

What a pain.

This was the third floor. Iarumas decided to use his trump cards without holding back.

"Mimuarif kafaref nuuni tazanme (Struck by storms, shatter like a rock)!"

Forming the signs of a spell with one hand, his other reached for the black rod. He drew the thin saber from its sheath.

His blade flashed through the void, carrying that curse, and brought death to all in the chamber in one fell swoop.

"Eek?!"

"Aahhh...?!"

The spell was MAKANITO.

Unable to resist, the weak were robbed of their lives in an instant by this horrifying spell of death. Once this fifth-level spell was unleashed, the monsters could only scream—not even death wails, but cries of confusion. Before they even had time to realize what was happening to them, they fell to the ground, dead.

That only left...

"Plop...! Plop!"

"The amoebas. Go figure."

Perhaps because of how primitive they were, MAKANITO had failed to affect them. He'd seen this coming.

"Splaaat!"

"Swash!"

The amoebas rushed at him with burbling, indistinct shouts. If they turned from men into slimes, then what could their thought patterns and movements be like? He imagined it must be difficult for them to change their forms freely. They dripped mucus as they attacked.

But the one facing them didn't need to worry about such things—not if they were an experienced adventurer.

Slime in human form. That was all a were amoeba was.

“Shih...!” With that sharp kiai, Iarumas swung his saber over and over again.

Bisected repeatedly, the amoebas were splattered and dismembered.

It wasn’t long before all that remained of the men who had become amoebas were stains on the burial chamber floor.

§

Iarumas opened the treasure chest without hesitation. He grimaced as the poison needle it fired bit into his flesh.

“Good grief. To think I’d be so painfully reminded of how grateful I ought to be for Raraja. That doesn’t happen often.”

Iarumas used his fingers to seize the needle that had pierced through his armor and into his shoulder. He yanked it out, then took a breath. He sighed—not because he was reflecting on the boy’s existence, but because of what he saw inside the treasure chest.

In addition to a smattering of gold coins, there was a single sword, as well as a number of potion bottles.

Not being a bishop, he couldn’t identify any of it himself. But knowing that the loot was a sword and potions was already enough for Iarumas.

It’s not what I’m after.

Regardless, he stuffed what he’d found into his sack. Such was the way of the adventurer. After securing his loot with experienced hands, he even began fishing through the monsters’ pockets. These sorts of creatures often had some gold on them. He poked around all of the corpses, relieving them of the purses that they had no more use for.

While there were those who carried dead adventurers back to the temple, no one did the same for monsters. And he’d never heard stories of a temple for monsters in the depths of the dungeon.

These guys appeared when the door to a burial chamber was opened. Were they resurrected each time? Or were new ones being summoned? Whatever the case, he could be certain that the bodies would vanish at some point, and new monsters would appear.

Perhaps Iarumas had tried to probe the truth behind this phenomenon in the past. But for the moment, it was of no consequence to him.

Everything was the work of the amulet and the one who held it: the master of the dungeon.

“Hmm...”

That said, while Iarumas had taken everything by force of habit, there

was a limit to how much he could carry on his own. He wouldn't mind filling up one of the corpse bags and dragging it behind him, but...

"Maybe I'll lighten the load a little."

He splashed holy water on the ground as if trying to wash away the ichor, then sat down, using the bloodstained chest in place of a chair.

First, he pulled out a bottle of LATUMOFIS oil and began applying it to his shoulder through the hole in his armor. He then drank the rest and chucked the bottle away with a grimace.

Poison was not all that scary, provided he wasn't fighting or moving around trying to escape from the dungeon. If he had sufficient willpower and stamina, then it wasn't an issue, even if he lacked the means to treat it. And right now, he *did* have the means to. Only inexperienced beginners died to poison.

Perhaps all of the threats in the dungeon were not so great on their own. However, that didn't mean an experienced adventurer would never die of poison—they still needed to be wary of it.

No, poison *alone* would not do them in. But a series of overlapping difficulties, one after another, might take the life of even a veteran adventurer.

Wandering into new depths without knowing the way back—all of his companions already slain by monsters—an adventurer opens a treasure chest, hoping to at least earn the money to resurrect his party, and he gets hit with a poison needle for his efforts.

Will his stamina last until he reaches the surface? What if he encounters monsters on the way back?

If that happens, what will become of him?

This was why Iarumas took his time treating the wound. If anything, he'd been lucky that it hadn't been a stunner trap, which could cause paralysis, or a mage blaster. The only threat he faced at the moment was poison, and it was easily dealt with.

"Hm?"

As he rummaged through his things, his fingers touched a bundle wrapped in cloth. It was the lunch he had been given some hours—or perhaps minutes, or days—ago.

Come to think of it, he hadn't eaten any of it yet.

Iarumas opened the bundle with a lack of care that would have made a certain percentage of the men who worshipped at the temple gnash their teeth.

The box was not ornamental in the slightest. And inside—
“Oh-hoh...”
—it was packed tight with boiled potatoes in meat sauce with cheese on top.

Would the worshippers who came to the temple primarily to see Ainikki be able to accept this? Or would they reject it? It was hard to imagine this dish was produced by the same nun who was always lecturing him on the kind of meals he ate at the tavern.

Was she bad at cooking? No, if so, she wouldn’t have been able to cook anything. This wasn’t a failure or her pulling her punches. She had deliberately chosen to make this dish and send it to him.

How had she done it? Whose hands had she borrowed?

Whatever the case...this was *Ainikki’s cooking*.

It wouldn’t have come out the same if just any old person had made it. How large the potatoes were cut, the heat of the oven, the cooking time—she had directed all of it. And on further thought, all of that was obvious.

The reason the nun faulted Iarumas was because he didn’t appear to be enjoying the fullness of life. If he had a feast as his last meal, it was because he had already accepted death. There was no life there. So if she sent him something like this to eat on his adventure, it meant...

“Die after you’ve lived to the end, huh?”

Death was a result. One all must come to eventually—it was something to be prepared for.

But even so, one should not go into battle with death as the assumed outcome. More than that, if she had fixed him a delicious lunch, it would have been tossed around during his adventure, right?

Iarumas could easily imagine Sister Ainikki angrily lecturing him about all of this. He could also imagine her standing in the kitchen, putting the potatoes, meat, and cheese into the oven with a serious look on her face. It was an amusing thought. It was so like Aine to send him a lunch like this.

That gave him reason enough to dig in with a spoon and carry a bite to his mouth.

“Hrm...”

He didn’t know whether it was good or bad. He simply felt the warmth of his blood flowing to the very ends of his limbs. This sustenance would have no influence on his focus (hit points), which was the deciding factor in whether he lived or died in battle. However, if there was one thing the meal gave him, it was...

Vitality, huh?

Of course, there was always a deeper meaning to what she said. Even when she said it with food.

§

When Iarumas headed to the next burial chamber, he wasn't thinking about the threat posed by the enemies there.

I only have the one paralysis cure.

That meant if he opened up a stunner or a mage blaster, he ought to head back to the surface. Taking on traps without a thief or a way of treating his ailments was a gamble.

He was an adventurer, not a gambler.

That was why, when he kicked in the next door, he wasn't thinking about how he was going to deal with the monsters. Whatever they were, he'd beat them—or if that seemed impossible, he'd quickly flee from the room.

Casting his long shadow over the door he'd kicked down, he looked around the chamber.

Found it.

He spied a shadowy figure riding on the back of a strange animal. But he immediately knew what it was: an armored knight, wearing a bloodred cape on its back. It was wraithlike in appearance, and it looked down at Iarumas from astride its beloved mount.

“A dark rider, huh?”

Some said that these monsters were ancient, cursed kings—some insisted that they were nothing more than scouts for the demon realm. They appeared alongside dark steeds in the dungeon and could be quite tough.

Similar to demons, spells were often ineffective against them.

The sword it is, then.

Iarumas slid his saber out of the black rod, exposing its bare blade in the darkness.

The dark rider...did not respond. It simply took hold of the reins and turned its horse to face Iarumas. It fixed its sights on the black-clad man.

It was already holding an ancient-looking sword in its right hand.

Iarumas held his own sword with one hand in front of him—he pointed it straight ahead. He lowered his stance, tightening his grip as if he were going to chop firewood.

He was planning to meet the rider's charge.

"_____"

On the mute wraith king's command, its mount whinnied and took off, beating the stone floor with its hooves. Iarumas had never witnessed a landslide, but he was confident that the rumbling must have felt similar to this.

The horseman came at him in a thunderous charge, and Iarumas met it head-on.

No sane infantryman would have done such a thing. Having these giant monsters make such a fierce charge was an intense, intimidating, and deadly threat. Cavalry was one of the kings of battle.

However, this was the dungeon. These were not soldiers facing each other down, but a monster and an adventurer.

The dark rider swung its blade—closed the distance—moved to flank the right-hand side of its opponent.

"Shih!"

In an instant, Iarumas leaped even farther to the right of it.

The ancient blade grazed him. This rider was a skilled fighter, and Iarumas felt a chill, even though its blade hadn't touched his flesh.

As the dark figure thundered past, Iarumas struck out at the horse's legs—not with his saber, but with the rod—its metal sheath—in his left hand.

"Neigggghhh?!" the beast cried.

Designed for speed, its legs were a work of functional beauty. The horse whinnied as Iarumas smashed what was essentially its very life.

Horse and rider toppled over with the momentum of their charge. The dark steed collided with the floor and walls of the dungeon.

And what of the rider? Did it fall pitifully from its horse?

Not at all. The dark rider jumped from its saddle, springing at Iarumas.

Its dark red cloak billowed out behind it. The dark rider struck down at Iarumas from above with a murderous blow.

Iarumas swept the sword away with a one-handed strike, then jumped off to the side.

The dark rider executed a midair somersault with incredible ease—one would have assumed it'd had some footing to work with. Its moves were simply inhuman.

Pale white sparks lit up the burial chamber as both combatants landed on the floor simultaneously.

The two black-clad knights said nothing. They each sized the other up,

judging their range.

Slowly, they rose to their feet.

They were evenly matched now...

No.

“MA (Mimuarif) HA (Hea) LI (Lai) TO (Tazanme)!”

The dark rider’s left hand lit up.

It’s pretty awful when only the enemy’s spells work.

Iarumas let out a low laugh. In his head, he counted the number of potions in his possession. Yeah, he was probably still good.

Iarumas sprinted straight through the scorching flames of the demon’s MAHALITO.

Hair singed. Skin blistered. Flesh burned. Blood boiled.

He opened the eyelids he’d briefly closed to protect his eyeballs. The demon’s helmet was right in front of him. He couldn’t see the color of its eyes through the visor. They both already knew the weaknesses in each other’s armor.

“Shah!!!”

A single flash.

The rider had pulled its sword back to guard its throat. The tip of Iarumas’s saber ran up the sword blade, reaching for it. He let the grip slide in the palm of his hand.

His blade slipped under the dark rider’s helmet and tore through its windpipe without resistance.

There was a high-pitched whistling noise as a fountain of ichor erupted from the dark knight.

Iarumas glanced at his foe. He flicked the blood from his blade before wiping it clean with his sleeve.

The destroyed demon’s body returned to the other world—there was no sound of it collapsing onto the dungeon floor.

§

With that done, only the problem of the chest remained.

Iarumas imagined the dark rider working hard to amass the riches inside. He cracked a smile, but that made his cheeks hurt, so he abandoned the entire train of thought.

What a sad state of affairs. Just being exposed to the air made his scorched face sting terribly. His eyes were dry and they stuck to his eyelids. He was only still alive because he’d sprinted through the flames

quickly. That was all there was to it.

Ugh, adventuring solo's not worth it.

This was nothing like collecting bodies on the first level. Iarumas pulled a potion of DIOS from his pack and sprinkled himself with the contents. He grimaced at the sensation of new flesh forming and spreading over his face, then gulped down the rest of the bottle.

Having emptied one bottle, he tossed it aside. He uncorked another and did the same with it.

If he'd ended up getting hit with an explosion trap, he would've been in a sorry state. That was why Iarumas had already started to treat his wounds—even before the stains left by the dark rider's ichor had time to vanish.

After all, it was best to improve his condition before finishing off the monsters.

It didn't take much searching after the demon was gone before Iarumas was able to find the treasure chest. Had it been there in this chamber from the beginning? Or had it been collected by the dark rider? He didn't know.

Iarumas smiled at his foolish imaginings, then dealt with the chest.

He caught his breath, considering his current status, remaining tools, spells, and present location.

Well, for the moment, no matter what comes out, I probably won't die.

Iarumas kicked the lid hard enough to break the lock.

§

“And that’s all he found inside?”

Back at Durga’s Tavern, Sarah peered at High Priest Tuck’s hands with interest.

Iarumas...was nowhere to be seen.

He had appeared in the tavern crowded with adventurers, handed over the goods, and then quickly taken his leave. He was no doubt sleeping in a cot at the inn, or in the stables, or maybe he’d already departed on another adventure.

And after Sarah had gone through the effort of providing him with information, he wasn’t even making it worth her trouble.

Once Sarah was done fuming, she looked at what High Priest Tuck was holding.

A glass bottle.

Not some kind of potion—just a bottle.

To Sarah’s eyes, it didn’t look like anything out of the ordinary, but...

“He was desperately searching for this, right? It makes you wonder.”

“That’s just the thing, Sarah,” High Priest Tuck said in a low voice as he carefully investigated the bottle. Sarah was always amazed that he could do such delicate work with his thick fingers. “I’ve got a message for you from Iarumas. Your information was correct, but it wasn’t the thing he was looking for.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

He can just say whatever he wants. Sarah’s long ears stood on end.

However, some things concerned her a little. Iarumas couldn’t identify items himself, so how had he been able to tell that this wasn’t the one he was after?

He just does incomprehensible stuff sometimes.

Did it mean he’d seen this bottle somewhere before?

Who was Iarumas? Where did he come from? Sarah had given up thinking about such things a long time ago.

It was true for all adventurers. Who they’d been before coming to Scale didn’t matter. That said, she would be lying if she claimed she didn’t want to know—even if it was only out of girlish curiosity.

