
Kumo Kagyu
Illustrations by so-bin
2
—Wireframe Dungeon
BLADE & BASTARD
Dragon with Red Dead—
Wizardry


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BLADE & BASTARD: Wireframe Dungeon & Dragon with Red Dead Volume 2 [Complete]

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Chapter 1: Berkanan

She was a big girl.

Tall, with big eyes. Big muscles, big boobs, and a big butt too.

But more than all of that, what drew the crowd's eyes was just how *large* she was. She stood six-and-a-half feet tall. Large enough that people had to look up at her.

Her hair, which swayed behind her like a tail, was black, yet her timid eyes shone a brilliant gold. She walked like a ghost—slowly, hunched over, as if attempting to hide her great size in what little way she could. However, she seemed unaware that this posture naturally caused her bountiful bosom to stick out in front of her.

Here, in the crowded reception area of the training grounds, she wasn't managing to make herself any less noticeable.

"Now, write your name."

"O-Okay...!"

The guard peered up at the girl. She shrunk down pitifully and wrote her name on the register.

I think it was Almarl? the guard thought idly, his eyes following her scrawl. Although he heard the names of foreign lands every day, he could never distinguish one from another. Still, there was a country in the east, where the sands spread out far and wide, and he was pretty sure it was called Almarl.

That nation had come to mind because of the provocative outfit the girl wore. During nights out drinking, he'd heard all about the dances that Almari girls performed in those revealing costumes.

Or was it Hiren? Well, it doesn't really matter.

From her attire, he could tell she was foreign, and presumably also a mage. She carried a staff, one suited to her size. In anyone else's hands, it would've practically been a club.

Yet, what really drew the eye wasn't her large body, or even her unusual clothing—no, it was her beautiful face. Her alluring countenance was the very essence of that foreign land beyond the sands to the east. There was something sensual about it.

If she had the confidence to back it up, she'd really be something...

But the girl was timid. She looked around the area hesitantly, as if frightened. Each time she turned, her braided hair swayed, as did her ample bosom. On a smaller woman, these gestures would have been less noticeable; however, the motion required for her to look around was magnified by her large figure.

"You may pass."

"Th-Thank you so much...!"

"Whoa!" The guard had to quickly dodge her club—actually a staff—as her bow sent it plunging down toward him.

The training grounds.

Built after the dungeon's discovery in response to the growing number of adventurers, this facility was becoming a shell of its former self. There was no way to truly manage adventurers—the gap between those who had delved into the dungeon and those who had not was insurmountable.

I wouldn't go into the dungeon even if they begged me to, thought the guard. If all he wanted was to make a living, then he was paid well enough to just stand at his post. He was far better off than a brave hero, a descendant of some legendary figure, or one of the monsters of the dungeon.

So, who were the training grounds for, then?

For the adventurers, the guard had concluded. These know-nothing newcomers came to sign their names on the register, and in exchange, the veterans looking for shields got their mitts on some fresh meat.

That was all this place was for.

"Okay, I'm... I'm gonna do my best!"

The girl worked up her courage and stepped forward. Her name, as recorded

in the register, was Berkanan. The guard had little inclination to remember it. In all likelihood, he'd never see her again.

Few adventurers ever left Scale.

None of the dead did, of course—but it was rare even for those who were still alive.

§

"Whoa?!"

"Arf!"

Raraja thought he was going to die, but Garbage was the very epitome of high spirits. Her eager barks echoed through the dungeon as her broadsword roared, dealing death to their enemies. Blows with such mass and speed behind them might not decapitate the enemy, but the damage was sure to be critical. However, skilled though she might have been, a single swing from a fighter's blade could never slay a whole mob of enemies.

Raraja raised his dagger to parry a foe that came flying at him.

"BUZZZZZZZZ!"

"Wh-What's with these bugs?!"

Raraja grimaced as the beetle chittered around his blade, which was caught in its mandibles. It felt like the insect could chew through anything...perhaps even the equipment they had purchased in Catlob's store. If Raraja had still been using the shoddy weapon he'd once relied on, he wouldn't have been able to stand looking at the bug's face.

Boring beetles.

He couldn't help but laugh at how odd and silly the name had sounded when he'd first learned it. Were they really that *boring*? From what he'd heard, these giant insects inhabited the shallow levels of the dungeon. They could roll their bodies up into balls and shoot off.

Maybe they were actually bowling beetles, or balling beetles, he thought, but no...

“It’s going to bore through you,” warned the black-clad mage, Iarumas, who was standing in the rear with his arms crossed.

“Woodhead sux!” spat Raraja. No one even remembered the origin of that curse, but he nonetheless threw it in Iarumas’s direction. Though the boy might swear, he wouldn’t complain—he knew all too well how fortunate he was to be in his current situation.

Sparks flew across the dusky burial chamber, and Raraja swung his dagger free as their lingering light seared the darkness. Even if their foe’s defenses were thick (though Iarumas had inexplicably said they were thin), there were ways to deal with them.

Raraja shot straight forward and took three stabs at the beetle. One strike sank into a gap in its carapace.

“BUZZZZZZZZ?!”

“Die...!”

Raraja planted a boot on the insect as it flailed its legs around, spurting filthy bug juice everywhere, and kicked it away, freeing his blade. Wiping the weapon clean, Raraja found that his pale blade was intact, without so much as a chip. He let out a sigh of relief. But, it wasn’t long before he scowled again. He could sense Iarumas’s eyes on him, although the man didn’t say anything.

What’s next?!

“Woof!”

He turned to see the scrawny, redheaded girl swinging her greatsword around, full of life.

Garbage was facing what was basically a huge spider.

The creature had fine hairs all over its body, eight cold eyes, fangs dripping with slime, and it jumped around as it attacked. Even just one of those features would have been enough to strike terror into Raraja, but apparently, such was not true for Garbage.

“Yap! Yap!!!”

She slammed her broadsword into its bulbous body like a rambunctious child

smashing a watermelon with a stick. And, lacking the carapace of a boring beetle, the spider was probably a softer target. Each of Garbage's strikes was followed by a shower of ichor.

"Watch yourselves. There's a lot of them."

"Arf!"

The tone of both Iarumas's warning and Garbage's bark were so relaxed—did she really comprehend his words?

Whether she understood or not, Raraja did. All too well.

"Don't get too far ahead!"

He desperately chased after the girl as she loped onward, swinging again and again. Garbage knocked away the spiders, which were as numerous as Iarumas had said, and deflected the beetles that flew at her.

Why're these monsters working together anyway?

Surely, spiders ate beetles. And when the beetles were of this size, they could probably eat spiders too. Raraja pondered their strange alliance, and for an instant, he found it similar to his own odd party.

The boy's eyes met a pair of blue ones.

"Arf."

Garbage glanced at him as she ran across a pile of dead spiders, snorting as if to say, *"You're too slow."*

Why, you—!

It was frustrating, but at the moment, she was certainly the one who was clearing the path for them. He'd mentally curse at her, but he wouldn't complain. He knew all too well how lucky he was to be here right now.

Yes, he was blessed.

He now had a routine: wake at the inn, prepare equipment, delve into the dungeon, fight monsters, gain riches, and return to town. Eventually, their party would move on to the next floor. To prepare for that, Raraja trained. Raised his level.

Letting Garbage drag him around as they beat up bugs was just another step toward that.

In short, he was adventuring.

§

“Arf.”

“Don’t go kicking them every time! It’s dangerous, okay?!”

After giving the treasure chest a good hard boot, Garbage looked down at him. Those blue eyes, like clear lakes, seemed to say, *“Hurry up.”*

Feeling restless under her gaze, Raraja kept moving his hands. The burial chamber was filled with a mountain of spider and beetle carcasses, wet with sticky juices that could be mucus or some other unidentified bodily fluid. Kneeling, surrounded by gore, he turned the lock with his pick, searched for traps, removed them, and then opened the box.

“When you get down to it, this is just how adventuring is,” mused their companion Iarumas, who was standing by the wall, arms crossed and watching them.

Indeed, that was just how adventuring was—timidly walk the first floor, barge into burial chambers, kill the monsters found there, and steal their treasure.

Then, move on.

Distilled, that was truly the essence of adventuring, and in that regard...

They’re starting to look the part.

At the very least, their party could do a passable job on this floor. Albeit only on *this* floor, for now. Regardless, they were making progress. Iarumas allowed his lips to curl into a smile.

“There was a dungeon only good adventurers could enter, and a dungeon only evil adventurers could enter.”

“Huh?”

Raraja looked in this direction, seeming creeped out. Iarumas’s words had come unexpectedly, and the boy didn’t understand what they were supposed

to mean.

Next to him, Garbage let out a small yawn, apparently uninterested.

They're talking about something again, she told herself, before crouching on the floor next to the treasure chest and curling up into a ball like a little puppy.

Iarumas gestured to Raraja with his chin, as if to say, "Keep your hands moving," and then went on.

"Six adventurers could enter the dungeon at one time. Do you know how many people it took to clear both dungeons?"

"Well..." Raraja trailed off. Only the sounds of his mumbling and the click-click of his tools echoed inside the burial chamber.

Twelve couldn't be the answer. That would be too easy.

Even after the last metallic click had faded away, it was still some time before the conversation resumed.

"Eleven, right?" Raraja said as he put his hand on the lid of the chest, still not confident in what he was saying. "There're only good-aligned and evil-aligned priests...and you'd have one neutral thief for both..."

"The minimum number is seven," Iarumas said, revealing the answer.

"Huh?"

"A good priest, an evil priest, and five neutral adventurers."

Raraja got very quiet. "That...worked?"

"It's one approach, that's all." Iarumas let out a low laugh. The caveat was, if the party he'd described got wiped out, it would spell the end for them.

The man in black walked away from the wall, approached the treasure chest, and gave it a casual kick with his booted foot. The lid rose with a clunk. Garbage raised an eye at him and barked.