“So, what was it, ultimately?”

“A ship in a bottle,” High Priest Tuck answered, his face wrinkling with a smile. “Here.” He casually tossed it to her.

“Whoa.” Sarah caught it against her chest.

Holding the bottle up carefully, she looked through it under the orange lights of the tavern. Inside, there was indeed a bottled ship.

The intricate little ship looked like it was ready to hoist sail and row out to the high seas at any moment. Sarah felt that, if she squinted, she could even see the sailors moving around on deck. It wasn’t clear to her if there was anything more to it than that, though.

“It sure is pretty...”

“Well, it’s a ship in a bottle. No more, no less,” High Priest Tuck said, his voice touched with emotion. He knocked back a glass of hard liquor like it was just water. “Anyhow, it’s good to see him adventuring for something other than dead bodies.”

Ah, so that was why this aged bishop was in such high spirits. It made sense now. For this stony dwarf, all of the others were like grandchildren. Sarah didn’t find this treatment particularly unpleasant...but it almost made her want to rebel a little.

Talking in the high-handed way that elves do, she gazed at the contents

of the bottle. “You’ve got to wonder what Hawkwind will say when he finds out.”

The sea... The sea, huh?

She’d never been there herself. At the far end of the sea, there was an endless cliff, and if you sailed off it, you just fell.

Sarah hated things that went nowhere—she preferred when there was a definite end.

That was what made the dungeon comfortable for her. And look, it was filled with wonders like this.

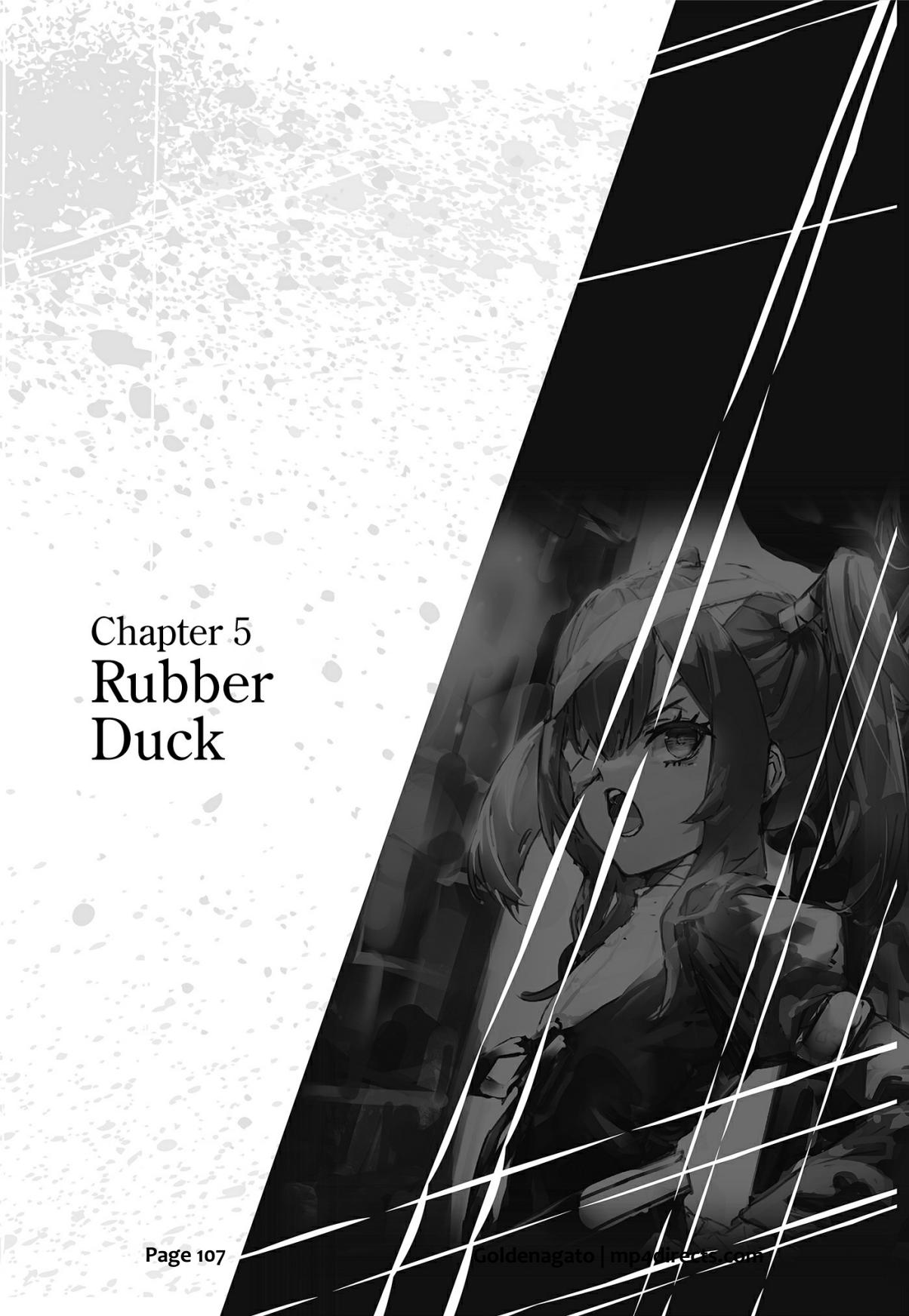
“Hey, High Priest. Can I have it?”

“I don’t mind. Just be careful not to leave it lying out only to step on it.”

“How rude. I’ll use it to decorate the windowsill.”

She’d told Iarumas about the rumor—she’d run all the way from the temple to the edge of town. This was a fitting payment for that. And besides, there was another thing that’d satisfied her: she’d gotten to see Ainikki’s reaction close up when she’d returned the empty lunch box.

This had been a natural reward for Sarah, who’d acted as the nun’s “hands.”



Chapter 5 Rubber Duck

“This is no good. It’s practically worthless.”

“Is...”

“...that right?”

Seeing the twins so obviously dispirited, Orlaya let out a deep sigh. She had no obligation to sympathize with them, but she still couldn’t help but feel like the bad guy.

Cuteness was unfair like that.

Her voice still came out sounding a little sharp, but that was due, at least in part, to self-loathing. She wasn’t doing anything wrong, but the twins hadn’t done anything wrong either. That was why she threw in some words of encouragement, or condolence—to muddy the waters a little.

“Well, if you went delving with just one—two?—mages and managed to return alive, you ought to consider yourselves lucky.”

Rahm and Sahm whispered to one another. They weren’t even thinking about Orlaya.

“What shall we do?”

“What *shall* we do?”

“Delve deeper?”

“I can’t do it alone.”

“I have a limited number of spells.”

“I can’t stand in the front and fight.”

“Or open treasure chests, for that matter.”

Their voices echoed and overlapped each other—it was impossible to tell which of them was talking. Orlaya was unclear about whether the concept of “which of them” even existed with these two.

I take back what I said.

Deciding that there was no real need to be apologetic about her sharpness of tone, Orlaya gave up on even *trying* to soften it. She found the twins insufferable. That was fine, wasn’t it? She didn’t need to be kind to everyone she met. After all, she had a limited supply of goodwill to go around.

“Then why don’t you call it quits?” Orlaya asked. “There’s no reason you two need to go delving just by yourselves, is there?”

“You say that...”

“...but we still haven’t...”

“...been able to repay...”

“...Schumacher-sama.”

This is what I can’t stand.

As she listened to Rahm-and-Sahm, Orlaya felt a twisted, ugly expression forming on her face. Guys probably preferred their type: exuberant and obedient, open and adorable, and eager to please. Of course they did. No one had any use for a girl who snapped at them all the time. These two could be expected to shut up and follow, and that was what made them so likable.

Dark emotions welled up inside of her for a moment. However, for Orlaya, those feelings were easily suppressed. She'd dealt with them for years. It was vexing that she couldn't rid herself of them completely, but she'd learned how to keep a lid on them. She just had to take hold of her head as it was starting to wander and forcefully screw it back into place. That would get things under control temporarily—although it was still no permanent solution.

"You didn't have any say in him resurrecting you, so I don't understand why you feel like you owe him a debt of gratitude..."

Orlaya rested her elbow on the counter and her cheek on her palm, then let out a deep, *deep* sigh. Even though the words had come from her own mouth, she hated how shameless they sounded. But they'd had their say, so why shouldn't she be allowed to have hers? At least, that was how she felt.

"Hmm?"

That was when it came. The jangling of bells heralded the arrival of a customer—the door burst open.

"Arf!!!"

She didn't even need to look. It was that redhead mutt of a girl, Garbage. That mighty Diamond Knight who was always trotting around behind Iarumas, leading Raraja somewhere, or chasing Berkanaan around.

How unusual it was for her to come alone.

Or maybe not.

It'd happened once before. Orlaya smiled as she thought back to the time this girl had dropped in on her at her own "shop."

"What, your masters wouldn't play with you?"

"Woof!"

Ignoring any protest, Orlaya reached out and mussed the girl's curly hair. She looked at the sword on Garbage's back and thought about the girl's situation. It wasn't so different from her own, yet Garbage approached it with a different attitude.

If Orlaya really thought about it, these were all things that vexed her,

but she didn't hate the girl. Only those who acted on emotion alone, without asking what was in it for them, were free of malice.

“Yap! Yiiip!!!”

“Yeah, yeah. I have no idea what you're saying, but Berka sent you to fetch me, right?”

Was Orlaya's shift over? Had it ended long ago? Whenever she was focusing on appraisals, she wouldn't even hear the chimes of the bells that kept time. And even when she did hear, she sometimes ignored them. There were occasions when she didn't even want to know what time it was.

Raraja was probably incapable of being considerate enough to ask after Orlaya, so by process of elimination, Berkanaan was the only one who could've sent Garbage.

As for Iarumas... Well, if he were to call for me, it would only be for a delve into the dungeon.

Orlaya told the girl to wait, then climbed over the counter with her diminutive body. Her bandaged legs were unsteady—her field of view had been cut in half, and what was left of it was blurry. Still, she was used to all of that.

When she got to the other side, Rahm-and-Sahm seemed as if their minds were somewhere else. The two gnomes stared vacantly at Garbage.

“Umm...”

“...who is this?”

“This,” Orlaya said somewhat proudly, “is the Diamond Knight. With only the sword.”

“Whah!”

Garbage's bark was met with a doubled “Oh my!” from Rahm-and-Sahm.

Orlaya could never read their feelings, but it seemed reasonable to say they were surprised. Was that shock due to Garbage's fame? Her sobriquet? Or the sword she carried on her back?

Whatever the case, their reactions didn't bother Orlaya.

“Ruff...”

The person they were discussing, however, regarded the three of them with a suspicious snort. Then, looking from Rahm-and-Sahm to the stuff on the counter, Garbage seemed to come to a conclusion.

“Arf!”

With that powerful bark, she clapped the pair on the shoulders. It was

like she was saying, “*Leave it to me.*”

“Leave them to you?” Orlaya asked.

“Yap!”

It wasn’t clear whether Garbage understood the question, but this time, she clapped Orlaya lightly on the shoulder.

Ignoring the nonplussed gnome sisters, Orlaya cast her eyes to the heavens.

All she saw there was the filthy ceiling of a weapon shop.

§

“Erm, so...you...agreed to go with them?”

“That’s right.”

Here in the noise of the tavern, Orlaya could be as ill-tempered as she liked and play it off like it was totally normal. She didn’t hold back at all. There was a big scowl on her face, and her tone was as sharp as it could get.

“If I left it to just Garbage, they would be wiped out for sure. I guarantee it.”

“Hmm...”

Berkanan seemed to want to say something. Orlaya glared at her hard.

If she’s got something to say, she should just say it.

“Ahem!” Garbage cleared her throat proudly.

“Thank...”

“...you.”

Say it like Garbage and the red-and-blue twins do.

There was something comical about the way Rahm-and-Sahm bowed their heads in response to Garbage. If you asked Orlaya, there was no point in taking that kind of attitude with the monster’s leftovers. The twins were only doing it for their own self-satisfaction.

Orlaya couldn’t stand how obsequious they were acting, but worse yet was...

“I do verily question why it is that I have been drawn into this.”

A black-haired girl was sitting at the other end of the table—although, it was perhaps strange to speak of “ends” when the table was round.

Orlaya found this girl with a ridiculous name like *Shadowwind* simply insufferable.

Noticing Orlaya’s one-eyed glare, the girl cried, “Eek!” and shuddered.

If she doesn’t like it, then she ought to say so.

“Wouldn’t it have been better to ask Raraja-kun...?” suggested Berkanan.

“They already had a thief they could ask, so there was no need for us to drag him into this,” Orlaya answered curtly.

Sure, Raraja’s skills as a thief had been getting quite good recently. Or so she’d heard. Even so, she didn’t want to rely on Raraja. The idea of relying on *anything* was galling to her.

However, there weren’t that many trustworthy thieves—an oxymoron—in Orlaya’s network of acquaintances. If she were to try to name another, then it would be Moradin of the All-Stars, and that was about it. Of course, if she went to him for help, he’d probably complain about it a little and then lend a hand anyway. But frankly, the All-Stars were the kinds of people Orlaya wanted nothing to do with.

It gave her the creeps the way they tried to act like senior adventurers—they watched over their juniors with those condescending smiles. But more than that, it was clear that putting herself into the debt of such a high-ranking group would only spell trouble down the line.

And since that was the case...

“If you’ve got complaints, make them to Rahm-and-Sahm. I don’t care.”

“W-Well, if you’re requesting my aid, I shall not refuse...!”

Shadow suddenly sat up straight and started talking in an overly dignified manner. Had she assumed they were blaming her somehow? Orlaya narrowed her sole eye and let out a sigh. Shadowwind was incredibly easy to read.

Neither the food at Durga’s Tavern nor the alcohol could arouse the rhea’s appetite. Orlaya quietly pushed the plate of meat—she didn’t know who had ordered it—in Garbage’s direction.

“Gnap! Gnap!”

Garbage gnawed away with gusto. This would hopefully keep her quiet—er, out of trouble—for a little while.

Meanwhile, Berkanan murmured, “I’m okay with it. But I’m still going to let Raraja-kun know. And Iarumas too...”

“Well, that much is fine.”

“Yeah...”

If the worst should happen and they were wiped out, someone would need to go down and collect their bodies. It wasn’t a possibility that Orlaya liked thinking about, but she had to consider it. Even *she* knew that there

were things she ought to be stubborn about and things that she really shouldn't push back on. At least, she liked to think she knew.

Something suddenly occurred to her.

"Shouldn't you do the same?" she asked, looking at the gnome twins.

Rahm-and-Sahm felt like they owed Schumacher a debt of gratitude, and he had been looking out for them. On top of that, Shadowwind was their party's thief. What was he going to think about the three of them—half of the party—going off and doing things on their own?

When asked this, the trio looked at one another in surprise.

"He won't really..."

"...think anything of it."

"It's not like we're..."

"...together all of the time."

"If anything should happen to us, well...such is life."

I guess this is what evil-aligned people are like.

Adventurers were known for being rather cut-and-dried in their relationships with one another, but this was still a bit much.

Now it was Orlaya and Berkana's turn to trade glances. The two groups would never understand each other. Although, ultimately, good and evil were just casual ways of referring to things.

Orlaya had never thought of herself as a *good-aligned bishop*...

"Erm, so...we'll have to meet up at the dungeon's entrance...right?"

Berkana asked the twins hesitantly.

Rahm-and-Sahm whispered in response.

"We'll leave that..."

"...up to you."

Well, if they're all on the same page, I guess it's fine.

Orlaya ignored the three of them as they murmured about their plans. She had more important things to consider.

"If we're going to the third level to raid burial chambers, having more people isn't going to improve the quality of what we find. Do you have some sort of plan?" she asked.

"Rahm...and Sahm said we would be going to the fourth level," replied Shadowwind.

"The fourth level?" Orlaya's eye widened at this comment. "Do you plan to cross the Monster Allocation Center?"

"Oh, there shall be no issue with that..." The black-clad Shadowwind proudly thrust out her chest, which wasn't appreciably larger than a rhea's.

“For we have obtained the blue ribbon!”

Now Orlaya really wanted to clutch her head.

How have these people made more progress than us?!

§

The meet-up in the dungeon went smoothly.

“S-Sorry...for keeping you waiting...!” Berkana exclaimed.

“No...”

“...it’s fine.”

“Woof!”

The red-and-blue-and-black trio stood out, even among the crowd of adventurers waiting right beyond the entrance to the first level. On that note, Berkana’s incredible height made her stand out more than anyone, and Orlaya and Garbage were only slightly less conspicuous. As far as Orlaya was concerned, the way Berkana pulled the brim of her hat down, shrinking into herself as much as she could, was nothing but wasted effort.

“Still, it was true... About the blue ribbon...” Berkana softly stroked the old strip of cloth wrapped around her arm.

“Heh heh!” By contrast, Shadowwind proudly displayed her brand-new ribbon—she used it to tie back her hair.

They were the same, and yet Orlaya couldn’t see them that way at all. Or rather, she didn’t understand the meaning of holding such a thing.

“You said you got yours from a strange old man, right, Berkana?” asked Orlaya.

“Oh, um, yeah. The old...dink...”

“You know, somehow, I just can’t imagine that crazy old man going through the Monster Allocation Center.”

And not just him... Orlaya thought. She cast a suspicious look at the blue ribbon presently decorating Shadow’s hair.

“We did...”

“...go through...”

“...it.”

“So...”

“It’s not that I doubt you,” Orlaya said, unnerved by Rahm-and-Sahm’s overlapping voices.

Orlaya couldn’t clear the Monster Allocation Center yet. She’d only survived that place because of Raraja, Iarumas, Berkana, Ainikki, and finally—

“Rowf!”

—redheaded Garbage, the mutt of a girl who was trotting along ahead of them. One look at Hrathnir hanging on her back left no doubt as to the girl’s capability.

Orlaya had only been dragged there as a sacrifice and embedded in a pillar of flesh.

I sure am acting like this is easy for me...

To think she had time to agonize over such things in the dungeon. How very impressive. Orlaya’s lips twitched with self-mockery. She put a lid on her feelings with practiced hands.

“Hold up, Garbage. We need to decide our marching order.”

“Yap?!” Garbage protested as Orlaya pulled hard on her ragged cloak.

“Shut up. I don’t care.” Ignoring all of the noise her companion made, Orlaya looked at each of the members of the party.

We’ve got Garbage, timid Berka, addlebrained Rahm-and-Sahm, jumpy Shadow, and me. What, am I supposed to act as the leader here?

Despondency suddenly weighed on her shoulders. She didn’t like this.

“Garbage is obviously in the front row—and Berkana too, of course.”

“Um, oka—” Berkana’s voice suddenly cracked. “Okay... I’ll do it.”

“And lastly, Shadow,” Orlaya finished.

“You would ask that of me?!”

It was practically a scream. But Shadow must have realized that there was no other choice. She had no further objections—after all, the rest of the team consisted of a bishop and two mages. Well, not that Berkana wasn’t a mage. But regardless, the fighter and the thief needed to be positioned in the front row. No doubt Shadow accepted that.

“But Coretas-dono is a bishop too...” she grumbled, but that wasn’t an argument.

If she doesn’t like it, then she ought to say so.

“Well, that settles it.”

Deciding that she now had the consent of all parties, Orlaya let the subject go.

“Woof!” Garbage bounded off.

Does she even know where we’re going?

Orlaya followed behind her at a relaxed pace...making sure that Berkana and Shadowwind stayed in front of her, of course.

§

Garbage let out a cry of distress.

At what? The dark zone.

Orlaya didn't know why, but Garbage *really* didn't want to enter it.

"Okay, let's leave her behind."

"Huh?" Berkanaan objected. "But it's dangerous."

"If she doesn't want to come, then we have no choice."

Did Berkanaan mean that danger lurked beyond the darkness? Or that Garbage would be in danger if left behind? Orlaya didn't know. But she deliberately ignored Berkanaan's protest and stepped into the zone.

Garbage's barks grew more high-pitched.

"Yap! Yap! Yiiip!!!"

"Wh-What are you going to do? I...erm..." From under the brim of her hat, Berkanaan anxiously looked left and right. "I'm going."

That was what it took for Garbage to cease her barking and reluctantly step into the dark zone.

Well.

Surely Garbage wouldn't feel lonely if they left her behind. No, the redhead girl went because she couldn't accept that Berkanaan would go while she stayed. Even without words...well, that feeling still came across.

"It's not so scary once you get used to it."

"It's just dark..."

"...that's all."

The other three, meanwhile, showed no sign of fear.

There was a false cheer in Shadowwind's voice, but that was the only hint of trepidation. This was one difference that wasn't due to their alignments, but because of past experience.

Once she stepped into the darkness, Orlaya couldn't help but come to a standstill. "Urgh..." she involuntarily moaned. "This is...really taking a toll on me."

She couldn't see anything. Not in front of her, behind, or to either side. Not even the floor on which she stood or the ceiling above. It was like being cast alone into an incredibly vast space. Yet at the same time, it still had the claustrophobic feeling of the dungeon.

She was struck by the illusion that all of the walls were pressing in on her, leaving only a space that was just her size.

These were conflicting sensations. But what stuck with her, ultimately, was—

I'm trapped.

—a panicked impression akin to a sense of crisis.

She wanted to get out of the dark zone as soon as possible. To run away. This was something other than fear. Her voice quivered. Her heart raced.

“Grrr!”

When she heard Garbage growling, Orlaya finally managed to breathe. She wouldn’t have been able to walk through this place alone.

Iarumas probably could’ve. And as for Raraja... Who knew?

“Anyway, just follow the path,” explained Shadow. “It would be hard indeed to get lost here, if you ask me.”

Lost in her own thoughts, Orlaya nodded. Only after doing so did she realize the futility of the gesture. “Got it. But what path?”

“Do you want us...”

“...to hold your hand?”

“I’ll pass.”

This curt refusal was met with a “You will?” from right beside her. It sounded disappointed. Orlaya couldn’t tell if that disappointment was genuine or in jest.

“Anyway, let’s get a move on,” Orlaya said. “I don’t want to fight monsters here.”

“Me either...” agreed Berkana.

“Then onward we go!” Shadowwind exclaimed, deliberately raising her voice.

“Yap!” Garbage barked.

Just this once, Orlaya was a little grateful to have such noisy guides.

§

The box floated, fell, and then came to a sudden stop—like they were being hanged from the gallows.

No matter how many times she experienced this sensation, it was never pleasant.

“Rrruff...”

Garbage let out a rueful growl and shook her head. Orlaya felt much the same way.

It really is taking us to the bowels of the earth.

Talk of the elevator going up to the highest heaven and down to the lowest depth was probably all made up. But she could understand why people might want to spread rumors about it sinking down that far.

However, as the doors opened without a sound, the third level was strangely quiet. Was the Monster Allocation Center even on this level? That almost seemed like a lie.

“Nothing’s coming, huh...?” Berkana murmured as she warily poked her head out of the elevator. With the tip of her finger, she gently stroked the faded blue band tied around her arm.

“Is it thanks to this...maybe?”

“Probably. Not that I’d know how it works.”

Whatever the case, at this moment, Orlaya needed Garbage, Berkana, and Shadowwind to get out of the elevator. She shooed them out, then looked around to ensure that the area was safe. Once that was done, Orlaya and Rahm-and-Sahm stepped onto the third level.

What an awful place. Even remembering what’d happened here vexed her. It was a vast, hollow chamber. Once, it had been overflowing with greater demons. Now, no trace of them remained—it was just an empty room, vacant and devoid of life.

“Perhaps the blue ribbon...”

“...is like a certificate...”

“...you get for passing...”

“...the test here...”

That might have been the reason the *examiners* wouldn’t attack those carrying one.

“Could be,” Orlaya murmured after listening to the twins. “But even if it is, there’s the risk of other monsters lurking around. Let’s hurry.”

“Yes, to the elevator in the back,” Shadowwind agreed, bubbling with excitement. “For it is the first time I’ll be riding it...”

There was a strange pride in her step as she walked forward. She must’ve thought that the blue ribbon tied in her hair was her own accomplishment or something. Perhaps she believed that it put her on the same level as Garbage, who was trotting through the corridors, carefree.

Orlaya had to question whether a girl who was a scout, thief, or something similar ought to be getting all giddy, but...

Well, it’s better than jumping at shadows.

Orlaya’s cheek twitched. There had been a healthy dose of cynical self-criticism in that thought.

The one who was most frightened here...was none other than herself.

Her legs felt heavy. They didn’t want to move forward. The doors to the elevator seemed like the jaws of a monster ready to swallow her.

Her breath was a little short. She prayed no one would notice. Berkana did.

“Orlaya...chan?”

“It’s nothing,” she told the big girl curtly.

She forced herself onward. Every step brought her incrementally forward. Her bare feet padded the floor.

Rahm-and-Sahm quietly followed. The twins said nothing. Their minds seemed to be elsewhere, and their expressions were as vacant as always. It made Orlaya imagine them peering right through her. That was probably what she hated about them.

“Is something...”

“...the matter?”

“I just said it’s nothing, didn’t I?”

To escape their gaze, Orlaya quickened her pace. She moved into the next elevator—into the altar where she had been offered as a sacrifice. She had made it through the experience once already. Why should she be frightened if it happened a second time?

But that said...she still hated the sinking feeling.

§

“It’s not like anything...really changes...huh?”

“So it would appear.”

“Arf!”

That was what the three front-liners said as they stepped out of the open doors of the elevator—onto the fourth level.

Berkana and Shadow were looking around cautiously. Garbage scrunched up her nose like a beast as she sniffed out the next burial chamber.

The scenery that unfolded before the adventurers was the same unremarkable stonework of the usual dungeon. Of course, that was only true for those who *saw it that way* from the beginning. If someone who perceived the dungeon as a vast, rocky cavern were to come here, then that was how they would see this level too.

Orlaya placed her hand on a nearby wall. It seemed vague and murky to her sole eye, but her sense of touch told her that it was definitely there. It certainly had the rough feeling of stonework or a brick wall. But if another hand touched it, perhaps it would’ve felt to them like natural, unworked rock.

What was this place, really? Orlaya thought about it briefly. She shook her head.

This was the dungeon. That was the one, pure truth.

“So, do you have a map?” Orlaya asked.

“We do...”

“...right?”

“Indeed, we do!” Shadowwind answered, brimming with confidence. She stuck her hand into the part of her shirt that covered her meager chest and fished out a folded piece of paper—her map.

Apparently, she was the cartographer in Schumacher’s party.

“Well, we actually haven’t explored much of the fourth level...” she added with an embarrassed laugh.

Did the thief take this responsibility in every party? Well, maybe it wasn’t an apt job for a fighter who stood in the front row. Orlaya had even heard of a party that left the mapping to an elf who had no sense of direction. Now *that* was an amusing story.

Still, if someone had to handle the job, then perhaps...the thief was one of the standard options.

We’re the same way.

Raraja.

Orlaya recalled him looking at the map, then saying this or that.

What expression he would make when she told him, “I went to the fourth level before you.”

Would he be frustrated? Angry? Or would he just look away sullenly?

“I believe it might be good to begin by hitting up a nearby burial chamber,” suggested Shadowwind. “It would let us see what the monsters on this level are like.”

“Y-Yeah, I agree...” Berkana nodded. “Since we don’t know what will show up, I think...that might be for the best.”

Orlaya’s thoughts were pulled back to reality by their discussion. This was not the time to contemplate idle fancies. But since she had been able to do so, maybe she was having an easier time than she thought?

“Yes, that sounds appropriate.” Orlaya gave their proposal her approval. “There’s some luck-based variance in whether we’ll run up against strong or weak guardians in the chamber, but...we’ll make one attempt, then return. Got it?”

It was the same as on the first level. That is to say, the same as when they’d challenged the dungeon for the very first time.

Hearing this, everyone except Garbage nodded with a gulp.

“Is there anything else?” she asked.