"You need to think of all sorts of ways to handle things. There's never only one answer."

Raraja frowned and went silent for a while before he slowly rose to his feet. "Sure."

“How do they feel?”

“Hm...? What do you mean?”

“Your tools,” Iarumas clarified. “They’re new, right?”

Raraja had an inscrutable look on his face—he stroked the fresh leather of the pouch that hung at his waist. Inside were the lockpicking tools he’d just put away. Of course, Iarumas knew that they were brand new.

“Well, they’re better than the old ones,” Raraja murmured. “Yeah... Better than the old ones.”

Raraja had been frequenting Catlob’s shop of late. The boy probably understood that he had a lot to gain from what the shopkeeper could teach him. It was good that he was improving his skills. Especially if he could take advantage of that training in the dungeon...

“Yap!” Garbage, who had advanced one space into the hall, turned her head back to bark, almost like she found their talking tiresome.

“Yes, hold on.” Iarumas waved to her before turning back to Raraja. “Consult the map,” he instructed.

“I always end up wondering...do we really need to check it so regularly?” asked Raraja.

“If we step on a rotating floor or a teleporter without realizing it, that would be less than amusing,” Iarumas explained in a curt but indifferent tone, not getting angry at the boy’s question. “When you’re checking the map, compare it against whatever geographical features you can see nearby. It costs nothing but time.”

Raraja paused and then replied, “Sure.” Then, he started digging through his pack, slowly but obediently. He pulled out the map, checked it, drew in some more details, folded it up, and stored it away once more.

Was Raraja bothered by referencing the map because it took a lot of effort to do so? If that was the case...

I suppose I ought to buy him a map bag, Iarumas thought, letting out a low laugh.

“Arf?” Garbage, who had tottered over to them at some point, let out a suspicious bark. Or perhaps she was saying, *“Get a move on.”*

Whatever the case, Iarumas simply shook his head a little.

If Sister Ainikki could see him acting like this, he was sure she’d be over the moon.

§

Iarumas’s party—he had no intention of calling them a clan—was currently focused on training.

“We’re able to open treasure chests now,” he said. “There’s no reason not to do it.”

Raraja didn’t know how to take that. Was it a compliment? No. Judging by Iarumas’s tone, he was simply stating the facts.

But even so, wasn’t he implying that they wouldn’t be able to do it without Raraja? Whenever such questions passed through his mind, the boy got this itchy, unpleasant feeling. That’s why he made a habit of raising his voice and shouting every time the topic came up.

“You better not’ve forgotten your promise!”

“Promise?”

“Yap?! Yap!”

Iarumas seized Garbage by the scruff of the neck just as she was about to gleefully barge into the next burial chamber. He turned to regard Raraja.

Looking around cautiously—there were always roaming monsters to worry about—Raraja answered, “The corpse! Of my—”

What is *she to me?* A friend? A comrade? When he thought about it again, he couldn’t decide on a neat, descriptive word. Regardless, whatever the word was, he didn’t want to have to append “former” or “ex-” to the front of it.

“—person I’m looking for...” he finished lamely.

Iarumas nodded. “No, I haven’t forgotten.”

“You sure?”

“She died on this floor, right?”

After a long pause, Raraja replied, “Yeah.”

“Arf!”

Garbage shook free of the irritating hand that held her and kicked in the door of the burial chamber. The door fell to the floor with a crash, and Raraja sighed as he watched her leap over the threshold.

“Hey, hold up!”

He had to wonder why Iarumas didn’t teach Garbage a lesson after she did things like this. There would still be monsters in the chamber. That is, assuming another adventurer hadn’t slain them already.

It was Raraja’s job to chase after Garbage when she charged in like this.

What’s next? A mangy dog? A giant rat? Something humanoid?

Raraja desperately unsheathed his dagger with an attitude that seemed to say, “Fine, just throw whatever at me,” and then crouched down inside the burial chamber.

Silence. A hushed “woof” from Garbage.

And yet... Nothing happened.

All Raraja saw was a gloomy dungeon constructed of cold, pale stone. The regular pattern of the stone blocks was certainly convenient for mapping.

Still, it’s really big...y’know.

The size of the underground dungeon was somewhat vague. It seemed different each time he saw it.

“Count your steps,” Iarumas always said. “Trust only the number of steps you’ve taken, and DUMAPIC.”

I’ll need to take a walk around this open area later.

For now, though, Raraja had to deal with Garbage.

She stood alone in the center of the room, a bored look on her face, hefting her broadsword and letting it rest on her shoulder. If he left her alone like this,

she was bound to immediately fly off to another burial chamber.

Raraja rushed over to Garbage and, ignoring her yelp of protest, seized the girl by the scruff of her neck.

“Something reeks,” he muttered.

He looked up at Garbage, though he doubted she understood what he’d said.

No, he wasn’t talking about the stench of this gore-splattered girl—something else hung in the air of the burial chamber.

It had a familiar *taste* to it. Like the charred scraps of bacon he’d saved from the remnants of campfires after the bastards in his old clan had gone to sleep. Like the smoke after a bomb inside a treasure chest went off and blew away the guy in charge of disarming it.

Or, more recently, like the smell of his own hair after being exposed to a dragonfly’s scorching breath.

It’s burnt meat.

“Was it a female rhea adventurer you were looking for?” Iarumas suddenly whispered.

Raraja turned to see the man in black crouching in the darkness—*wait, no.*

“Then this isn’t her.”

What had looked to Raraja like darkness was, in fact, a black pile of charcoal—charcoal with a human form.

“Blegh...” Raraja let out an involuntary groan, but who could blame him? Glistening red and white striations—the colors of cooked meat—peeked out of the cracks in the charcoal. The boy *had* been helping Sister Ainikki remove equipment from corpses at the temple more often recently, but still...

“Man, this is awful... What happened here?”

This is no ordinary death, he thought. It certainly wasn’t caused by a blade, fang, or claw. *Magic—it had to be magic.* That’s what Raraja thought. Although, that was simply because it was all he could imagine.

Anything that could slay a man twice Raraja’s height had to be mag—

“She was big,” Iarumas observed. “Based on the musculature, it was probably a woman.”

“Huh...?”

When he heard that, Raraja blinked. In all honesty, he didn’t want to look, but he hesitantly leaned around Iarumas’s side to take a peek at the remains. The clothes, armor, and equipment were already blackened and melted, or just gone completely. Her face was as charred as the rest of her and swollen up so bad he could never stand to see it again.

Even so...

That’s...a woman?

Now that Iarumas had pointed it out, the gentle, voluptuous curves of the body did seem rather womanly. Although, in this pitiful state, her figure didn’t make him feel anything else.

However, if she were alive...

“Arf?”

“It’s nothing.”

As Raraja stole an unintended glance at Garbage, he was met with her blue eyes. She seemed so carefree about this.

I bet the charred woman would’ve been nothing like her.

“Whatever happened here, she’s not a rhea. This one’s a dud,” concluded Iarumas. Then, as if he had lost interest, he proceeded to look around the room, searching for their next course of action.

Garbage did something similar. Raraja, however, surprised himself by saying, in a low voice, “What? You’re not gonna take her back?”

“The intent today was to train,” Iarumas responded. “We’ve only brought two corpse bags.” If they needed a third, there would be no one left to drag them back.

Remaining silent, Raraja stared down at the miserable body near his feet.

I wonder what she was like...

Good? Evil? Neutral? Alignments were simply what someone proclaimed themselves to be. In reality, they didn't tell you anything about an adventurer as a person.

Why had she come to Scale? And why had she delved into this dungeon?

What were her dreams, her goals? Where was she born? What did she like? What did she hate?

None of that had anything to do with why she'd died, or why she'd been left to languish here as a charred husk, one of the lost. No one would ever recall this miserable corpse—this dead body that had once been a fellow adventurer.

It would have been just like that for Raraja. It *had* been just like that for the rhea girl who'd died to a crossbow trap.

Noticing Raraja's hesitant silence, Iarumas asked, "What is it?"

"This could be her," the boy responded.

"Oh?"

"With burns like these, there's no telling who it is."

It sounds like I'm making excuses, Raraja thought. However, now that he had started speaking, he found that the words came with surprising ease. Deciding to just roll with it, he spat them all out with an air of desperation.

"So, we can't know until we revive her, right?"

Iarumas let out a low laugh. "You'll put yourself in more debt."

"Then I'll just have to pay it back...and I will!" Raraja stuck out his hand to ask for a corpse bag, and Iarumas silently tossed the sack to him. Grasping the body —still heavy, even in this charred state—by the legs, Raraja began to drag it.

What had once been skin peeled off and stuck to his fingers, but what did he care about that? If this body belonged to a young girl, she would have been mortified by the position she was currently in, but again, what did he care?

I'm gonna carry you back, so don't give me any guff about it!

Though Raraja worked under Iarumas as a corpse hauler, there were limits to how accustomed to the task he could get. This was the first time he'd handled a

corpse this badly charred—of course he was going to struggle.

“Yap!”

Seeing Raraja in such a sad state, Garbage ambled over to watch. The light of true amusement glimmered in her eyes. Her bark mocked him, as if to say, *“What’re you doing?”*

Of course, Raraja knew better than to expect help from Garbage.

“Incidentally, how would you feel about spending five hundred gold for a little peace of mind?”

“More debt, right?” Raraja pouted. “It’s all the same at this point.”

“All right.” Iarumas produced a small vial from inside his cloak. It contained a light-green liquid that seemed to originate from a little stone in the bottom—Raraja had previously learned that it was a potion of DIOS. “If you apply a small amount,” Iarumas continued, “they say it’s easy to convince yourself that it ‘healed their soul and saved them.’”

“That really is good for nothing but peace of mind...” argued Raraja. In the state this corpse was in, a potion wouldn’t do her a lick of good.