“Oh, umm...” Shadow thought about it. “Rahm...and Sahm-dono?”

“Yes.”

“We know.”

The little red-and-blue twins snickered and then took each other’s hands.

“Dauk mimuarif peiche (*O cloth, spread out, show my place.*).”

Something invisible seeped across them. It felt like it was stroking Orlaya’s skin—melting it.

This was DUMAPIC. It was a basic, first-level spell that could verify the party’s location within the dungeon.

After whispering back and forth, the pair revealed the group’s current coordinates, almost as if they were a secret.

“Hmm... Good,” Shadowwind remarked, marking something down on her map. “There doesn’t seem to be any problem.” She was likely adding the position of the fourth floor’s elevator to one of the grid’s squares.

“You’re so thorough...” Berkanan cooed in admiration.

“Should I take that to mean your party doesn’t do the same?”

“Erm, I, uh...” Berkanan looked down shyly. “I...don’t...remember.”

Besides, with their current lineup, they almost never took on unknown territory—Iarumas was busy off on his own.

Who even knows what he’s looking for? It was none of Orlaya’s concern, but the fact that it was delaying their progress meant she did have some thoughts about it. Still, it wasn’t like she was relying on that black-clad man to chaperone her around. The very idea that she couldn’t make progress without him—or without Raraja—made her squirm.

I won’t stand for it.

She was nobody’s accessory. Nobody’s servant.

“Woof! Whah!” Garbage began barking from around the corner. She was tired of waiting.

For now, they needed to...

“We’ll have to train Garbage to do just one room and then head home.”

“Ah... Ah ha ha...”

With Berkanan’s strained laughter in the background, Orlaya took her first step toward exploring the fourth level of the dungeon.

§

“Grrr!!!”

A small figure kicked down the door and rushed inside with a growl. Where did her thin, delicate body hide that kind of strength?

Orlaya watched Berkana’s big butt as the girl lumbered in behind Garbage.

“Where’s the enemy?!” she blurted out.

“I don’t see them...” Shadow’s voice was sharp and tense. “No, wait, there they are!”

Their entry had been far too muddled to be called *smooth*, but it was still enough to let them act first.

“Woof!”

The party fell into an unfamiliar formation centered around the spirited Garbage. They were up against something lurking in the darkness of the burial chamber. Fearsome monsters. Abominations. No...

“Bunnies?”

That airheaded comment must have come from Shadowwind.

Orlaya and Berkana had already run into these creatures during past delves. In all honesty, they could only be described as white rabbits.

It seemed the dungeon imposed formation restrictions on monsters as well. The rabbit they’d spotted stood at the head of a group. Of how many? Three or four. This would have been an almost pastoral scene were it not taking place inside the dungeon.

“Yikes,” moaned Berkana. “Those things jump and bite you...”

“Well, monsters will do that—even if they’re not that strong,” replied Orlaya.

“Somehow, this feels like a letdown...” Shadowwind complained. She had been expecting a battle against the fearsome monsters of the fourth level. This put a damper on her enthusiasm.

But monsters were monsters. The group had come here to kill them and steal their riches. Even if their guard loosened, the adventurers still acted in accordance with that general policy.

“Awoooooo!!!”

Especially Garbage. Swinging Hrathnir, she pounced into the hoard of white beasts.

Shadowwind raced to keep up. Behind her lumbered Berkana.

The battle began.

“I don’t see any more coming...”

“...but should we conserve our spells?”

“Yeah... We still don’t know what else might be down here.”

The three spellcasters waiting in the back row watched the battle with clear heads. Soon, they came to a decision.

This was the fourth level, and there were monsters that wandered the dungeon. On the way back, the group could encounter creatures that exceeded their wildest imaginings. So, once they realized this, they came to the conclusion that saving their spells was the only way to go. If things got hairy, they would unleash them, but for the time being, no magic would be used.

Though, surely no adventurers would come up short against a bunch of rabbits...

“Hi-yah...!” Berkana shouted nasally.

“Rowwwf!!!” Garbage roared.

With each swing of the Dragon Slayer and Hrathnir, rabbits squealed and died.

Watching this for a moment, Shadowwind remarked, “Must be nice.” She looked down at the weapon in her own hand. If only she, too, could have a famed weapon of her own.

“I shall join the fray!”

Finding her resolve, she gripped her dagger, closed in on a rabbit, and

“Ah.”

—the moment she thought that, the rabbit had already sprung.

Yeah, it was a rabbit. Of course it could jump. But her thoughts couldn’t keep up with reality. Rabbit teeth filled her vision, bizarrely sharp. They were getting closer.

“Ouagh?!”

Intense pain assaulted her throat. With that muddled, idiotic cry, Shadow tumbled to the ground and rolled.

She was unable to comprehend that her throat had been torn out.

“Aghhh, ah, oagh, oh, gogh...?!”

Everyone froze at the sight of her gurgling and thrashing around as she drowned in her own blood.

“Huh? N-No way...?!”

Berkana stared in disbelief, but Garbage acted fast.

“Arf!!!”

The redhead girl sprang backward to Shadow’s side. Then, she kicked her. The wounded girl was sent rolling to the rear. Orlaya saw what

the goal was.

Garbage didn't even look in their direction. She was back to facing the rabbits.

"Rahm! Sahm!"

"Right."

Orlaya ignored the way the twins' voices overlapped as she rushed to Shadowwind's side.

"Ough, gogh... Gwagh, oaghuh!"

Shadowwind was—not yet dead! It hadn't been a lethal blow (critical hit). Praise Kadorto.

Still, the injured girl spasmed around, eyes wide, clutching her throat. She was unable to comprehend what had happened to her. Orlaya placed her hands over the wound—she wasn't bothered by the way the gushing blood stained her bandages a dark red.

"Darui zanmeseen (*O power of life*)!" she chanted. Her true words must have reached Heaven. DIOS only brought about a small amount of healing, but it was enough to keep Shadowwind alive.

And while Orlaya was struggling to save their companion, Rahm-and-Sahm, those red-and-blue twins, moved into action. Their hands flashed in ritualistic motions as they whispered back and forth. And when those indistinct murmurs echoed back in the form of a chant—

"Daruarifla tazanme (*O storm of ice*)."

—their spell, DALTO, struck with a blizzard of surprising force. It was comparable to that of the stronger MADALTO.

The rabbits' white fur was instantly coated in frost. They were turned into living ice sculptures, and then they perished.

"Wow!" Berkana's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yap?!" Garbage yelped along with her.

It was an incredible technique—the twins had timed their spells to complete at the same time, which boosted the effect. This was a technique Berkana had also displayed in the battle against the fire dragon, but Orlaya couldn't have known that.

She did know one thing, however.

Their spell had struck a decisive blow...and they'd all survived.

§

"Uegh...eagh... Ee...eeeek...!"

"Woof..."

Garbage snorted at Shadow, who still couldn't believe she was alive—before, it had seemed all but certain that she wouldn't make it. There was a dismissive tone to Garbage's bark, almost like the girl was asking, "*What is she doing?*"

Garbage took off at a trot.

"Is...she going to be all right?" Berkana asked hesitantly.

"She's just searching for the chest," Orlaya answered sharply.

"That's not what I meant..." Berkana protested weakly, but there was no need to respond.

Shadowwind's wound had closed up—not perfectly, but she wouldn't die. She was going to have to be "all right," or they were going to have a problem.

Because, as a thief, her job was just getting started.

Orlaya glared up at Berkana. When she looked past those accursed breasts, Orlaya saw the big girl's eyes practically quivering with fear.

"What about you?" Orlaya asked.

"Erm, what do you...?"

"Are you wounded?"

"Oh, u-um, right. I'm...fine, really."

"Right."

Orlaya had asked the question she'd wanted to ask. And based on Garbage's behavior, the redhead girl was probably fine too.

Rather than listen to Berkana any longer, Orlaya walked over to the gnome twins. They were whispering to each other, like they always did, and giggling. Their vacant eyes turned to regard her. Four irises, none of them matching. It was like they were completely different life-forms.

"We are..."

"...completely unscathed..."

"...and looking forward to what's in the chest."

"Hopefully, it's something good."

Having said this, they let out a laugh that was like the jangling of small bells. Orlaya kept a stony face as she nodded.

"That spell just now... You can cast DALTO?" she asked them.

"It's a taste..."

"...of what we know."

"Right."

Realizing that she'd responded to Berkana the same way just moments before, Orlaya clicked her tongue in annoyance. That wasn't what she'd

wanted to say. It never was...

“I think you made a good call,” Orlaya finally managed to say—brusquely, as if she were throwing the words at them.

The twins exchanged a glance, but Orlaya didn’t detect any more of a change in their expressions than that.

“Whah! Woof!”

She heard Garbage’s energetic barking from across the chamber. The girl had her foot planted on a treasure chest.

Having said her piece to Rahm-and-Sahm, Orlaya turned to go. She headed straight toward Garbage.

She’s sure got a good nose for this kind of thing.

It was a thought that was half exasperation, half genuine praise. Orlaya couldn’t have done the same if she tried, but she had no desire to try.

“Hey, thief, it’s time to get to work.”

“Uegh... Whaa...!” cried Shadowwind.

“If you don’t get that chest open, then what did we even come down here for?”

“Augh... A-Again...?”

What did she mean, “again”? Had this kind of thing happened to her before?

Even if it has...

Orlaya had been through something similar. All of them had. The girl was still alive, so Orlaya didn’t want to tolerate whining. She didn’t want to hear it.

Orlaya could feel Berkanan’s eyes as they anxiously darted back and forth between her and Shadowwind. She waited quietly, not wanting to say anymore. Eventually, Shadowwind started moving, albeit slowly.

“Urgh...!”

Once she saw that the girl was heading over to the chest, Orlaya let out a sigh of relief.

If it were Raraja...

He might curse once or twice if he got bit by a monster, but that would be it. He wouldn’t complain.

Orlaya shook her head slightly. She didn’t really want to bully the girl with the comparison. She wasn’t that nasty.

Not that it makes much difference, she thought with some degree of exasperation at herself.

“Woof! Arf!”

“You, be quiet. She’s not Raraja, so don’t get in her way.”

“Yap?!”

Wasn’t Orlaya due some thanks for holding Garbage back by the scruff of the neck?

§

Is it a poison needle, maybe...?

Shadowwind carefully scrutinized the area around the chest. She couldn’t be confident. She had already disarmed a number of chests since coming to the dungeon, but that didn’t change things.

On the surface, back in her village, she had practiced with locked and trapped storage trunks, but this was completely different. Back then, she could have gotten away with using a saw to cut through the outside of the box. But she couldn’t think of the treasure chests here in the dungeon as mere boxes. It was like how killing monsters was completely different from killing people.

Shadowwind let out a deep sigh.

That moment...

She replayed the scene in her mind: rabbit fangs, closing in on her throat. This had occurred mere minutes—hours?—ago. She’d thought she was going to die—decapitated in an instant. But the reality was longer, more excruciating, and truly terrifying. Just the recollection made her heart pound and her breath come in short puffs. Her hands shook. She wanted to burst into tears and run away.

There was nothing she could do about it. That was just how fear was.

Holding in the impulse to scream, Shadowwind slowly pulled out her dagger. There had been resistance when she’d lifted the lid slightly, which meant there was some mechanism on the piece that connected the lid and box.

Now she just had to skillfully...cut the string, or whatever it was. It was fine. She could do this.

Inserting the blade into the thin opening, she carefully, *carefully*, slid it along. There was nothing to be afraid of.

Crack.

She heard something break.

“Ah.”

It wasn’t a string.

§

A roar. A flash.

Heat.

An impact.

“Gyagh...?!”

Orlaya’s small body was hurled across the burial chamber. She collided with something soft but heavy and then rolled. As she peered through the cloud of dust hanging in the air, she realized that the “something” was Berkana.

Well, she hadn’t figured it out immediately. Unable to understand what was happening, Orlaya had flailed her arms and legs around.

“W-Wah...! A-Are you...okay? Are you all right?”

Even in the middle of her own panic, Berkana was hugging Orlaya tightly with that large body of hers. At this point, Orlaya realized that Berkana was protecting her. She breathed a sigh of relief.

“My ears are ringing...but I’m fine. How about you?” she asked.

“I’m, uh...yeah.” There was a nod above Orlaya’s head. “Fine. This still isn’t as bad as a dragon.”

Embarrassed to say anything more, Orlaya just murmured, “Mmhmm.”

She got up.

The chamber was full of hot air, dust, and smoke. Orlaya let out an involuntary cough as she looked around.

“Are you all alive? Or dead?” Orlaya called out in a hoarse voice.

She couldn’t see the others. But taking a headcount was the most important thing for her to do right now. Not because she was worried—because it would have a direct impact on their ability to return alive.

Over the ringing in her ears, she could just make out a “Yiiip!”

Dazed, and with surprise written all over her face, Garbage got up from where she’d tumbled to the floor. Sheltered under her belly—if that was the right word to use—were two diminutive figures wrapped in red and blue cloaks.

“Sorry about that...”

“We survived...”

Garbage whined.

Had it been chance? A coincidence? With Garbage, it could have gone either way. That mutt liked to think she was the top dog in this pack. And

in her own way, Garbage was good at looking after others.

Now that they were confirmed as alive, that just left—

“Shadow? Shadowwind?”

—the thief who’d botched disarming the trap.

Raraja never would’ve...

As much as it vexed Orlaya, she wasn’t going to lay into Shadowwind over it. Accidents happened. She knew all too well that there was never any guarantee that things would go well when disarming a trap. Most importantly, they needed to decide on what their policy would be going forward. For that, she needed Shadow and her opinion.

Not that there’s any other option but to head back.

Having decided this, she winced as she walked on unsteady legs across the burning-hot tiles of the stone floor.

There—she spotted a black figure lying prone in the corner of the soot-filled chamber.

It was the twitching silhouette of a girl. Her neck was bent at an impossible angle.

Shadowwind was dead.

§

“So...what do we do now...?” asked Berkanaan.

It was fair to say that they were in rough shape. Covered in soot and burns, the pain and exhaustion left them with hardly any focus (hit points) to speak of. Yet even in that state, Berkanaan’s voice was only as thin and weak as it was under ordinary circumstances. Perhaps that spoke to how brave she truly was.

Orlaya remained very quiet. She pondered these types of things as an escape mechanism—only half her mind was focused on reality.

Shadowwind’s corpse had already been stored in a body bag.

Rahm-and-Sahm had cleaned her remains with experienced hands. They’d gotten the job done and over with quickly. They would drag the girl back to the surface. Honestly, Orlaya didn’t want to think about that right now, but if she stopped thinking, she would surely perish.

“Anyway, we’re lucky that she was the only one to die.”

Shadowwind’s exhaustion from the battle must’ve been the deciding factor. If not for that, the thief might’ve been able to assume a better position—she might’ve survived the blast.

Orlaya felt a little guilty and responsible. Past memories of when she’d

been in charge of opening chests swirled through her mind. She felt like she was going to throw up.

What good would vomiting do? If this were something she could solve by crying and wailing and losing her lunch, then it would have been fixed much sooner.

Why did the gods recognize I had the ability to become a bishop?

Orlaya bit her lip as she repeated to herself once more. They had been lucky. The five of them were still alive.

“Berkanan, Garbage, and I will stand in the front, so could you two drag her along?”

“Got it.”

“Leave it to us.”

Well, this is the only real choice.

She was grateful that the twins listened to her. They fell back, along with Shadowwind’s corpse, while Orlaya moved up. The rhea carried a staff and shield, neither of which she’d ever used, along with the breastplate she’d pulled off Shadowwind. The dead didn’t need armor, so she didn’t feel guilty about it. It even fit her perfectly. She’d laughed about that.

“You okay...?”

“Mm...”

Orlaya’s strained smile must have made Berkanan worry. She leaned down to peer more closely at the rhea’s face.

Orlaya forced a smirk. “Don’t treat me like a fool,” she said sharply. “Anything you can do, I can do too.”

“Right...”

“Besides, I’m just filling the hole in the front row. I’ll be counting on you two to handle things.”

“Right!”

She’s so easy to read.

Berkanan suddenly held the Dragon Slayer with renewed energy, declaring, “I’ll do my best!” It was hard to decide whether that gesture was reassuring or worrisome.

Now, the only problem left was...

“You, huh?”

“Hmph...” The redhead mutt, Garbage, looked at her with a bored expression that said, “*I thought you were finally finished.*”

Orlaya still couldn’t get over the fact that this girl was carrying

Hrathnir. Garbage's entire body was singed and burned. Her stamina and willpower must have been as drained as everyone else's. Obviously, Orlaya had gone and healed everyone, but she only had so many spells to go around.

They would have to make the trip back as they were.

However...

"We're heading back to the surface. Okay?"

"Woof!"

"We're going up. Back home. Understand?"

"Arf!"

"Does she really get it...?"

"Woof!"

Orlaya was going to have to act on the assumption that Garbage *did* get it. They weren't going to be able to move forward otherwise. That was why, half out of desperation, she decided that the girl understood. She ended the conversation there.

"Okay, we're going. As for the map..."

"We'll read it," said one twin.

"Go due north after leaving the room," the other continued.

"Mm, got it..."

They filed out of the chamber, stepping over the door that they had kicked in earlier. Orlaya looked left, then right. It was a tense moment.

"There're no enemies...right?"

Garbage whined.

Obviously, the dungeon's gloom didn't allow the adventurers to see very far ahead. The spell MILWA could have done something about that, but they didn't have the presence of mind left to cast it. After all, the only pure front-liner that they had—although this had been true from the very beginning—was Garbage.

In this unexpected situation, spells were their only trump card. They couldn't afford to use them up lightly.

It's not so bad that we need to set up camp and wait to be rescued.

Orlaya didn't want to imagine needing to do that. Iarumas was one thing, but the very thought of Raraja coming and saving her was simply unbearable.

I can't accept them being on top and me being on the bottom.

"So...north, right?" she asked.

"Which way is that...?" Berkana wondered aloud.

“I think it’s...”

“...that way.”

Garbage seemed to have more or less figured out the situation. She remained silently on the lookout for trouble.

They were merely facing the opposite direction from where they’d come, and yet the dungeon looked completely different. Even though they were just tracing their route home, they felt as though they were wandering down unfamiliar paths. It may have been because of *that*—okay, probably not.

Whether it was good luck or bad luck—the party responsible for it will remain anonymous—*someone* stepped on a tile that they hadn’t trod on earlier. And the moment they did...

“Huh?”

“Yap?!”

There was a slight whooshing noise. The world spun around and twisted.

The sensation was unpleasant, like someone had grabbed Orlaya’s stomach and given it a squeeze.

Everything flipped.

The next thing she knew, an unfamiliar corridor—in the truest sense of those words—appeared before her eyes.

Garbage landed and sprang back to her feet like an animal, letting out a low growl as she looked around in all directions.

“Oops...”

“...a teleporter.”

Was it Rahm who whispered that? Sahm? Or both?

“Oh, you have *got* to be kidding me,” Orlaya groaned.

§

“Dauk mimuarif peiche (*O cloth, spread out, show my place.*).”

The twins chanted DUMAPIC—the same spell they’d used earlier. Orlaya had no idea whether one of them had cast it twice or if they had each cast it once.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“Pretty far on the east side.”

“But we’re on the same level.”

The twins whispered in her ears. Orlaya glared at the empty portion of the map that they were pointing to.

It's not so far that we can't walk back...

However, what if there were burial chambers along the way? Entering a chamber where monsters were guaranteed to lurk would be suicide in their current condition. Could they simply walk along the corridors and get back to some place they recognized?

“Let’s try and go...”

The sudden voice from above their heads was hesitant...but what Berkana was saying resonated with Orlaya.

“If it doesn’t work out, well, we’ll deal with that when it comes. Although, it’ll feel kind of pathetic if we end up needing to be saved.”

Berkana stayed silent.

It's got to be this part of her. I'm sure of it.

Orlaya looked at her tall friend with one clouded eye. The girl was timid, hesitant, and frightened—she was waiting to see how everyone reacted. And yet, there was also a degree of consideration in her gaze. Her eyes were a mix of cowardice and kindness.

Orlaya stared back into them for a moment, then, after some time, she let out a sigh.

“It beats standing around, I guess.”

“W-Well, umm, if we do set up camp, at least we won’t be standing... Heh heh...”

After casting a dubious look at Berkana, who was acting all shy and embarrassed in a way that didn’t fit the tense situation, Orlaya started walking.

It's not like anyone's in the wrong here.

Each and every misfortune they’d encountered was one that everyone who entered the dungeon was bound to meet with eventually. They’d just happened to experience them one after another.

Was it bad luck? Perhaps. But that was all it was. Nothing more.

It's just how the dice happened to come up. Only a fool would get depressed about that.

“Okay, Garbage, you can go now.”

“Woof!”

It was like walking a dog—though they were way too reliant on said dog. Regardless, with Garbage leading the way, Orlaya and the others carried on exploring this unfamiliar area.

It took them—who knows?

Minutes? Hours? Days?

Weeks? Months?

They would progress a little, then check their situation. They compared the map against the terrain, avoided doors, and continued along corridors. The only way to precisely determine their location inside the dungeon was to cast DUMAPIC, but they couldn't cast it frequently. Spells were not so readily available that they could afford to waste them.

What could they do, then? Compare the map against what they saw with their eyes.

If they stepped on a revolving floor, let alone managed to get caught in another teleporter, it would be unbearable.

They had to rely on hazy memories and their senses.

No wonder Iarumas uses the Ring of Jewels and that accursed coin...

But if Orlaya had time to wish for things she couldn't have, that meant things were going smoothly enough. She could afford for her mind to wander a little.

And not long after that...

§

“Arf!”

“Huh...?”

Garbage barked. Berkana blinked. With her one cloudy eye, Orlaya couldn't see what they were reacting to. As they drew closer, something finally came into view.

A blue color. A slight chill.

This was...

“A pool...”

“...perhaps?” the twins speculated.

“It looks more like a spring to me,” Berkana countered.

“I wonder what everyone else is seeing...” Orlaya groaned.

The adventurers had arrived at a water area. Was it an entire space filled with blue water? A pond? An aqueous pillar? It was a mystery. Whatever it was, it was probably best to call it a *pool of water*.

Orlaya peered through the surface of the water. Even if her eye had been clear, she wouldn't have been able to see the bottom.

Just how deep was it?

“Woof!” Garbage started yanking on Orlaya's sleeve.

“You don't need to pull. I'm not going to fall in...” Orlaya grumbled before shaking her head. She didn't understand it at all. The cool air on her

face felt pleasant, though.

“Will you try drinking it?” one twin asked in a whisper.

“That would let us know if it’s poison,” the other added.

“Hey...”

Orlaya scowled at the giggling twins.

Well, I guess they do have a point.

It wasn’t a bad idea to investigate so that they could be prepared for the next time they came here—if there *was* a next time. There was no guarantee that their party would make it to somewhere they recognized. And if they were going to camp here, then having something hazardous nearby would be...well, unpleasant.

After some groaning, Orlaya dug through her pack. She clicked her tongue.

“Berkanan, do you have that thing?”

“Huh? Oh, the pot?” The wide brim of Berkanan’s hat bobbed up and down. “Yeah, I do. Hold on just a moment. I know I brought it...”

Having said this, she began searching her shoulder bag. The bag might have looked small, but it was anything but—it seemed as though she had anything and everything in there.

As she produced the pot with an “Oof,” even Rahm-and-Sahm’s eyes went wide. It was just a small one for camping, but its sudden appearance still felt like magic.

“Erm, do you want me...to scoop some up?”

“Yeah. You don’t have to drink it, though.”

Berkanan nodded. She dipped the pot into the pool and collected some water.

It won’t corrode, will it? Orlaya didn’t point this out to Berkanan, but the pot seemed the same as ever. The color and smell of the water were normal too. Orlaya then opened the body bag holding Shadowwind. Berkanan figured out what she was up to and began fidgeting uneasily.

“I-Is that okay...?”

“Dead bodies don’t get mad.”

The black-haired girl’s corpse was laid out in the bag. A dazed look was etched on her face, and her neck was bent at a bizarre angle.

Berkanan tilted the pot over the body. One drop, then another, fell onto the corpse’s pale skin.

No change.

Shadowwind’s soft flesh retained a sense of youth. The beads of water

rolled off it before soaking into her peach fuzz. If she weren't dead, the scene would have been picturesque.

"Well, it doesn't *seem* poisonous. Maybe we can drink it."

"Looks like we won't..."

"...go thirsty, at least."

"You want to be the first to try it?" Orlaya asked the twins teasingly, but she only got vague smiles in response.

Suddenly, those expressions changed—their faces seemed to say, "Oh my," and "Huh?"

"There's something..."

"...floating there?"

The little twins raced over and plunged their hands into the water.

"Don't fall in," Orlaya warned them sharply, as if she hadn't looked like she was going to tumble in herself just minutes ago.

"Whah! Grrr!" Garbage yanked on the hem of Orlaya's clothes.

"What? Don't tell me you're thirsty," she snapped.

"Orlaya...chan," Berkana said, her tone tense. But Orlaya wasn't so dense that she hadn't picked up on the situation before the big girl spoke.

How had Orlaya known?

Because Berkana had already pulled out the Dragon Slayer!

"Woof!"

"You really are like a stray dog!" Orlaya belatedly drew her own weapon with unpracticed hands and turned to face the same direction as the other two. She didn't know what the twins were doing behind them. Nor did she have time to worry about it.

Wandering monsters.

Finally, an encounter with those creatures—a battle they couldn't escape—was coming their way.

No...

I guess...running is an option.

Orlaya swallowed with an audible gulp and then reassessed her decision. This wasn't like a battle inside a burial chamber. There was no need to fight. No need to kill. Running was fine. And forgetting this option...would truly end them.

"There!"

Soon, the monster turned a corner and appeared at the end of the corridor.

A reddish-black shadow, humanoid in form, emerged from the dungeon

gloom. It reminded her of the void priests they'd faced before. But this was clearly different.

A man in armor—that was how it appeared to Orlaya.

“Awooooooo!”

Garbage was the first to pounce. She swung Hrathnir, and the white blade tore through man and darkness alike.

“_____!”

Slice! It was such a perfect strike that she could practically *hear* Hrathnir make that sound. To Orlaya's eye, it looked like the creature was bisected. But if not, she had to assume that it had been dealt a terrible wound.

“Eek?!”

Garbage's cry said otherwise.

Meat audibly bubbled up. Blood reconnected tissue. Skin stretched over muscle.

The felled creature rose once more, unfazed.

“It's undead...?!” Berkanaan cried in horror as she stood beside Garbage with the Dragon Slayer. The girl was really slow, both mentally and physically, but her massive body at least lent some *oomph* to any attack she launched.

With a nasal shout, she swung the Dragon Slayer.

The result was...exactly the same, of course. The blade struck the monster's shoulder, cutting it down, but in no time, it was slowly rising again.

Berkanaan didn't let this deter her, though.

“Garbage-chan...!”

“Rowf!”

“*Nicely done,*” the delighted bark seemed to say. The redhead girl jumped backward to recover her stance, and Berkanaan lagged behind her.

“O God! O Kadorto, ruler of life and death! Free this one from its cursed yoke! Save its soul!”

Stepping in for the two of them, Orlaya said her prayer.

Dispell. It was a technique all members of the clergy knew—one that released the undead from their curse. Its powerful light was similar to a mage's ZILWAN, though they were distinct. However...

“_____!”

“Of course it didn't work!”

The light dissipated in front of the creature.

Wait, was that thing even undead to begin with? Orlaya ignored this doubt, which momentarily surfaced in her mind. We can't take this thing!

“Pull back!” she ordered. “We’re fleeing!”

“Yap! Yip?!”

“O-Okay...!”

Garbage raised a fuss—she seemed to want to keep fighting—but Berkana seized her by the scruff of the neck. The front row was now ready to go. As for the back...