Raraja smiled ruefully as he uncorked the bottle and splashed a little over the body. Then, with some effort, he stuffed the slightly dampened remains into the bag.

Garbage spent the entire time wandering around next to Raraja. If she kicked him again right now, even Raraja would have flipped out on her...but it seemed that she at least had the sense not to.

“I wasn’t counting on anything, but damn—you piss me off.”

“Arf.”

Garbage’s expression seemed to say, *“Oh, are you finally done?”* or perhaps, *“Wow, you sure are hopeless, you know that?”*

He couldn’t take the way she was staring at him like an ill-trained minion—no, he couldn’t stand it at all.

“You’ll need to carry her corpse yourself,” Iarumas pointed out.

The boy pouted again. “’Course I will... I know that.” After all, he’d said he was going to do it. Now he just had to clean up his own mess.

Raraja took the cord that cinched the mouth of the bag shut and wrapped it around his hand. He then threw the rope over his shoulder and began dragging the bag along behind him.

“You could break her up into pieces, but be careful not to lose any. The same applies when someone’s petrified.”

“If I did lose some of her...what would happen with the resurrection?” asked Raraja.

“Who can say?”

That wasn’t a terribly funny joke. Nah, knowing Iarumas...maybe it wasn’t a joke at all? Raraja couldn’t decide one way or the other.

“Well, I suppose we ought to call it a day,” said Iarumas. “You’ll be needing to haul that girl back to the temple.”

“Come to think of it...”

“What?”

Raraja looked around before asking the question that had been bothering him this entire time. The burned remains of something lay at his feet, along with some kind of stick.

So...

“What happened to this girl’s party?”

Instantly, a hair-raising roar came echoing from deep inside the vast burial chamber.

There was his answer.

§

Having seen one before, Raraja didn’t think he’d get so scared the second time. Though he’d known, deep down, that it was just his pride talking—some sort of false cheer, perhaps an unwillingness to admit defeat. Even so, he’d thought, *Now that I’ve seen it once, it won’t be like this again.*

But this—what was this?

As Garbage—*Garbage*—let out a hoarse, whining whimper, Raraja couldn't even groan.

What was *this*?

There could only be one answer to that question.

"SSSKREEEEEEEEEEONK!!!"

"This" was a dragon. Its roar alone was enough to make the soul quake.

Raraja gulped, struck by a hallucination that seemed to warp the dungeon, making it expand. The mountainous form of the monster before him, the sulfurous stench, the white fire burning in its eyes... No, it wasn't only the eyes that burned; so did the body, which glowed, seeming slimy and wet.

Raraja had never seen magma, but he was confident that this was what it must look like.

Red.

With flame-like scales, shimmering incandescent with heat... This was a red dragon—the incarnation of death itself.

"I see. A fire dragon, huh?" Iarumas murmured.

Those words snapped Raraja to his senses, and the fear that had bound him melted away. At some point, the man had moved up to stand between Raraja and Garbage. His hand was on the black rod at his hip—the hilt of that thin saber he carried. The man's readiness spoke to just how serious this situation was.

"We—" Raraja's voice caught in his throat. "—can win this, right?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Because..."

Because we've beat one before, haven't we?

His whisper was something akin to a prayer, a hope, a wish.

The other day, when they'd suddenly encountered a dragon in the dungeon,

Iarumas had defeated it with ease.

Or, that was how it had looked to Raraja.

“This one is in another class entirely.”

Iarumas said that so easily, but Raraja couldn’t believe it. The man in black let out a laugh, though it wasn’t clear what was so funny, and shook his head as if to tell the boy to give up.

This monstrosity belonged down on the lowest level of the dungeon.

“GRRROOOOOOWL!!!”

Raraja was reflected in the monster’s eyes. However, it wasn’t looking at him. A boy thief was beneath its notice. An irritating little fly. Nothing more.

So, what was it going to do? With its treelike arm, it raised a claw—a claw as long as Raraja was tall—and prepared to swing.

“W-Wahhhh?!?!” Raraja’s cry was pitiful, and he knew it.

Thud.

The dungeon shook, and the impact catapulted Raraja up, sending him flying.

But he wasn’t dead. At least, not yet.

I...dodged that?!

It felt like a miracle. Or, perhaps, he hadn’t really been attacked. The fire dragon had simply moved up—that was all. The battle hadn’t even begun...

“Arooof?!” With that yelp, Garbage was sent rolling, bouncing like a ball. She quickly recovered and leaped back to her feet. Her grip on her broadsword was already adjusted, and she assumed a low posture, fangs bared.

“Rrruff!”

Her will to fight was strong—her morale, unbroken.

She’s amazing.

Raraja scowled as he readied his dagger and leaned into a fighting stance, though he was a few seconds slower than Garbage had been. Yet, even once he did, he had no idea what he was supposed to do. He heard the corpse bag fall

to the ground with a thud. Hopefully, the body inside hadn't broken up at all.

"Hey, what're we gonna do?!" he practically screamed, his eyes rapidly darting left and right.

Garbage growled.

Please, don't charge in, thought Raraja.

Iarumas remained unmoving.

Say something, please.

"There weren't any others, were there?" Iarumas asked.

"Huh?!"

"Monsters," the man clarified. "You didn't run into any others right after you entered the chamber, did you?"

"Well, no...!"

But what did that matter? Iarumas continued mumbling to himself, never answering the question in Raraja's head.

"A wandering monster, then..."

Slowly, slowly, Iarumas shuffled his feet, measuring the distance between him and the fire dragon.

"We're in luck."

Raraja looked at him in disbelief. "How is *this* lucky?!"

"Because I can manage this, somehow."

"Really?" Raraja asked, using only his eyes.

"Probably, yeah," Iarumas boasted. "Carry the corpse. That is, if you still want to bring it back to the surface."

"R-Right!" Raraja crouched down clumsily, never taking his eyes off the fire dragon. Wrapping the cord around his hand, he shouldered the corpse bag. He could hear and feel the charcoal grating against the hemp fabric.

What'd happened to her? What'd happened to the rest of her companions?

Raraja was about to end up the same way.

Dammit...!

The boy cursed himself as his legs started to give out. He gritted his teeth to stop their chattering.

“Grrr...” Garbage let out a low growl, adjusting her grip on her broadsword as she looked for the right time to attack. But, she couldn’t find an opening.

The dragon remained motionless, unmoving.

Not yet... They weren’t dead yet...

Alive.

“What’re we gonna do?”

“Run away,” Iarumas said plainly.

“Yap?!”

In an instant, Garbage, who had been about to charge in, found her petite body hoisted into the air. Iarumas threw her over his shoulder. Before Raraja could so much as utter, “Huh?!” he was surprised to find his own body already high-tailing it out of there.

“Wh-Why...?!”

“If we can’t win, running’s the only thing left to do.”

“SSKREEEEEEEEONK!!!”

Raraja had opened his mouth to object, but the thunderous roar from behind them made him shut it.

A wave of sound and a hot rush of air blew past them—the creature’s breath, in the ordinary sense of that word. It scorched their backs nonetheless.

Raraja tensed his muscles so as not to drop the corpse he was carrying. Diligently, he pumped his legs.

Come to think of it...

As he ran full-tilt, Raraja noticed a minor detail: Why wasn’t he dead? How could he have stood there, quivering before the dragon, for so long?

It's because of Iarumas.

That dragon hadn't been looking at Raraja, or even at Garbage—its eyes had only focused on Iarumas.

Iarumas hadn't moved, so the dragon hadn't either. In order to read the enemy and predict its foe's first strike, the dragon had remained cautious, unmoving.

I still fall short... In every way, I'm still falling short!

As he kept running, his breath shallow, Raraja glared at the dark form ahead of him. His eyes met the clear, blue ones of the redheaded girl being carried on Iarumas's shoulder. Raraja could tell what she wanted to say without any need for words—the annoyed tone of her whine was enough.

Listen, I'm as frustrated as you are.

But of course, Raraja wasn't going to admit that out loud.

§

Word that a fire dragon had shown up in the shallow levels of the dungeon spread through Scale like wildfire. After all, this was a town where subjects relating to adventuring were as topical as the weather. However, the more important thing was—

"Business is bad lately..."

—*that*.

"The adventurers have all chickened out."

"It's entertaining, I guess, seeing something so unusual."

"Nothing to be amused about. We're short on cash and short on things to sell. What'll we do?"

"Well, we can't exactly go get the stuff ourselves..."

"Now there's a scary thought. Give me a break."

It wasn't as though the city of Scale had anything going for it besides the dungeon. The town sat in a wasteland, where a slightly chilly wind blew beneath filthy, leaden skies. It prospered as a town that never slept only

because of the endless bounty that welled up from inside the dungeon. And it was adventurers with unusual strength who carried that wealth back above ground.

Inside the dungeon, both a descendant of the legendary hero and a brash youngster from the village were equal—the weakest of the weak.

However, the adventurers who survived in battle—triumphing over monsters that transcended human knowledge—attained a power like that of mythical heroes.

The fact was, when adventurers were faced with the dragon of red death, it changed none of that.

The sort that made their money killing monsters in the shallow levels of the dungeon would get intimidated. As for those who could slip past the fire dragon and access the deeper levels, they were truly cautious as they came and went.

It wasn't that they feared death, per se... But dying costs money, you know?

There weren't many who would willingly give those cant-spouting money-grubbers in the temple anything to be happy about.

Although, the sense of time inside the dungeon was a vague thing. There were likely some who were still exploring, oblivious to the fire dragon's existence.

"Well then, what do we do?"

"Try asking them, I guess..."

And so, the merchant's guild in Scale moved to action.

Basically, they decided to resort to an old-fashioned method—pool funds and ask a reliable adventurer to take care of the dragon.

The answer they received was short.