“Rahm, Sahm!”

“Okay!”

“We got it!”

Glancing back, the red-and-blue twins were soaking wet. There was something yellow in between them. They must have fished it out of the water.

“Great! Now run!”

The twins’ layered “Okay”s echoed over each other. Now it was just a matter of everyone running.

It was a hurried and disorganized flight. Where did they run? Down what corridors? And what turns did they make?

The stomping of the monster pursued them wherever they went.

Would it go away? Or would they run out of breath first?

Ultimately, they all stopped, winded. They stood still and wheezed.

The stomping behind them faded... And right in front of them was the elevator.

§

“And that was all you got for your effort, huh?”

Back at Catlob’s Trading Post, which was dimly lit even in the middle of the day, a metallic clicking sound came from the shop’s counter.

Raraja glanced up at Orlaya as he continued opening the chest.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Orlaya replied curtly, spitting the words at him.

“We did our best, though...” Berkana added with a vague smile.

She was carefully stroking the twins’ backs with her large palms, as though she were touching something fragile. Though they both wore the same vacant looks as always, there was something dispirited about them. In their hands, clutched preciously...was something small and yellow.

“Ruff...”

Garbage poked it from the side. She didn’t seem to understand it. Was

she showing restraint by not simply seizing it from them? Her jabs at it weren't hesitant enough to suggest that this was the case. It squeaked and deformed under the push of her finger, only to return to its original shape when she withdrew it.

"Whah!"

The way her eyes widened, she might have simply been amused by it.

"What is that thing? A duck?" asked Raraja.

"Yeah, a rubber duck." Orlaya scowled. "I've never seen rubber before."

"Where I come from, the rubber is a little softer... Who knew it could be like this?" Berkana remarked.

How carefree. No, maybe she was deliberately trying to seem that way.

"We failed..."

"What do we do...?"

After all, this was a far cry from Rahm-and-Sahm's original objective.

They lamented, but not because of the cost of resurrecting Shadowwind, whose body had been thrown into the temple's morgue. That would come out of the girl's own savings, so it didn't hurt their pockets. As long as she wasn't reduced to ash, she'd pop up again in no time.

The problem was they had been trying to earn money to repay a debt of gratitude, but this was all they had to show for it. There was no way a rubber duck could be of any use in exploring the dungeon. And as for the eccentrics in the outside world...would they see any value in it?

"Even Catlob says he couldn't put a price on it..." Orlaya mused to herself.

The owner had bitterly informed them that his establishment was not a place for them to hang out—he'd then withdrawn to the back of the shop. Well, it was a small place, and there were six of them. It was hard to blame him. Though, with Berkana occupying extra space and the tiny twins needing less, perhaps that balanced things out.

"Well, maybe it's fine?" Orlaya said sharply to the twins. They were sad they'd failed Schumacher. "You scouted ahead on the fourth level. Even mapped a bit of it. Don't you think that was of some use to him?"

"Yes..."

"Thank you..."

"I haven't done anything you ought to thank me for," Orlaya replied, her lips pursed with irritation. She didn't like the way that Berkana was watching them warmly.

For starters...Orlaya, well, she had things of her own to think about. She'd gotten roped into the leader position, but she could hardly call their delve a success. Sure, they'd made it back alive, but that was a result, not an accomplishment. They should have been better—should have been able to handle combat, exploration, and everything else they'd done down there.

Orlaya rested her elbows on the counter and glared at Raraja with her one eye.

"Wh-What...?" he stammered.

"Y'know...you're actually thinking about a lot more than I expected."

"The heck's that supposed to mean?"

Had he assumed she was mocking him? Raraja scowled and looked back down at the treasure chest. Well, if that was what he thought, then let him think it. She wasn't going to spell it out for him.

The conversation died. Time passed. And then...

"Yap!"

Suddenly, Garbage barked as the bells on the shop door jangled. There stood a man clad in black, with a black staff and a gloomy face.

"Iarumas, huh?" Orlaya groaned. "Should I say 'welcome'?"

"If you want to, then be my guest," the man replied.

"Well, what are you here for?"

"To buy some things," Iarumas said, without seeming interested in the slightest. "More importantly," he continued with a faint smile, "I hear you went down to the fourth level."

"That was fast..."

He was their party's leader, but Orlaya hadn't reported anything to him directly. Had Raraja informed him? Or had Iarumas learned about it in the temple, after they'd dropped off Shadow's body? The latter seemed likely. Ainiiki was always looking out for Iarumas. That said, ever since the nun had lost both her arms, Orlaya hadn't seen her outside the temple very often.

"We didn't really find much of anything," Orlaya reported, her tone bored and dismissive. "Just some weird monsters, a pool of water, and a rubber duck."

Iarumas's reaction to her words came as a total surprise.

"What...?" The look in his eyes changed. He raced up to the counter and pointedly asked, "Did you say a pool and a rubber duck?"

"Huh? Uh, y-yeah..." Orlaya nodded, intimidated by his intensity.

“That’s right.”

“I marked it on the map, just in case,” Berkana chimed in. “Because they let me make a copy of theirs...”

Berkana dug the map out of her bag with a grunt of exertion. One of the reasons they’d come here today was to add it to Raraja’s map book.

Iarumas demanded that she show it to him, and she obediently handed it over. He snapped it open, his eyes sharp as he observed each cell on the grid. The route from where they’d been teleported to the elevator was blank due to their chaotic retreat. But the space where the teleporter was, where it went, and the spring were all included—despite the distance between them. This was the product of having cast DUMAPIC multiple times.

Iarumas looked it over for a while, then nodded slightly.

“And the rubber duck?” he asked.

“It’s right...”

“...here,” the twins said falteringly.

The little yellow duck was even smaller than the little hands that held it.

Iarumas saw it, and without delay, he said, “I’ll buy it from you.”

“Huh?!” the twins blurted out in synchronized surprise.

Their red and blue eyes were wide—they looked back and forth from Iarumas to the duck.

While Orlaya wasn’t surprised, she did lean in, half exasperated, half curious. “What, it’s that valuable, is it?”

“Not if you can swim... But I haven’t in a long time.”

As per usual, she couldn’t tell if Iarumas was joking. The black-clad man was even smiling faintly. Orlaya couldn’t help but be suspicious.

He took a fistful of gold coins from the pouch on his hip and placed them in the twins’ hands. “I’m sure, as adventurers, you can use this. Consider it payment for the map too.”

“Uh, tha...!”

“...nnk you very much!”

It probably wasn’t common for Rahm-and-Sahm to show such emotion. The twins were delighted by the gold coins Iarumas had paid for the rubber duck. They bowed their heads to him repeatedly, as if he’d saved their lives.

Iarumas brushed it off, though. He squeezed the duck a few times with his armored hand. It squeaked. Seemingly satisfied with this result, he put

the duck away.

“All right, get yourselves ready. We’re going to the fourth level next,” he said.

“Ugh, seriously...?” Raraja groaned, but he immediately started putting away his lockpicking tools.

“A-Already?” Berkana didn’t sound enthused to be going back.

As for Orlaya...

I wonder.

Strangely, her heart was still. Emotionless even. “*Oh, I guess we’re going then,*” it seemed to say.

Had all of her emotions dried up? Had she just gotten used to it? Or...

I guess I’m fine if we delve with this party.

None of the answers made much difference. So, fine. Whatever.

“Just don’t make me stand in the front row,” she muttered.

“Say that to anyone but me,” Iarumas responded with a low laugh.

Finally, he looked at the redhead girl—the monsters’ leftovers who had become the Diamond Knight. “What will you do?”

“Arf!” Garbage responded.

She was the most enthusiastic of them all.

Chapter 6

Pool of

Clear Blue

Water



Ding.

The doors opened with a sound so cheery it seemed out of place.

The dungeon corridor spread out in front of them, looking no different here than it did anywhere else. Even so, his first time descending to this place brought about a certain sense of tension and elation.

Iarumas was in an unusually good mood as he stepped out onto the fourth level.

“I thought it would take longer...”

“Awooo!”

Redheaded Garbage followed vigorously, Hrathnir on her back. Her eyes flared with fighting spirit, and her lips bore a ferocious smile.

She's raring to go, Berkanaan seemed to be thinking. *She must've really disliked how things went last time.*

No doubt she had. Berkanaan knew her doglike friend's personality well. And it wasn't as if Berkanaan didn't understand how she was feeling. The situation hadn't frustrated her like the dragon had, but still...it hadn't exactly been enjoyable.

“I'll...do my best too.”

“Woof!” Garbage barked as if to say, “*That's the spirit.*”

Perhaps the key to getting along was in the intention, not the words themselves. That said, Raraja and Orlaya were looking a little dispirited.

“Our goal's...the weird pool of water, not the monster, right?” the boy asked.

“I don't want to have to fight things over and over,” added Orlaya.

Even so, Berkanaan had an inkling—whatever that thing had been, it was still *here*. And now that they had descended to the fourth level, they were guaranteed to collide with it again.

I don't like this, Orlaya thought, but Raraja was already over it. He had the map out and was checking the grid. His finger stopped on the square with the teleporter trap.

“Teleporters sure are dangerous...” he grumbled.

“We have a guaranteed way back,” Iarumas noted. “Besides, it's your second time, right?”

Raraja scowled. “Yeah, but it's not an experience I'm eager to repeat.”

I can't stand it, thought Orlaya. It was like Raraja was a full-fledged adventurer now. Though she hadn't wanted to, during their previous expedition, she'd automatically compared him with Shadowwind—and with herself.

Bile rose in her stomach. She spoke with the vitriol it inspired. “I know I already said this before we came here, but you’d better not make me fight in the front row.”

“I take no responsibility for anything that happens if we’re attacked from behind,” Iarumas said in response. Was he saying that if she wanted to stay back, she’d better watch the rear?

Orlaya clicked her tongue and scowled as hard as she could. “I know that,” she answered sharply. “Fine, I’ll just pray that neither Raraja nor Berkana get laid out flat.”

“Well, that lineup’s not quite right...” Iarumas murmured. Orlaya’s sarcasm seemed wasted on him. “I’ll be on the front row this time.”

How unusual...

§

Clink, clink.

A gold coin bounced across the stone-tiled floor, then was reeled back in using its string.

The creeping coin. This was a trick Iarumas had devised and Raraja had come to emulate. The boy had thought it was silly the first time he’d seen it, but he couldn’t laugh anymore.

“Woof!”

Even Garbage was quietly going along with it this time.

Well, knowing her, she’ll forget again in no time. After all, to the best of Raraja’s knowledge, this was her third time being sent flying by a teleport effect.

The first of those three times, well... It was an awkward memory for Raraja.

But Garbage still ran around the dungeon, kicking in doors like it was no big deal, so her resilience was impressive.

If I told her that though, she’d get a big head, so I’m not gonna say it. The girl was quick to pick up on such things, even if she didn’t understand words.

“Yap!”

“It’s nothing.”

See? Her eyes, like two bottomless blue lakes, stared at him. Raraja waved her off dismissively. He turned his mind to the map and the dungeon.

“So, what is that pool?” he asked.

“Not having seen it myself, I can’t say for certain...” Iarumas shrugged as he reeled the coin in and threw it again. “But the water was blue, right?”

“Well, yes,” Orlaya said, occasionally glancing at their backs. “It was a bit of a blur for me, though.”

“Mm, I got a proper look at it...” said Berkanaan. She realized belatedly that they were asking *her* specifically.

“Umm...” Berkanaan placed a finger on her lips as she thought about it. It was an innocent gesture befitting a girl her age, but it nonetheless looked humorous. “It was like the color of...Garbage-chan’s eyes.”

“Arf?” Garbage looked up, thinking she’d been called.

“Yeah, that’s right. A clear blue color...” Berkanaan nodded with a smile.

“Aha,” Iarumas said to himself. “That’s good. I’m more certain of it now.”

“Why’re you asking about— Whoa.”

“Hrm...”

Raraja stopped short. Iarumas fell silent too.

The black-clad man had tossed the coin, and it had landed on the stone tiles before suddenly vanishing without a sound.

He reeled in the string. It was broken. The coin did not return.

“This is the place. How’s the map look?”

“Seems accurate...” Raraja checked the nondescript corridor against the map. Their notation suddenly cut off at this spot—a sign that Orlaya’s group had come this way. “Hold on, Berka...nan and Orlaya have actually seen it. What do you think?”

“I can’t see well,” Orlaya replied. “Ask Berkanaan. Or Garbage.”

“Whuh?! M-Me? You can ask, but...I’m not confident...” After all, they’d endured the explosion right before—her memory of the teleporter was slightly muddled. Berkanaan hid, hesitantly, behind the brim of her hat.

Still, in reality, the dungeon looked the same no matter where one went inside it. When it came to recognizing a place they’d been before, well...there was never any way to be sure. And yet...

“Grrr...”

After sniffing the air, Garbage let out a low growl. Her wariness was readily apparent. It seemed that, for her, there was no doubt about it.

“Hmm.” Iarumas held up the Ring of Jewels. “The coordinates match too.”

“Next time, use that first...” Raraja griped.

“We can’t assume that this is the correct spot if the map, what you’ve seen, and the coordinates don’t all match.”

Raraja had no comeback to that—Iarumas was correct.

The man in black laughed a little, then stepped onto the teleporter. He vanished.

“Rowf!” barked Garbage. Berkanaan looked surprised.

Raraja stood there, staring hard at the strange section of floor. “I wonder... Whaddaya think happens if you stop with just one foot on this thing?”

“Stop saying stupid stuff and move along already,” Orlaya snapped.

With this verbal jab from behind, Raraja reluctantly advanced. The world turned upside down. He felt like he was being twisted, and then it was like being dropped from some endless height.

Suddenly...

“Whoa.”

New scenery, no different from before, yet *definitely* different, appeared before him.

The coin lay at his feet, its string severed.

§

“Now, where to next?”

“I think it was this way... But I dunno...”

“I already told you not to ask me, didn’t I?”

“Pretty sure the map’s accurate.”

“Woof!”