"Well, y'know, wandering monsters don't have treasure chests," Sezmar said with a garrulous laugh. He was currently sitting in Durga's Tavern, tearing into a piece of meat.

“Well, yes, that’s true.” Iarumas, who had practically been forced to sit with him, responded with a nod that implied Sezmar’s statement was obvious.

It went without saying—Iarumas hadn’t come to them with the idea of slaying the fire dragon. He’d been scarfing down gruel when, before he knew it, the All-Stars had him boxed in on all sides. They were all in plain clothes today, but only a fighter would be less potent because of a lack of armor.

There was no escape like this...not with *four* of the All-Stars here.

“You have money troubles?” Iarumas asked.

Sezmar sighed. “I wouldn’t go so far as to call them *troubles*, but we’re short of funds, yes.”

“Or rather, we can’t afford to end up any shorter on them, y’know?” added Moradin the rhea thief, snickering. “The merchants will pay if we defeat it, but they’re not going to pay us anything extra if we happen to die in the process.”

“Hmm.” Iarumas gave an indifferent response, then gobbled up more gruel. “So, was it Hawkwind?”

“Hardly,” High Priest Tuck answered instantly. “Even if you were to lop his head off, I doubt it would kill him.”

“You knew that when you asked, right?” Sarah glared at Iarumas, narrowing her eyes.

She was right.

The All-Stars, who were the top adventurers in Scale, was a party made up of six members, as was common practice. There were only two of them missing today—that black-clad spy and the mage who hid his beautiful face inside his cloak.

It might have varied depending on the situation, but, well, if one of them was more likely to die than the others, it would be...

“You know how it is,” Sarah continued. “Our back row is High Priest Tuck, Moradin, and Prospero, right?”

“We suffered a back attack, you see,” Sezmar explained awkwardly.

“Well, if that happens, of course Prospero’s gonna die.” Iarumas nodded, then set his spoon down in the gruel bowl. He liked to eat whatever filled his belly the fastest. It wasn’t as if the food had any effect on his abilities.

At this point, the reason Iarumas didn’t get up and leave was that he was actually fond of this party. He didn’t mind spending a little time talking with them. Besides, he didn’t have anything else to do but go to sleep at the inn.

“And that’s why you’re not going to kill it?” Iarumas asked.

“We can make money from things other than dragon slaying.”

“Yeah, and we’re not satisfied with sleeping in the stables like you, Iarumas. We use our money in all sorts of ways.”

Iarumas didn’t bother to correct the elf by informing her that he had been sleeping on a cot lately. However, he couldn’t help but think that Sarah sure was different from her fellow elf, Ainikki.

No... Maybe their fixation on money is the same?

He had nothing to gain by dwelling on the thought. If he said it out loud, both elves would perk their long ears up angrily.

“We have no business on the shallow floors anyway,” said Moradin, who had acquired a beer at some point in the conversation—likely from a passing waitress’s tray. He tilted back the mug, which was oversized compared to his diminutive form, and enjoyed the drink thoroughly, then licked the foam from around his mouth. “What about you, Iarumas?” Moradin asked. “It’s gotta be tough on you with the two kiddos around, right?”

“Not particularly, no.” Iarumas crossed his arms and groaned as he thought about it, then continued responding in the same unconcerned tone. “So long as we’re not facing the guardian of a burial chamber, we can run away as often as we need to.”

“Hmm, so you’re looking after them properly, huh?” Sarah murmured, sounding surprised.

“Hey, now,” High Priest Tuck chastised her.

“Oh, come on,” the girl argued back. “It’s a shame leaving a cutie like Garbage

with Iarumas!”

“It is,” Iarumas agreed.

“I mean, she’s a girl, you know?”

“I’ve never seen that as an issue...but her youth isn’t a bad thing.” To Iarumas, it meant that she had room to grow, and she learned fast.

When he murmured that, Sarah let out an exaggerated, “Yikes,” and made a show of backing away from him.

“I’m going to have to tell Aine not to take her eyes off you...”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll be watching Mr. Iarumas without you needing to tell her,” Moradin added with another cackle. High Priest Tuck told them both off.

Sezmar decided to sit back and let the dwarf handle the rhea and elf. He was enjoying his meat and booze as he asked, “Where are the two of them, by the way? I hope you didn’t drop them both at the temple.”

“Yeah,” Iarumas replied in a relaxed tone. “They’re at the temple today.”

Neither of them was dead or turned to ash, though.

§

“Honestly, it’s such a crying shame!” Ainikki lamented, in the tranquility of a chapel filled with murmurs, chants, prayers, and invocations. Her beautiful face was made no less comely by her arched eyebrows, perhaps thanks to the long, trembling ears that sprang forth from the gap between her habit and silver hair.

Raraja simply sat on one of the benches, listening. He was the one who’d gotten a front-row seat the other day...when she’d cut down an assassin at the equipment store.

Assuming that wasn’t just some lucky hit where she accidentally took the guy’s head off...

But even if he were certain it’d been luck, he’d still be a fool to deliberately provoke her.

“Yap.”

Even Garbage had beat a hasty retreat. She was now sitting in the corner,

wrapped tightly in her cloak. Raraja couldn't understand what had her so afraid. Maybe, contrary to his expectations, Sister Aine had done something awful to her in the past...

Damn it, Iarumas.

Now that he thought about it, well, visiting the temple today was fine. They'd met at the tavern before splitting up. That was fine too. He'd decided to do this himself, after all. But, Raraja had been left confused when Iarumas said, "Go with her."

Confused, that is, until Garbage, who had also been listening, started to totter off, leading the way. The redheaded girl stayed a little ahead of him, glancing back occasionally, but it wasn't like walking a dog.

Those blue eyes, like clear pools, were clearly telling him, *"Hurry up and come with me."*

That guy oughta have said "Take her along" to me! Raraja thought.

"Are you listening to me? Raraja-sama!"

Oops.

With the elf's beautiful face right up close to his, and the slight smell of incense hanging in the air, Raraja nervously answered her. "Um, er, uh... Yes."

Of course he was listening. Maybe in the past he wouldn't have been, but now—mysteriously—he found he could perceive more than before.

"You were saying it's not good that adventurers have been avoiding the dungeon..."

"For those without the skill, they have no choice. Yes, no choice." It didn't seem like she was seeking a response. Moving away gracefully, Aine shook her head with indignation. "And yet, when one of you has the ability to challenge the beast, I have to ask, how can you do otherwise?!"

"I mean, it *is* a dragon and all." Raraja crossed his arms, leaning against the back of the bench and looking up at the ceiling.

That terrifying red dragon flitted through his mind.

It was death incarnate. If they fought it, they would die—turn to ash—be lost forever. That beast probably didn't even recognize puny adventurers like them as a threat.

Except for Iarumas.

Frowning, Raraja shook his head angrily. "I don't care how much they're paying. It's not worth it."

"Isn't slaying dragons what makes adventurers so great? I can't see why you'd want to shy away from such an honor..."

Aine kept on shaking her head, lamenting this state of affairs. Yet, it wasn't as if she were complaining to Raraja and Garbage. There weren't many people in the temple today—an unusual occurrence. At the very least, it was the first time Raraja had seen the temple so empty since he'd started helping here. If adventurers didn't venture into the dungeon, that meant fewer died, and fewer visited the temple.

The massive stone building. The men and women of the cloth who walked silently around it. The great statue that stood in the back. With the prayer hall as deserted as it was, for some reason, they all took on a more austere appearance than usual.

Raraja gazed vaguely at the face on the statue of the god Kadorto, so large and distant that he needed to look up to do so. The other day, Sister Ainikki had told him—it was hollow.

Not long after, a priest emerged from the back and silently approached. He whispered in Aine's long ear, and she nodded before looking back at the two of them once more.

"They've finished preparing. Let's go."

"'Kay."

"Arf!"

Raraja jumped from the bench to his feet. Sensing his movement, Garbage got up too. As he watched the girl step over to them, Raraja voiced a sudden thought.

“Sister, is there any chance *you* might go slay the dragon...?”

She said nothing, just fixed Raraja with a quiet smile. For some reason, that felt like a more eloquent answer to his question than anything she might have said.

§

“Wahhhh...?!”

Berkanan flailed her thick arms and legs, crying out pitifully. Her thrashing was completely undignified, but she couldn’t afford to be picky about such things while trapped inside the mouth of a giant toad.

When she finally managed to tear free of the tongue that’d been wrapped around her, she dragged herself out. Her whole body was covered in slime.

Berkanan nearly cried at her miserable, drenched state.

She had gotten dirty plenty of times on the road to Scale, so she was emotionally prepared for the grime she might encounter in the dungeon. But still, this outfit had been sewn for her by her grandmother...

“Mage, cast a spell!”

“R-Right!”

Despite the filth coating her, when one of her party members called out, Berkanan slowly rose to her feet. She didn’t remember the person’s name, but they were still companions—it made her happy that they would ask for her help.

“Hea lai tazanme (*Flames, come forth*)!”

Raising a tremulous voice, Berkanan kneaded together her magic, then threw out the small flames that appeared at her fingertips.

HALITO.

It was a great spell, bestowed on Berkanan by her grandmother after many years of training.

The fire flashed through the gloom, leaving a trail of white light across the burial chamber. It collided with the toad’s skin and burst, emitting a bang.

When the spell cleared, the frog's entire body...wasn't so much as singed.

"Huh? U-Uh...?" sputtered Berkanan

"What're you doing, you dolt?!" shouted the fighter in the front row. Hefting a thick broadsword of tempered steel, they buried the blade into the toad's flesh. However, the creature's rubbery skin proved tougher than the fighter could have imagined—even when skewered by a sword, the giant toad still opened its big mouth wide.

"Eek?!"

Berkanan shrank down desperately, slipping beneath the tongue that lanced through the air above her head. Her butt slammed hard into the stone-tiled floor, and though it ached from the impact, that discomfort sure beat being swallowed again.

Perhaps it was also better than the pain of continuing to wait at the tavern.

"You don't even know KATINO?"

She'd seated herself at a table in Durga's Tavern. Her heart was aflutter, and her eyes glimmered with excitement. An adventurer called out to her, asking if she was a mage, and she nodded her head up and down vigorously.

"I-I... I've learned the true words of fire!"

The response to this assertion was...well, merciless.

Truth soon trampled her conception. HALITO, the spell she'd thought to be her ultimate technique, was only a first-level ability in the dungeon. Even the name was diminutive; it meant "*little* fire."

The adventurers of Scale had much stronger abilities than people from the outside world—that difference was stark. Although, because she'd heard talk of how the dungeon was a world of myth, a world of legends, Berkanan had already figured as much.

Still, she was a full head taller than those around her, so she felt like an adult sitting at the kids' table. It made her very visible to others. Many people reached out to her, but she also experienced a comparatively higher rate of

rejection. Apparently, adventurers had no use for a mage who could only toss fire around.

Her breaking point came when someone pointed to her staff and asked, *"You fight with a club? Come be a front-liner for us."* She'd fled the tavern in shame.

Mages used to be welcomed into parties for just being mages. Was that no longer enough? Had that era come to an end?

Perhaps it was just Berkanan's own bad luck, or maybe she'd come on a day when the gathered adventurers could afford to be pickier in choosing their mages. She would never know the true reason either way. In the end, Berkanan just sat dejectedly at a table, feeling out of place, and that was how her first day in Scale concluded.

Ultimately, it was an adventurer staying in the stables who seemed to take pity on her—no, surely it wasn't *pity*—and that person showed her the way.

As Berkanan gathered up straw to sleep in, crying all the while, the adventurer was strapping on their own equipment. *"You should try going to the first floor of the dungeon,"* they suggested.

There was an unspoken rule that adventurers of differing alignments wouldn't work together in Scale. However, the dungeon was an exception. On the first floor, the total number of adventurers looking for a mage was much higher—even if the arrangement was only temporary.

But was it true? Would she really find an opportunity there? Berkanan seemed only half convinced as she proceeded to the first floor of the dungeon.

Even among the crowd of adventurers, she stood out. Exposed to their curious—or perhaps amorous—stares, she shrunk into herself, standing by the wall for a time.

The first party she spoke to asked her what spells she could cast. When they heard her answer, there was some discussion before they said, *"Well, you're better than nothing, I guess."*

That party, likely of evil alignment, said they'd lost their mage during an earlier attempt. One surprising thing about this town was that here, the dead could be resurrected. Obviously, though, that came at a cost. Even if Berkanan

was being added to the party solely to fill a gap, she was still satisfied.

And that brings us back to the present.

"Ugh, you sure were a pain in the ass..."

With the battle over, the nameless fighter planted a foot on the giant toad's carcass and cursed at it. The thief was in the corner of the burial chamber, crouched in front of the treasure chest, hard at work on unsealing it. Assorted party members stood around, treating wounds or else remaining alert for threats, whatever their specific job was.

But did anyone so much as check on the depressed mage, sitting against the wall? Certainly not.

"That frog, it had...some kind of protection against spells," Berkanan mumbled weakly. "I'm telling you, my fire bounced off... If it weren't for that..."

If it weren't for that, then what?

The words, which sounded like an excuse meant to ward off her insecurities, only fed her own self-hatred.

Is it my fault that they aren't saying anything? she wondered, peering at them through the gap between her knees. *Or was the party like this even before I joined?*

What do I do if they throw me out? Would she have to go back to standing around on the first floor of the dungeon? Or maybe retreat to the tavern? But everyone had seen her before, when she'd failed to find companions, and they'd witnessed her adventuring with this party today.

Berkanan knew she stood out like a sore thumb. People would come to recognize her in no time.

Dull Berka. Slow Berka. Blundering Berka. Useless Berka.

Oh, but maybe adventurers don't care about other adventurers...?

Berkanan hoped that was the case. It was almost a wish or a prayer—that was how badly she'd given up.

“What do you think?”

“Should go for a hundred gold, I’d say.”

“A Sword of Slicing, huh? Couldn’t we have gotten a good dagger instead, like a Blade of Biting or something?”

“Like they’d let a friggin’ frog have something that good.”

One of the party members then turned to Berkanan and called out, “Hey, let’s go!”

“Oh, okay.”

She slowly got to her feet. Under her breath, she began chanting feiseen (*begone*), but then she stopped and shook her head.

Grandmother would get upset...

“You listen to me, Berka—words of truth aren’t to be spoken lightly.” The old woman had often told her this with a sour face. No, Berkanan couldn’t go using *that* word to clean the slime off her clothes.

Still, the silly, sticky sounds she was making with every step on the stone-tiled floor were horribly embarrassing. The frog slime made Berkanan’s clothes cling tightly to her body, and it stung just a little, making her feel all itchy.

The thief walking beside her—an elf, she thought—seemed to be staring. Though she had an inkling that she was being overly self-conscious, Berkanan hunched her large body over, needlessly trying to make herself smaller.

“Something smells weird...”

“You sure it’s not just toad slime?”

In the darkness, people were talking.

“It’s not me,” muttered Berkanan, her voice as faint as a mosquito’s buzz. Her hands tightened around her large, club-like staff; her arms hugged her ample bosom tight. Her eyes quickly darted left and right, seeking without knowing why. In her head, she chanted, *I won’t mess up again. Next time, I’ll take them out with my fire.*

Next time—

“Hm?”

Suddenly, Berkanan noticed a shadow looming over her. It didn’t happen often. That’s why she immediately raised her head, peering up in surprise.

Before her, there stood—

“Ah.”

—a red dragon.

§

Murmur—Chant—Pray—Invoke

§

“Aughguagahhhhh?!?!?!”

Berkanan’s entire body convulsed as she thrashed and flopped around.

“Hot! It’s hot?! Aughahhhh?! Ahhhhhh!!!”

She couldn’t breathe.

Agony.

She clawed at her throat and screamed as though spewing blood, her eyes blown wide open.

“It’s okay.”

A cool hand, perhaps even cold—the touch was nonetheless gentle. That coolness, along with the warmth of the voice, helped Berkanan get her movements under control. The hand softly stroking her back moved up and down slowly, reminiscent of a mother soothing her child.

“You have been granted life. May the fear of suffering, pain, and death inspire you to live even longer.”

Berkanan was unable to respond—she could only wheeze out hoarse breaths, and her throat ached. Still, those kind, gentle words reached her heart, like new life being breathed into her.

Yes, there was her heart, thudding away in her chest. A pulse. She was alive.

Alive...

Her arms and legs were still attached. Nothing burned, ashen, or charred.

This was the body her grandmother had praised her for. *You have such pretty white skin, Berka. Not even the sun can beat you.*

“May you live a better life and die a better death. Raise your face, look forward, and advance.”

The face of an elf with pretty silver hair filled Berkanan’s tear-blurred vision. Her voice was calm and kind, as was her expression.

It’s okay, the elf seemed to whisper*. You can do it.*

Berkanan took a deep and gasping breath, desperately sucking in air. And then...and then...

“For that is what’s sought of you.”

Berkanan raised her voice and cried.

§

“Everything turned out fine.”

Raraja’s eyes opened wide as he heard Sister Ainikki’s voice. “Oh...”

A person trailed behind Aine, tottering on unsteady feet—she was like a little girl being led by the hand of the elven nun. Her bare, white flesh was covered in a sheet of linen, and she was stooped over, peering around suspiciously. Little more than a scrap of fabric covered her, and it couldn’t hide the girl’s beautiful face or exotic spirit. But more than that, there was one thing that caught the boy’s attention...

“She’s *huge*!” Raraja blurted.

As soon as he spoke, the girl twitched, her body shuddering, and she shrunk into herself. A quick, piercing glance from Ainikki tore into him, but there was no getting around it—the girl was bigger than Raraja, bigger even than Iarumas.

Memories of Raraja’s former party members flashed through his mind. Everyone had things they didn’t want said about them, or traits they didn’t want laughed at. Knowing this, Raraja wanted to quickly follow up on his outburst.

“Sorry...” he mumbled.

“D-Don’t be... I’m used to it...” The girl shook her head but also hid behind Aine’s back in an attempt to obscure her massive body. The attempt was, of course, unsuccessful. She was just too big.

Come to think of it...

It occurred to Raraja belatedly—if she wasn’t wearing clothing or equipment now, didn’t that mean she’d been naked back in the dungeon too? That is, if you can call a charred hunk of meat that’d been tossed into a corpse bag “naked.”

Raraja knew if he said that, this poor girl with black hair and a large frame would probably shrink into herself even more.

As the boy awkwardly averted his eyes, he met another pair—blue ones, looking rather uninterested.

“Arf.” Garbage barked as if to say, *“What’re you doing?”*

Raraja told her to shut up.

At this point, he noticed that there were only women in the ritual area right now. If you counted Garbage, a leftover monster’s snack, as a woman, then Raraja was outnumbered three-to-one. The odds were just not in his favor...

Aine gave the newly resurrected girl a slight nudge from behind, as if to support her.

“Now, come this way.”

“Um, er, uhh...” The girl spoke haltingly, clearly nervous, and then bowed her head. “Thank you. So much. I hear you, uh, saved me. But, um...”

Her gestures were probably meant to be small and polite, but they seemed awfully big to Raraja. First, he felt her black hair graze his nose, and then from beneath that hair, he saw her eyes staring at him.



He couldn't tell if she was looking at him with upturned eyes...or looking down at him. But regardless, the impression she gave off—a mix of fear, flattery, and uncertainty, like she was trying to read his mood and act accordingly—came across clearly.

"Erm...why did you—"

Save me?