It’s strange, Berkanaan thought. She chased after Garbage, who’d taken off at a trot—or what she’d intended to be one. During their last expedition, Berkanaan hadn’t been this boisterous. That was to be expected, considering how things had turned out.

Something was different now. Was it because Iarumas was here?

Because Raraja...kun was here?

Berkanaan couldn’t imagine that was all it was. She couldn’t, but...

“Heh heh...”

“What’re you laughing about?” Orlaya challenged her.

“Oh, umm, nothing... It’s nothing, okay?”

“You’re acting creepy...”

This is kinda nice... Berkanaan thought, even as she frantically waved her arms in small—large—motions. Maybe this was what it was like to

have companions. To have *friends*.

Although, assigning a word to it like that...felt wrong somehow.

§

Iarumas threw the coin with its retied string, reeled it in, then threw it again. He didn't know how many times he'd repeated this process, but eventually, the repetitive motion came to an end.

After throwing the coin for the umpteenth time, it went *splloosh*.

Iarumas reeled the string in, nodding. "This the place?"

"Looks like it," Raraja replied after consulting the map.

Iarumas held up the Ring of Jewels again. The spell DUMAPIC contained in the jewels could be used again and again without ever fading. More accurately, it was permanent.

"That's so convenient..." Berkana murmured without meaning to.

Orlaya glared at Berkana with her sole eye. "Hurry up and learn DUMAPIC for yourself. It's a basic spell."

"You haven't learned it either, Orlaya-chan."

"I have my studies as a bishop too, so it's fine that I haven't."

Berkana pouted. Down at waist-height, Orlaya snorted at her.

"More importantly, why don't you get your sword out? I mean, Garbage has already been growling for a while now."

"Rowf!"

A white sword flashed in the dungeon's gloom—Hrathnir. Its bearer, Garbage, bared her canines, glancing around as though ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

Seeing this, Berkana quickly drew her Dragon Slayer.

However...

"It's a wandering monster... It's not gonna show up when we want it to, right?" What Raraja said—with his dagger drawn and his eyes wide open —made perfect sense. They'd happened to have the encounter at this pool last time, but that was no guarantee that the monster was always here.

Their sense of time was vague inside the dungeon. Even if a moment of tense waiting lasted only a second, it could feel like an hour, or even a day. Just sitting and waiting around seemed awfully...exhausting.

"Iarumas, why don't we go looking for it?" suggested Raraja.

"Honestly, I was considering it," the man in black responded. Should they wander areas where it seemed likely to appear, like they had done with the red dragon? It seemed Raraja had simply voiced the idea that

Iarumas had already been contemplating. “We wouldn’t want it interfering as we search the pool... Well, no...”

It seemed something had occurred to the man. He turned to look at the pool—or perhaps it was a spring. Deep and clear, it was filled with blue water. Its surface reflected the dark and gloomy man’s face.

“We search the water and *then* it comes to interrupt... Huh.”

“Well... That was how it worked out last time,” Orlaya agreed cautiously. She recalled that she’d had Berkana scoop up some water. “Is that something monsters do?”

“If it’s like a certain ghost, it’s not out of the question,” Iarumas said, as if speaking of someone he knew. He looked around the area.

The other adventurers, picking up on his unspoken signal to get ready, each prepared themselves.

Iarumas dipped his hand into the water. There was a faint *splash*.

“_____!”

Then, it came.

Stomp! Stomp!

A dark red figure—a humanoid creature—a man in armor.

It came at them from deep within the dungeon’s gloom—a wandering monster.

No, perhaps...it was the guardian of this watering hole.

“Groaaaaaaaarrr!!!”

The first to charge was, of course, Garbage. She swung Hrathnir, turning the wind around the sword into a blade that she slammed straight into the man.

“_____!!!”

The result was no different from last time. The man’s body was cleft in twain, yet he rose again, squirming.

But Garbage had expected that.

“Hi-yah...!”

“Woof!!!”

Timing her move to coincide with Berkana’s timid slash, Garbage jumped backward in order to make way for the big girl. This wasn’t like last time—Garbage hadn’t been injured by that thing that went boom. The girl wouldn’t let anything that mocked her live.

Hrathnir seemed to pick up on this. The demon-slaying sword lit up brilliantly.

“Yaaah!!!”

Another strike. It severed the man's throat with decapitating force.

"____!"

But of course, he did not die. Despite the clearly lethal wound, he kept moving. He made a clumsy sideswipe with his own sword.

"Arf!!!"

"It...really is undead?!" asked Berkanan.

"But using Dispell didn't work!" Orlaya shouted at the two front-liners, her voice shrill. If physical attacks didn't work, then spells were the answer—but what did Orlaya have in her repertoire that could affect it?

While she pondered that, Raraja already knew one answer.

"Iarumas, what about that spell...whatever it was called?!"

"Hmm, I wonder..." With a swish of his black cloak, Iarumas immediately began forming the signs of the spell with one hand.

"Zeila warif nuun (*O all who are deceased, dissolve before this radiance*)!!!"

The flash of ZILWAN swept through the air like a blade, striking the creature's torso—

"______!!!"

"Of course..."

—but not cutting through it.

ZILWAN was nothing more than light. It didn't cause the creature even the slightest of wounds. But there was no surprise on Iarumas's face. He had expected this.

"Orlaya, your read on it was correct. It's not undead."

"Then what is it?!"

"That, we will need to find out."

With complete composure, Iarumas placed a hand on his black rod. He drew out the saber, casting its black japanned scabbard aside.

"Watch closely."

Iarumas raced down the corridor. He closed the gap in an instant with strange steps that didn't shift to adjust for the weight of his body.

His blade flashed.

The armored man swung to counter, but the movement seemed sluggish—no, amateurish. That was how it looked to Raraja.

Iarumas, Sezmar, Ainikki, Goerz.

Having witnessed the brilliant skills of all of these masters of the blade, the boy could tell. Could Raraja have blocked Iarumas's blade? It didn't matter—the armored man's skills were certainly not up to the task.

Also, Raraja had...seen him...somewhere...

“Ah.”

Raraja and Orlaya both cried out in recognition at the same time.

“The guy who stole the Ring of Healing!”

“He’s got the Ring of Death around his neck!”

Garbage and Berkana both simultaneously turned back to look.

Iarumas, who had returned to his original position and put distance between himself and the enemy, did not. He slowly leveled his blade at it, maintaining a cautious stance. That left him no room to turn and look.

“What, is this an acquaintance of yours?” Iarumas asked.

“Nah, he’s no acquaintance...” Raraja answered.

“But that is the Ring of Death. I just appraised it recently!” Orlaya asserted.

Seeing Iarumas nod, Raraja explained the circumstances. A man had visited Catlob’s Trading Post. He’d succeeded in making off with gold and items while Raraja had been distracted. When the boy had looked around for the thief afterward, Raraja hadn’t even been able to remember his face. But now that he saw it again, he knew.

Even in this degenerated state...he was sure it was the same guy.

“What are you even doing?” Orlaya said with exasperation.

“Shove off,” Raraja shot back venomously. “How about you? How can you recognize it at this distance?”

“I appraise items with more than just my eyes. I can tell.” Orlaya thrust her small chest out proudly. She couldn’t stand being underestimated.

However, there was one person who didn’t understand: Berkana, who was left with question marks floating around her head. “So, what’s it all mean...?”

The Ring of Healing, as per its name, healed the wounds of its wearer. The Ring of Death was a horrifying item that drained the life of the one carrying it. What was the point of having both at the same time? No, even if there was a point...would carrying them result in a monster like this?

“Having both drives you crazy.”

That was Iarumas’s answer.

“_____!!!”

The enemy lunged at him, groaning. Iarumas easily sliced it with his blade. The strike should have been a fatal one, but the monster was cut, backed away, and that was all.

It fell to the ground. Severed flesh stitched itself back together. The

monster rose again.

Iarumas watched its sluggish movements without letting his guard down. “When life and death are at a stalemate, a strange thing happens—you no longer die. That’s the sort of thing that is.”

“So, it really is undead...?” asked Berkanan.

Iarumas shook his head. “No, it just doesn’t die. That’s different from undeath.”

In short, there were any number of ways to deal with it. *What to do?* Iarumas considered their options quietly. Normally, he would have left it to Raraja, Berkanan, Orlaya, and Garbage to handle by themselves. This was *their* adventure, after all. But...just this once...

“Awooo!!!” Garbage howled.

“*Enough of this! Let me at it!*” her voice said. It was written on her face. He could see it in her eyes.

Iarumas laughed. He mussed her red hair.

“Woof!” she protested.

“This is a good opportunity. It may be of no relevance to you, Raraja, but let me show you something good.”

“Huh...?”

Ignoring Raraja’s confusion, he turned to Garbage and looked into her blue eyes. There was a dangerous light in them.

“Take aim, then strike.”

§

Whatever *it* was...he had once been an adventurer.

He hadn’t wanted to die. He’d wanted to make easy money.

Having come up with a little idea, he’d thought himself very clever—if it could be called that. It was the sneaky kind of clever, though he never realized that for himself...

It all started when he happened to acquire a valuable Ring of Healing. As for how he got it...there’s no need to waste time on such details.

He heard rumors of another ring—the Ring of Death. He had a flash of inspiration.

What would happen if I put on both?

It was, generally speaking, only possible for a person to gain the benefit of one magical ring at a time. However, just *carrying* the Ring of Death was enough to trigger its life-draining effect. So, if he were to wear the Ring of Healing at the same time...what would happen?

Obviously, he had struggled with this question.

When he found a way to make money from his Ring of Healing without losing it, he couldn't stop laughing. A hundred and fifty thousand gold! Using that cash, he tricked some foolish adventurers into getting the Ring of Death for him.

His idea worked too.

He didn't die.

With both rings, he could be wounded or burned endlessly, and he would still live on.

He was able to descend to the second and third levels, which he had never been able to make it to before. He would never tell anyone about this power—that was what he swore to himself after he made it through the Monster Allocation Center.

And as for the spring he found on the fourth level? Never. He alone knew about it. It was his. He would never let anyone else have it.

He wandered the dungeon, killing adventurers who tried to unearth its secrets, drunk on the ecstasy of his own power.

It was, ultimately, just a little clever—nothing more than that.

He never knew what he had become. Nor would he have had any idea what happened to the wizard who had once obtained the amulet.

Nonetheless, *it* was happier that way. It still was. These adventurers couldn't lay a hand on it. It would keep going like this. Kill them. And then...

“Taila (*O swift wind!*)”

At that moment, the wind started to blow.

§

Intense magical force whirled through the dungeon, carried on the wind.

Berkanan, Orlaya, and Raraja all saw the man at the focal point of those energies. The black-clad corpse hauler—Iarumas of the Black Rod. He was a fighter who cast spells, or perhaps a mage who could fight with a sword. That was what they had assumed.

And yet...

“Tazanme woarif (*Together with the light!*)”

What was *this*?

Pale light rode on the wind, rumbling like thunder.

Orlaya's single eye was wide. Berkanan's throat trembled. Even a

totally mundane person like Raraja knew: this...was crazy. The only one smiling was Garbage.

“Iyeta (*Be unleashed*)!!!”

White.

It could only be described as a flash, accompanied by overwhelming light and heat and wind. With a roar that erased all other sound, it was unleashed into the dungeon. It blotted out everything.

TILTOWAIT.

“_____?!?!”

Burned by the light, *it* thrashed and writhed. Even as the body charred and dissipated, the two rings forbade him from dying.

But Garbage, she was different. And Hrathnir, the demon-slaying sword she carried, was different.

“Aooooooooo!!!”

She pounced, howling. The girl slashed, even through the light of that nuke. Her body twisted in the air, dancing as she unleashed a flash of her own.

Hrathnir sliced through TILTOWAIT and lopped off the creature’s head.

“_____?!?!”

A critical hit.

Its head, silently severed, sailed through the air as it burned and vanished.

Even to the very end, the creature probably never knew what had destroyed it.

§

Garbage landed nimbly on the sizzling-hot stone-tiled floor.

“Aooooooooo!!!”

Letting out a victorious howl, she shouldered Hrathnir and savored the win. It was a point of glee for her that she’d slain the guy with her own hands, but...

“He wasn’t immortal. He just wouldn’t die.” Iarumas, on the other hand, let out a sigh of dismay. “If you destroy his body or behead him, well...that’s the end of it.”

What he was saying was understandable. Sure, it made sense. Maybe he was right.

The issue was with how Iarumas had done it.

“W-Was that just...”

“...TILTOWAIT...?”

Orlaya and Berkanaan looked at one another, awestruck. They'd both come to the same conclusion.

A seventh-level spell.

Even here in the dungeon, where the whispers of legends became the stuff of reality, such magic was still unheard of. There was no way, as magical practitioners themselves, that they wouldn't understand the significance of him firing off a seventh-level spell like it was nothing.

The ones who didn't understand were Garbage...and Raraja. No, even Raraja realized that the spell he'd just witnessed was horrifying.

“If you have a spell like that, then why...?!”

“Don't ask me to use it on a regular basis,” Iarumas said with a shrug, as though it were no big deal.

Fair enough—TILTOWAIT was a powerful spell. They'd all just seen that. But...

“We were lucky it ended with just one TILTOWAIT.”

If one could entertain the naive idea that it was the ultimate attack—a surefire solution—then this wouldn't be the dungeon. It was a trump card. Nothing more, nothing less. To rely on it... To become a one-trick pony... That would be folly.

“Are you saying there are gonna be times when you'll have to fire it off repeatedly?” Raraja asked incredulously.

Iarumas looked at him. “You've seen those times for yourself, haven't you?”

Red dragons. Greater demons. And...unseen beings. What if enemies like those appeared not individually...but one after another? Besides, by no means had that *terrifying unknown entity* been destroyed.

Raraja cast a glance down at his feet. The stone tiles were charred. That was how it looked to him. The entity was far below them, in the deepest depths...

In the bottom of the labyrinth.

“We're standing on top of those sorts of things.”

Having said this, Iarumas removed his cloak and tossed it to Raraja.

“Whoa...?!”

“Don't drop it.”

Next, he removed the black rod, his gauntlets, and his breastplate. It occurred to Raraja that he didn't see Iarumas this lightly equipped very

often. At some point, maybe he'd started to become numb to things as well.

The boy forced himself to smile. "What're you gonna do?"

"Dive into the spring. I want water from the depths."

Water? From this pool? None of them could see the bottom...

Without meaning to, Raraja stood next to Iarumas and peered at the surface. It was clear and blue, but it stretched down endlessly—no bottom in sight.

Much like the dungeon.

"I doubt it will happen, but if I drown, you handle things," said Iarumas.

"By 'handle things,' you mean I should haul you up and drag you back to town, right? It would be a real pain in the butt having to dry you off."

"You can leave me if you prefer."

Raraja snorted at this comment, unsure if it was meant genuinely or as a joke.

"Where's the rubber duck?" asked Iarumas.

"Huh? Oh, r-right...!" Berkanaan started to hurriedly dig through her bag. There was a lot in there, but surely she couldn't have lost it.

It'll turn up eventually, Orlaya concluded with a sigh. She turned to Iarumas.

"You'd better teach us about that spell later." Her tone was sharp, and her one eye narrowed into a piercing glare. "I don't know *what* you are, but if you know that spell, then there's no way I'm passing up the chance to learn it from you."

Berkanaan quickly raised her hand. "Oh, m-me too!"

"Very well."

Neither Orlaya nor Berkanaan had expected him to accept their request so easily. The two of them, despite their considerable height difference, couldn't help but turn and look at one another. They thought he'd be more reluctant or try to dodge the issue, but...

"Because this isn't my adventure," he said. "It's yours."

"Ruff!!!"

Intentionally or not, Garbage barked over the top of his response.

Iarumas fell silent. He looked at her. Garbage had Hrathnir resting on her shoulder and a look on her face like she was ready to bite somebody.

Her eyes—those clear blue pools—stared at Iarumas with irritation.

"I think she means... 'hurry up'?" Berkanaan suggested.

Orlaya offered her own guess. “Maybe she’s calling her underlings pathetic for not being able to swim?”

The girls both laughed. Whatever it meant...it didn’t change things.

“We’ll be waiting for you, so take a dive,” said Raraja.

It was frustrating for them to be seen as inexperienced or told something had nothing to do with them. Not because they were companions. It wasn’t anything as saccharine as that.

Wasn’t that just how adventuring parties were? Even Raraja understood that.

“Hmm...” Iarumas said, fascinated. “Then, I’ll get to diving.”

“But what does this, umm...duck do?” Berkana asked as she hesitantly held it out for him to take.

“Oh, this thing?” Iarumas accepted it with a smile. “If you have it on you, you can’t drown.”

And with that, a loud splash echoed through the dungeon.

§

“Heya.”

“Hrmm...”

Two people met on the path that led to the Temple of Cant—one cloaked in white and the other in black. They differed in height as well as in hue. One grinned; the other had a sullen look. One was a rhea girl, while the other was a human man.

“What, you’re still doing the corpse-hauling thing? Do you still toss that coin too?”

“I feel like it’s about time I moved forward.”

“You’d better hurry, or I’ll get ahead of you.”

“I wonder about that.”

Iarumas didn’t rise at her provocations. Regnar snorted out of boredom.

“You keep living like it’s the old days and you’re gonna die, y’know? And not just be reduced to ash, but *dead* dead—lost completely.”

“The next adventurer will take care of it.”

Regnar scowled so hard that her revulsion was practically audible.

Iarumas shook his head, not even reacting to that expression.

“How have you been?” he asked. “Has anyone died?”

“Welp, our *ninja* got blown up real good. Had to get a resurrection.”

“Hmm, is that right?”

“Anyway, you keep treading water as long as you like. I’m going on

ahead!"

With that, the white-clad rhea ran off, racing down the stairs.

Iarumas didn't look back. He kept climbing.

On the other side of the closed doors, the temple's prayer hall was bustling with activity. No, that wasn't enough to describe it—the temple was bustling every day. Adventurers came to heal or resurrect their companions. Or else, they came to mourn their passing.

But today, it was more than that. The priests were running around in a great hurry—an unusual sight in the temple, where silence was highly valued.

Iarumas thought about it as he looked toward the statue of the god Kadorto, which loomed over the hall. In front of it, he could see the back of a nun, kneeling to pray. Her hair was silver, and she wore a habit that could not fully conceal the beautiful lines of her body.

After some time, the nun rose and turned around to face him. She had long ears, was missing both her arms—

"My, my! Iarumas-sama!"

—and wore a beaming smile.

Light on her feet, Sister Ainikki raced to the black-clad adventurer's side.

"You haven't visited in so long! I nearly thought you had given up on me."

"You never considered that I might've died in the dungeon?"

"Oh, well... You know?"

Her chuckles sounded like small bells—her eyes narrowed as she smiled. Iarumas didn't know what was so amusing.

He didn't find out. Ainikki led him over to one corner of the temple and sat him down on one of the long benches there. She elegantly slid her bottom onto the spot next to him.

"So, what was the matter?"

"I was looking for something. I'm here because I've found it."

"Looking for something..." The elf's beautiful eyes narrowed. "Was it that amulet, or a shard of it, perhaps?"

"Something a little more useful than that."

"Hm?"

As Ainikki cocked her head to the side questioningly, Iarumas placed a little bottle on her plump thighs. He'd filled an empty holy water bottle with clear blue water.

Slowly, making clever use of her empty sleeves, Ainikki picked up the bottle. The liquid made a faint burble as it shifted inside the glass.

“This is...”

“Water from a healing spring. At deeper levels, it has the power of rejuvenation,” Iarumas explained plainly. There was no real point in hiding what it was. “It should be able to heal your arms.”

This left Ainikki speechless. She felt surprised and overjoyed—and not only because she would be getting her arms back.

Oh, gracious me! This man...!

This unsociable and eccentric adventurer had been feeling responsible for what had happened to her.

Ainikki’s eyes narrowed. She clutched the bottle to her chest like she might a bouquet of flowers.

“You really didn’t have to.”

Not everything in this world was ordained by the gods. But some things were. If she had been told to “live,” even after she’d unleashed the viking blade...

I was ready to accept that it cost me an arm or two.

“Was *this* what everything was leading up to? It seems like such a shame...”

“Did you not preach at me about how this was precisely the sort of thing that makes a life one of value?”

“I suppose I did.” Ainikki’s eyes narrowed as she nodded.

But did he realize the meaning behind it? Through his own actions, he was elevating the value of her life. However, she was much more overjoyed to see the value of *his* life increase!

“I also have this Ring of Healing. Even if your arms come back, I doubt that they’ll immediately recover.”

“Should I wear it on my ring finger?”

“If you’d like to, go right ahead.”

“It was a joke.”

Going out of her way to explain the joke to him...would lack style. There were things that had to be put into words, and some that were best not.

Ainikki chuckled, curtailing her response to a meaningful sideward glance. “You’ve got me eager to have my arms back.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes.”

That was the end of this conversation topic. In the noisy temple, the two chatted about a few more minor, insignificant things.



About Garbage, Raraja, Berkanaan, and Orlaya.
About what the All-Stars were doing. About other rising adventurers.
Who had died—who'd come back to life. What had been found—what
monsters had appeared.

These were not the sorts of things that would be written in adventure
stories. They were details of no great significance.

They were tales told in the dungeon town.

And then, after some time had passed...

“Well, I’ll be going now,” Iarumas said, slowly rising from his seat. “It
looks like you’re busy here anyway.”

“Yes, indeed we are! And once my arms are restored, thanks to you, I’ll
sadly be caught up in it as well.”

“Should I apologize?”

“I wonder about that.” Ainikki’s tone was teasing, but then her
expression suddenly grew serious. She looked up at Iarumas. “In all
likelihood...you’ll be drawn into it too, you know?”

“Oh?”

“After all...”

But if these stories so far were just interludes—

“I hear that a prince of the Llylgamyn royal family will be visiting
Scale sometime in the near future.”

—the tale of adventure would begin after this.

Afterword

Hello, it's Kumo Kagyu.

Did you enjoy the fourth volume of *Blade & Bastard*? I did my very best writing it, so I hope you did.

In this installment, we took a breather and featured stories from the various adventurers who live in Scale. Among all the various *Wizardry* products, one I love most uses a similar format, you see... Hee hee.

Ultimately, not all of the events going on in the world are centered around Iarumas and the gang. In fact, it's precisely *because* there are other adventurers that they believe the world will go on, even if they're wiped out.

Well, not that they *want* a full party wipe. Reset, reset...!

Speaking of party wipes, I finally, *finally*, had the chance to take on the challenge of *Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* again. Recently, a *Wizardry* remake was released by Digital Eclipse. I immediately bought it for myself and was soon delighted to be venturing into the dungeon. Some parts were just as I remembered them, and some were different, but it still kept me on edge...

Step-by-step, battle-by-battle, I walked around the proving grounds, filled with a sense of excitement. This is research...and since I'm doing research...it's work!

Actually playing *Wizardry* like this made it feel like I've been dreaming. Docom also has a number of Wiz projects in the works, and I'm eagerly awaiting those as well. Since I've been able to get involved with the franchise that I love, even in such a minor way, I feel like I really have to give it my all. If I could go back in time and tell my child self that I'd be doing this, I'm sure he would never believe me.

But if you keep at something for a decade or two, you eventually go places, huh? I'm always thinking about how, in all sorts of ways, I've gotten lucky.

What would have happened if I'd never picked up that volume of *Wizardry 4-koma Manga Kingdom* at the bookstore that day? While I was aware of *Wizardry* before then, it had felt like something more distant to me. After reading that manga, I entered the world of Wiz, following in the

footsteps of those adventurers who had come before me.

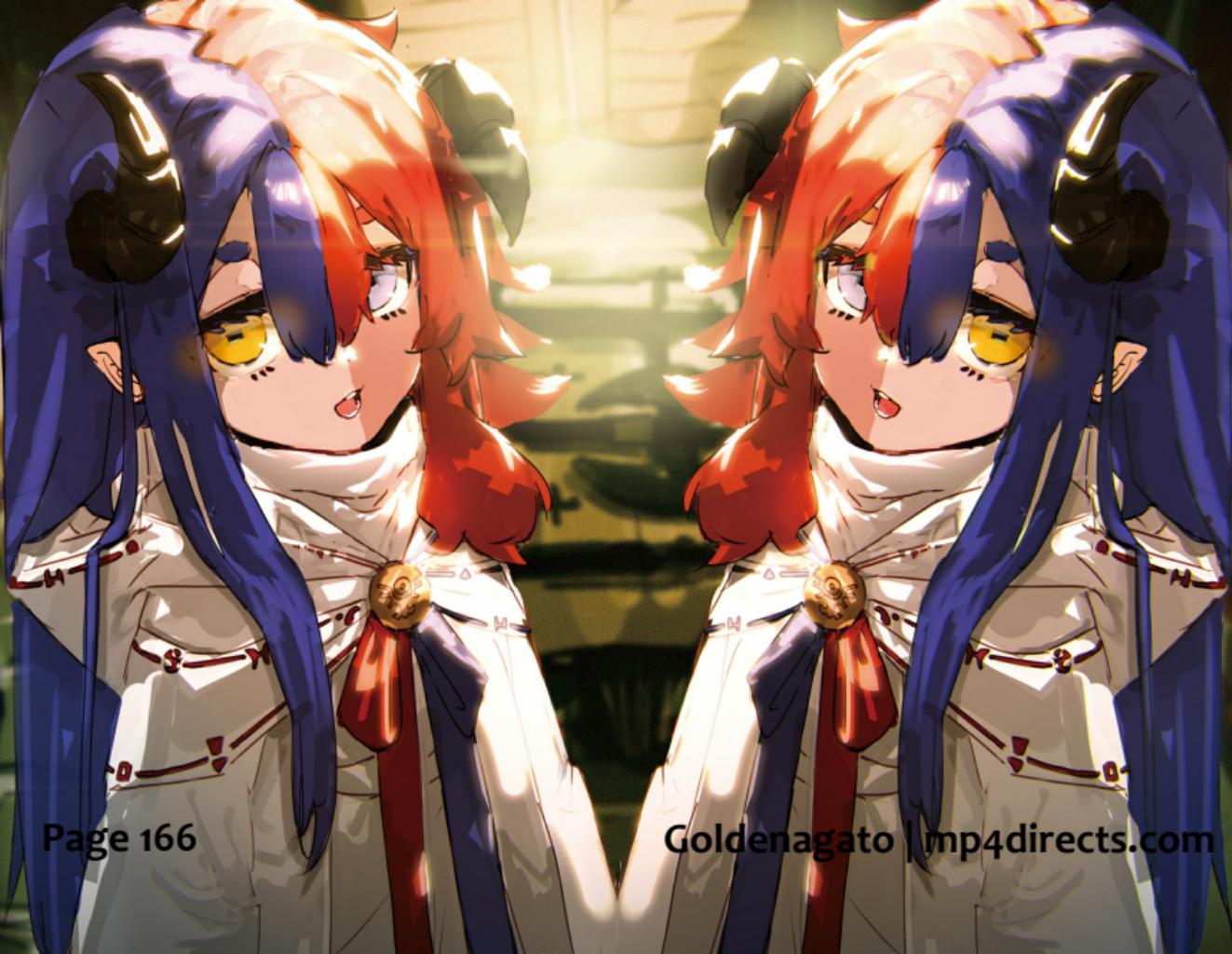
I always thought my copper-colored book was *Sorcery*, but it turns out there was still another one. Honestly though, adventures always start in the most unexpected of places, don't they?

On that note, Iarumas will be going on a new adventure in the fifth volume. There is still an abyss that remains unexplored in the depths of the dungeon. I'd like to keep on doing my best so that I can continue exploring with Iarumas for a long time to come.

I hope that all of you can support us on this adventure—nothing would make me happier.

See you again next time.





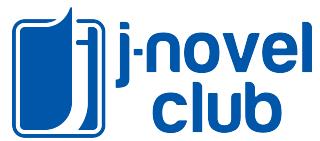
Page 166

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Page 167

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