Dunno what to tell her.

In place of a response, Raraja glanced around awkwardly. He didn't know the answer any more than she did. Resurrections cost money, and the boy wasn't getting anything out of it. Well, he thought he might get the girl to pay him back, but he wasn't really looking to turn a profit. He could only break even. Though...no, considering his labor and the time spent, he'd likely be taking a loss on this one.

"We just happened to find you," said Raraja. "That's all." If he were to look for a reason in spite of that, he was ultimately going to strike on something inconsequential. "I figured it was better to have you up here and alive, doing whatever it is you like doing, instead of dead down there."

For some reason, Sister Ainikki's eyes narrowed a little when she heard that. Raraja had no idea why she was grinning so brightly.

Had he, once again, mentioned something he shouldn't have? If so, then he figured he shouldn't keep walking around on top of this particular pitfall any longer.

The girl's eyes widened with surprise, Raraja looked around, and...

"Oh, hey, that thing."

"Woof!"

"Pass it here, would ya?"

Garbage had been idly playing with a scrap of wood. When asked, she picked it up with her feet and tossed it to Raraja.

It felt heavy in his hands—sturdy like a club, and long too. Yeah, it was *like* a club. But it wasn't one. And he already had an idea of what it must be.

“This is your *magic staff*, right?” he asked. “You can have it back.”

“O-Oh...!”

She took it from him and clasped it to her chest with both hands, as if she were handling something precious. He heard her murmur something like, *“Oh, thank goodness, thank goodness,”* between sobs, along with some words of gratitude. Her large, exaggerated motions made it feel like she’d torn the staff out of Raraja’s hands.

The owner of the weapon shop, Catlob, had taken one look at it—literally, just one—before telling him what it was.

Quite a fetching rod indeed—a Studly Staff.

Hard and strong, they were enchanted to protect the user. It was rare to see one in the world outside—although, they were all too common in the dungeon.

This girl was grasping her staff, weeping and moaning... Though she was on her knees, there was no need for Raraja to look down to see her. Despite that, she looked terribly small.

The boy didn’t know where she’d come from or what she was trying to do. He didn’t even know her name. He understood only two things about the girl: she was a mage, and she’d just been resurrected from a corpse.

And also...I guess I *paid for the resurrection?*

Sister Ainikki said nothing—she simply stared at Raraja. It made him feel awfully uncomfortable. Meanwhile, Garbage seemed completely unconcerned. She let out a whine and trotted over to the girl.

How did this redheaded morsel of monster’s leftovers feel about everything? Raraja had no idea. He speculated that she might be thinking, *“Who’s this?”* or something like that...

Just a stray dog wanting to sniff out a noxious smell.

Even so, as Garbage peered at the girl, that tear-streaked face formed a frail smile. A small, weak murmur. *Thank you.* Raraja clicked his tongue. The girl shuddered.

“So,” Raraja asked after a moment, “what are you going to do now?”

“Now...?”

It seemed that he had no more answer to that question than she did. In retrospect, even asking her seemed nasty, but he thought he should say it—felt it needed to be asked.

“I mean, sure, I’m the one who decided to put up the money for this, and I never asked you if you wanted it, but, you know...” His gaze was pointed away, outside the ritual area, to the prayer hall where the hollow god—Kadorto—stood. “I didn’t pay for it just so you could mope around on your knees, crying,” Raraja concluded, before adding a quiet, “Probably...”

“I-I... I...”

Memories whirled around in the girl’s—Berkanan’s—head.

Slow Berka. Dull Berka. Become a great mage. Make a name in the dungeon.

Can only cast HALITO. Useless. Grandmother’s clothes. And...

“I want...”

To Berkanan’s surprise, her voice wasn’t trembling. Had she ever spoken so firmly before? Not as far as she could remember. She had always been frightened. She couldn’t do anything well. Things always turned out terribly for her. She tried, all to no avail. Strained desperately—still no good. No matter where she went, she was hopeless.

Would things also be like that from now on? Would she keep on running away, always, always, always afraid?

I’d hate that, she thought. No, she didn’t want it at all. Why did this stuff always have to happen to her?

Well, in that case...

With her eyes no doubt set on the future, Berkanan said, “I want...to take down that red dragon.”

Chapter 2: The Edge of Town

“I don’t mind,” said Iarumas. “That’s more than enough reason to go on an adventure.”

Berkanan was back in Durga’s Tavern, jumping at every little thing as though afraid. Her eyes roamed the room suspiciously. At this point, she obviously had more than a linen sheet covering her body, but she was still a big girl, eye-catching to the patrons around her. Attempts to hide her frame by shrinking into herself only made her stand out more.

All around the tavern, people stared at her without holding back. Of course, some of that was also curiosity—she was a new face, and Iarumas of the Black Rod, the corpse hauler, was talking to her.

Perhaps because of the red dragon, a lot more adventurers than usual were in Durga’s Tavern this evening. If they lacked the means or the courage to slip past the red dragon, they couldn’t delve deeper into the dungeon. And without the dungeon, there was nowhere else for them to go. Those types of low-caliber people, be they good or evil, well...they weren’t exactly classy.

Sensing the intent behind all the stares the girl was receiving, even Raraja had to sympathize with her. *She wouldn’t make a good thief,* thought the boy. He’d returned to the tavern with her (and with Garbage tagging along too).

Realistically, no one cared who took up what class in Scale. Yet at the same time, the dungeon swallowed up adventurers without a care for whatever their personal situations might be. Those who chose a class that suited them poorly would simply disappear, unnoticed by anyone.

They might not even make it as far as Durga’s Tavern.

Raraja thought back to his former self—a boy not blessed with talent (bonus points). He began to realize that he’d had it better than some. At the very least, he’d never find himself stuck at the tavern again. He’d also managed to survive this long. Though, whether he could keep it that way was another question.

He told himself that this reasoning, this progress he’d made, justified his

imminent prickly behavior.

“But I...umm,” Berkanan mumbled.

“What? Out with it already.” Raraja scowled. The woman seemed older than him—he’d react with wide-eyed surprise if he found out she was younger. *And yet, look at how she’s acting...*

He’d long since stopped bothering to be polite.

“Uhh...”

After all, this was just how she acted: hanging head, averted eyes, incoherent mumbling. He could hardly believe this was the same girl who’d declared that she wanted to kill the red dragon. All Berkanan did was fiddle with the hem of the outfit, one offered by Aine out of the kindness of her heart. And due to the, uh, *size* of her body, it was an awfully short hem. It looked like Berkanan was desperately trying to stretch it out and make it longer.

It’s not gonna make much difference either way.

Raraja clicked his tongue with irritation, causing Garbage to raise her head with a “Yap?”

The girl felt like her job had been finished once she’d brought her two underlings—Raraja and Berkanan—to the tavern. She greeted Iarumas with a self-satisfied bark before taking a seat. Before her was a portion of gruel, and she began scarfing it down—face-first in the bowl, like a stray dog. She made a big mess of it.

When she looked up, her face was covered with scraps of food, and she gave them just one word.

“Arf!”

“Erm...” Berkanan’s eyes darted from Iarumas, to Raraja, then to Garbage as she tried to get a read on them and act accordingly. Finally, the girl said, “I’m...only able to cast HALITO.”

“That’s nothing to worry about,” Iarumas replied, his words brief but sharp. “The only difference is how long it takes you to learn spells, and in what order you acquire them. Ultimately, you’re no different from anyone else.”

“Are you...” Berkanan hesitantly asked, “a mage?”

She received no answer. The black-clad man simply gave her a casual, silent shrug.

“Besides,” he murmured instead. “A little dragon-slaying isn’t bad every once in a while.” His words were casual, as though the whole situation wasn’t a big deal.

Raraja cast a dubious gaze at the shady man who was always dragging him around. “You say that, but last time, you ran away...”

“Yes, because we lacked the means, or cause, to slay it,” he answered simply. “But we have cause now, and we can search for the means.”

Still glaring at Iarumas, Raraja rested his elbows on the table. *I’ve got no idea what this guy’s thinking.* He felt the same way about Garbage, but at least she was easy enough to understand when gobbling gruel.

Iarumas? Not so much.

What had he been up to all day?

Raraja had gone to the temple with Garbage, talked to Aine, performed the ceremony, and brought Berkanan back. During all that time—yes, *all* that time—had this guy just been hanging around the tavern? Not behaving raucously like the other adventurers, nor bemoaning the current situation, but just...acting normal? Had he been silent, not doing anything in particular? Had he just sat there, staring off into space?

The boy had a feeling his imagination was on the mark. The thought of it sent a slight chill running down his spine.

“You’re going to help me?”

Raraja’s sense of unease prompted him to shift his focus to Berkanan and her hesitant question. There was no point in thinking about Iarumas. In fact, it was better not to. Probably.

“Yeah,” Raraja replied. “If you go off and die in a way that leaves no body, I’ll be taking a huge loss.” He needled her with all the attitude he could muster, pursing his lips.

Maybe he was thinking something like, *Give it a rest,* or perhaps, *Go back to your hometown.* But Berkanan got very quiet—her demeanor became serious in a way it hadn't been a moment ago.

In the middle of the tavern's hubbub, just around their little group, an elongated silence hung in the air.

Garbage emptied her bowl, wiped her face with her cloak, and let out a satisfied, "Woof."

"My magic was no use..." Berkanan murmured, glancing at Iarumas's black rod. "But would a sword work?"

§

"Wahhhhhh?!"

"Grrrr... Awooo!!!"

I don't see why that means I *need to swing a sword around!*

Berkanan didn't even have the composure left to voice this complaint. With the wooden sword coming at her—*whoosh, whoosh,* over and over, never letting up—well, yeah, of course she'd be unable to voice her concern. Their voices echoed loudly across the barren land, beneath a depressing, ashen sky. They could probably be heard even on the other side of the stone wall.

This was the edge of town—a wasteland that lay between the entrances to Scale and the dungeon. It was also known as the training grounds. Though, this desolate patch of ground had become a shell of its former self, and it was now a place for training in name only. There was nothing to mark off the area, or even any straw dummies left to pummel.

Still, that didn't mean one couldn't train there—or so Iarumas had said.

"Woof!"

"Eek?!"

Wheeze, wheeze. Berkanan's breathing was so labored that she took not breaths, but gasps. By now, she couldn't count the number of times she'd cursed this lumbering body of hers.

If only she were small, thin, and cute...like the girl behind her.

They'd told her that the redheaded girl—the one swinging around the wooden sword—was named Garbage.

I've heard it's customary to give children names that are unappealing to protect them from evil spirits, but that's a new one. And why in the world is she wearing that raw metal collar around her neck?

"Bowwow!"

"A-Ah?! I get it, I'll run...!"

After their earlier talk, Iarumas had immediately escorted Berkanan through the gates and out of town. Then, after leading her here, he'd thrown a wooden sword to Garbage.

"Do it," he'd stated simply.

"Yap!"

Berkanan couldn't tell if the two managed to somehow understand one another. The result, however, was that Garbage gleefully chased after the large girl, swinging the wooden blade.

It was an incredibly embarrassing predicament—Berkanan, running around in sandals with her legs exposed by the short hem of her outfit. But, if she paused to shyly fidget with the garment, the wooden sword was quick to slap her back or buttocks.

Funnily enough, despite how she'd been previously roasted by dragonfire, a little thing like that still hurt real bad.

Once she'd started running, desperation took care of the rest.

"Listen, Berka. If someone does something for you, then you need to do something for them in return." That was one of the three great rules of the world that her grandmother had taught her.

I still haven't paid them back. Don't have anything to pay them back with. So, at the very least—

"Arf! Arf!"

“Eek... Eek! Eeeeeek...!!!”

For the moment, it took everything she had to just desperately keep running—she didn’t even have time to finish her thought. With heavy footsteps, she ran round and round the training grounds, yelling out loud as she did. The lone soldier nearby, who stood around looking out of place, let out a short, “Oh,” when he saw the two girls.

Meanwhile, Raraja sat on a nearby boulder, ignoring the soldier’s utterance. “Is there any point to this?” he asked Iarumas.

“Surely it’s not pointless.” The man’s response was simple, half-assed. “If she trains as a fighter, she’ll gain stamina and focus...the power to survive (hit points).”

“Hmm...”

“A mage who just won’t die can be quite frightening.”

He seemed strangely confident about this. Had Iarumas done this kind of thing too?

Iarumas, running around, screaming, as an instructor chased after him? That’s a bad joke.

Raraja rested his elbows on his knees. “You’re not gonna make me train too, are you?”

“There’s no need, is there?”

“Well, no...”

“Did you want to?”

Raraja didn’t answer. His heart raced as he imagined himself heroically fighting the dragon. He admired that kind of thing—thought it was cool, and certainly didn’t look down on tales of heroes. He loved that kind of stuff.

But for whatever reason, in Raraja’s fantasies, the one trading blows with the dragon was a redheaded waif.

“No.” Raraja shook his head. “That’s probably not for me.”

“Then it’s fine,” said Iarumas.

“But we’re going *dragon-slaying*, you know?”

“It’s good to go every once in a while.”

Raraja had been trying to ask, “That’s not gonna be enough, is it?” but he didn’t get the chance to restate his question. At that moment, a bunch of adventurers bolted from the dungeon’s entrance, making a huge ruckus.

“Damn it, no one warned us! What the hell was that?!”

“Nope—can’t do this! What’s a dragon doing *there*?!”

“We took a huge loss on this one!”

These shouting men were covered in soot and dragging several charred hunks of meat behind them. The group rushed past Raraja and Iarumas, leaving black trails of ash on the ground as they raced back to Scale.

Raraja absently followed the tracks with his eyes, and Iarumas said, “We’ll need to sort out some equipment.”

“For the girl?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“We’ve got no money for it, though, right?”

They would readily have the girl go into debt to pay for her equipment; however, the party still had no money to lend her. Even putting up the gold to cover her resurrection would’ve normally been impossible—the temple wasn’t that generous. It was all thanks to Aine paying the tithe for them. That was just how much the nun liked Iarumas...or Garbage, or perhaps even Raraja.

Sister Ainikki believed that a better death awaited all of them, and she hoped they would find it. It would have been beyond misguided to expect that kind of kindness from just anyone.

“Oh, there’s money all right.” Iarumas looked down at Berkanan, who had finally fallen over, wheezing. There wasn’t a trace of an expression on his face. “If you go to those who have it.”

§

“Well, if it isn’t Mr. Iarumas. You’re back awfully fast.”

At the tavern, they were met by a seedy-looking man. It was hard to imagine that he had any money at all. Wearing rags, hunched over like some kind of flea, he practically looked like a beggar, and his figure was strange—small and wizened. What really caught the eye, though, was the swaying hand lantern he held and the great burden on his warped back. That bag, as swollen up as it possibly could be, might well have been larger than the flea man himself.

This dink's wearing rags because he's got as much stuff as possible crammed in that bag of his...

That was Raraja's impression. Was the man a dwarf? Or maybe a rhea? He didn't know.

Garbage sniffed around the man for a while, then eventually barked, "Yap."

Had she lost interest? Decided it was safe? Satisfied her curiosity? Only Garbage knew.

Seeing this, Berkanan finally poked her head out from behind Raraja. Obviously, a girl as large as she was couldn't hide behind a boy of his size, but for some reason, she insisted on clinging to his back.

Was she totally terrified? Exhausted and in need of support? Or just in the habit of hanging around behind someone?

Whatever the reason, it was awkward for Raraja.

"Who is he?" Berkanan mumbled, her voice hoarse.

"Bank."

Iarumas introduced the man with that one word. As if it were enough.

"It's a *pleasure* to make your acquaintances, young man and young ladies." Bank rubbed his hands together like some kind of merchant, a broad grin spreading across his face.

Yes—as far as merchant's aesthetics went, he certainly looked the part far better than Mr. Catlob did. To Raraja's eyes, he didn't look like an adventurer. But if he was here in this tavern...

"You an adventurer too, old man?" Raraja asked hesitantly.

“Heh heh.” Bank’s smile was unfaltering. “Well, something of the sort...”

He put down the large bag. No doubt, it was responsible for his hunched back. It thudded heavily against the floor, and Garbage, who was sitting in her chair and acting disinterested, raised her eyelids slightly.

“Woof!”

“Oops. Excuse me. I’m sorry about that, young lady.” Bank responded to her complaint with an easygoing manner, and his face scrunched into a wrinkly smile. He then placed his hand on top of the bag and turned his stare on Iarumas. “Now then, what can I do for you, mister? Is it *things* that you need? Or money?”

“Various things, but just money for now.” Iarumas nudged his chin slightly toward the frightened Berkanan.

The girl shuddered as Iarumas singled her out—she tried to conceal herself behind Raraja’s back once again. The boy could faintly smell her sweat above him.

“I want to get a set of equipment together for this girl. Enough money to pay for that will suffice.”

“Heh heh. You’re sure you don’t need things as well?”

“The things you carry come at too high a price.”

“If you say so...” Bank nodded repeatedly, then began digging through his bag.

Raraja felt Berkanan grasp the hem of his shirt tightly. Doing his best to ignore her, the boy spoke up. His tone was awfully sharp.

“Who’s this guy supposed to be?”

“I told you, didn’t I?” drawled Iarumas. “He’s Bank.”

“Yeah, sure, I get that ‘Bank’ is his name...”

“It is indeed.” Iarumas nodded. “He accepts deposits of items and money, and also lends them out.”

After a pause, Raraja asked, “Is he an adventurer?”

Iarumas didn’t answer, and that was because the dink had just pulled out a jangling bag of gold.

“Will this much do?”

“Yes, it should be sufficient.” Iarumas took the bag, weighing the gold in the palm of his hand. “I’ll pay you back eventually.”

“While I’m still alive, please, mister.” Bank grinned broadly and continuously rubbed his hands together. “I’ve been having all sorts of troubles lately, what with this red dragon business and all.”

What sorts of troubles?

What connection did this man have to the dungeon, beyond dealing with the goods adventurers brought back?

There was a certain difference between those who had delved into the dungeon, even just once, and those who hadn’t. From the surrounding adventurers—who looked no different from how they’d been before leaving—to Raraja himself, the timid girl behind him named Berkanan, and of course, Iarumas and Garbage—there was something *different* about all of them.

It would have been simple to say that it was a matter of experience or skill level, but...

Well, anyway, whatever “it” was, he didn’t sense “it” from this Bank fellow. That was likely why Raraja had never so much as registered the man’s existence before.

Obviously, he couldn’t have any connection to the red dragon.

“Business, my boy. It’s slowing down business.”

“Urkh.” The man had read his mind. No—had it been written in his expression? Raraja’s face twitched.

“Deposits and withdrawals. Both are down, you see. On that point, Mr. Iarumas, I might say...”

“I’ll come to you when I need to. You have no complaints about that, right?”

“Heh heh...”

“Now, if only Murphy were here,” murmured Iarumas.

“An acquaintance of yours?” asked Raraja.

“Something like that,” was the brief response.

Well, at this point, it wasn’t like Raraja would be surprised by anyone the man in black might happen to know.

“Young man, and young ladies, I do hope you’ll come to me if there’s ever anything you need.”

“You say that, but...” *I’m not gonna be needing you for a while,* Raraja was going to finish, but a large hand tugged on his sleeve. Repeatedly. Powerfully. Berkanan must have been doing it unconsciously.

With a slight click of his tongue, Raraja swung his arm around hard, yanking the girl out in front of him.

“Ah... Ah!” Berkanan stumbled, pitching forward.

“If you’ve got something to say, say it yourself,” Raraja bluntly snapped.

“Erm... I, umm...” Berkanan’s eyes wavered. Raraja could sense them roving, moving from himself, to Garbage, to Iarumas.

Iarumas said nothing. Neither did Raraja. Berkanan gulped audibly.

“Thank...you? Mister...”

“Oh, my.” Bank’s eyes widened, then narrowed with a smile. “Well, then.”

§

“It doesn’t suit you.”

“Urkh...”

The situation was changing faster than either Raraja or Berkanan could keep up with. Pushed along by the flow of events, they’d rapidly found themselves at Catlob’s arms and equipment store. About the only one who wouldn’t be perturbed by this was Garbage, who just wandered about the trading post sniffing things.

Oh, and of course, Iarumas.

With cash now in hand, Iarumas had led them here, unwilling to take no for an answer. Well, not exactly—it had felt more like he was going to go whether they came along or not.

The shop was overflowing with equipment. Iarumas approached the counter in the rear and plainly said to Mr. Catlob, “A breastplate and a round shield. A helmet too.”

“And what will you do for a weapon?”

“That’s already sorted.”

“Then, your total comes to one hundred and seventy gold.”

“Eyagh...?!”

Raraja couldn’t blame Berkanan for blinking wildly at the amount. Even *he* wasn’t used to it yet. There was no telling how long they could fool around in the outside world for that kind of money.

When they’d borrowed gold from Bank earlier, she probably hadn’t imagined it was anywhere near this much.

She stood frozen, bewildered, as money was thrown on the counter and pieces of equipment were set down next to it, one after another.

“Go put them on,” Iarumas told her.

This was the result.

“It *really* doesn’t suit you.”

“Ohhh...”

With the breastplate strapped over her thin clothes, an unfamiliar shield in her left hand, and her staff in her right, she didn’t look like a fighter—maybe a rookie priest at best. All Raraja could say was that it “didn’t suit her.” Even Garbage in her rags, with a broadsword slung over her shoulder, looked the part better than Berkanan did.

“Arf.” Although, Garbage was currently just wandering the store, looking incredibly bored.

Berkanan smiled ever so slightly as she watched Garbage scamper around. For

some reason which Raraja couldn't grasp, Berkanan seemed not entirely unfond of the monsters' leftovers. This, despite the fact that the little ragamuffin had been chasing her around with a wooden sword only a few hours ago. If Raraja had been in Berkanan's position, he was pretty sure he'd have spat out a choice word or two.

Maybe she's just too exhausted to think like that.

"Are you going to kill the dragon?" Catlob—that elf with unseeing eyes—suddenly asked in a quiet whisper.

"Huh?"

It wasn't Iarumas, or Garbage, or even Raraja he had asked.

"You mean...me?" The tall, raven-haired girl blinked her golden eyes at him.

"I am the one who appraised your staff." Catlob spoke as if that explained everything, then tilted his head slightly. "I would have thought you were a mage. Was I mistaken?"

"No, um, er, I'm..."

"She *is* a mage," Iarumas interjected. "But she's a fighter now."

"You mean to train her?"

"Do you think she can win if I don't?"

"Not at all." The elf shook his head. Like an old tree swaying in the wind, his age was just as uncertain. "But if that's the weapon she's using..."

"Excuse me!"

Berkanan was the one to speak this time. There was a loud *whoosh* as that club—her hardwood staff—sailed right over Raraja's head.

"Whoa!" Had he not ducked, it would have brained him.

However, it had taken every ounce of fortitude Berkanan had just to speak up, so she didn't notice Raraja's reaction. She leaned in. For her part, she had tried to only move a little, but to everyone else, it seemed like she was leaning in deeply.

"Do you have a weapon that can kill dragons?"

“A weapon that slays dragons, huh?” Catlob seemed less than amused by this question. His hands, which may have been doing some sort of work behind the counter, paused. His eyes didn’t move. “I do, in a way.”

“Y-You mean it...?!” Berkanan stood up straight.

“Because any weapon can slay a dragon.”

Berkanan hunched over again. The elf had said it plainly, like he might have remarked that an axe was a tool for chopping firewood.

“But, if I were to pick out just one...” Catlob brought a hand to his chin and thought for a moment. “It would be the Dragon Slayer.”

“Heh.”

Raraja cocked an eyebrow at this quiet vocalization from Iarumas. Just now... Was that not—perhaps—a *laugh*?

Inside this shop, gloomy even during daylight hours, the boy couldn’t make out the shape of the man’s lips, masked as they were by the shadow of a cloak.

“It’s not like that suggestion’s total nonsense, right?” Raraja asked.

There’s nothing to laugh about.

Iarumas met the boy’s question with only a slight shrug. “It’s better than him offering up a shuriken.”

“What’s a shuriken?”

“A throwing knife.”

“You can find that kind of thing everywhere.”

“Yes, everywhere.” It was Catlob, not Iarumas, who responded to Raraja. “But, only a certain type is the real deal.”

Even if his eyes could not see what was where, the owner of this arms and equipment shop must have known the place like the back of his hand. That was how convincing it was when the elf pointed a slender finger in a specific direction.

“They’re an all-too-common product of the dungeon. I have one here, in fact, if you’d like to see it.”

Catlob had pointed—with unseeing eyes—at a single barrel. It was stuffed full of various swords. They didn't look like they'd been treated particularly well. Upon closer inspection, there was indeed a sword in the bunch that bore a dragon design. Though, it was certainly odd to put a dragon motif on a sword meant to kill dragons...

Timidly, nervously, hesitantly, sluggishly—whether she was aware of it herself or not, Berkanan was being awfully slow about how she peered into the barrel.

"Would you mind...if I took it out...?"

"Do as you please."

Berkanan reached out nervously and pulled the sword from the barrel. The naked blade, without a scabbard, shone with a faint phosphorescence—which was all the more apparent in the gloom of the shop. The pale glimmer was unmistakably that of magical power. Raraja had seen something of the sort up close the other day.

But...

Sensing that something was off, Raraja squinted, staring hard at the Dragon Slayer sword. Obviously, he couldn't tell a good sword from a bad one—not once they reached the level of quality required to be displayed in this establishment. But, well, compared to the others lining the shelves, this one was...

"An ordinary sword...?"

Or it looked like one, as far as he could tell. It lacked style—personality. If someone told him it was a family heirloom, he might have believed that story, but he'd never buy that this Dragon Slayer was a legendary weapon.

It seemed like Berkanan shared that same vague impression. Her eyes met with Raraja's as she glanced past the blade, then she hurriedly turned her head away.

Her black hair, which was tied back, bounced and swayed like an actual tail.

"The Dragon Slayers that you'll find in the dungeon all lack spirit," Catlob explained.

“That goes for most things,” Iarumas said, in a tone that was unusual for him—amused reminiscence mixed with grumbling. Speaking in a resentful murmur, as if he were complaining to Catlob, he added, “It never did me any good. Along with the Mage Masher.”

“What about the Were Slayer?” Raraja asked, pursing his lips. “Sezmar uses one, doesn’t he?”

“That’s an exception.”

“What do you mean, an exception?”

“The Were Slayer is useful.”

Is it okay to let this go with so little explanation? Raraja wondered. *And hold on, based on the way he said that...*

“You’ve used a Were Slayer too?” Raraja asked.

“Who can say?”

Raraja didn’t think Iarumas was being evasive. *He just doesn’t remember. I’m sure of it.*

“Well, then...” Berkanan murmured, still gazing at the Dragon Slayer she held in her hands. “Is there a ‘real’ one of these too?”

“Not here there isn’t.”

“Then...where?”

“Deep in the dungeon,” Mr. Catlob stated, as if it were no big deal.

Which means...

“That’s right,” Iarumas agreed.

It was like the two men were telling them a riddle. Was it Iarumas who laughed? Or Catlob?

“In order to kill the dragon, we’ll first have to slip past it—into the lower levels of the dungeon.”

§

“Well, let’s go.”

“Hey.” Raraja leveled Iarumas with a glare as soon as they left the arms and equipment shop.

This man had made them train, gathered money, and prepared equipment. What came next? Raraja could hazard a guess.

“Go where? You don’t mean the dungeon, do you?”

“I do, yes.”

“Oh, come on,” Raraja moaned in a low voice. The problem was, when he let Iarumas handle things, they always turned out like this. The man’s head had precisely two categories in it: “the dungeon” and “everything else.” It had been this way when he was dealing with Raraja too. That’s why the boy had seen this coming.

“Augh...” Berkanan’s pale face was blanching so hard she looked ashen. It was all she could do to stay on her feet, using her staff for support. Raraja could hardly blame her for that.

“Arf?”

“Oh, um, it’s okay... Really. I’m fine...” Berkanan offered a weak smile as Garbage peered up at her.

The wall between those who’d been inside the dungeon and those who hadn’t was absolute. However, there was also a gulf between those who’d delved multiple times and those who’d only been once. That measure was even greater in the case of someone who’d died and only just been resurrected.

Even so...

I never thought it’d be this *big of a difference.*

Raraja had seen Iarumas right after his resurrection. He’d treated the whole thing like it was no big deal.

And how about himself? Raraja had yet to experience death. If he died, would he be able to come back? And would he even be able to move around afterward?

Raraja thought about it, then shook his head. *I’m not gonna die.*

“We can head out tomorrow just as easily,” he insisted. “The dungeon and the dragon aren’t going anywhere.”

“Hmm.” With eyes bereft of emotion, Iarumas surveyed his three fellow adventurers. “Right. To the inn it is, then.”

§

That was how Berkanan was finally able to get some rest.

“Whew,” she exhaled, lying back on a pile of hay in the stables. They’d told her she wouldn’t be able to rest her body in a place like this, but she couldn’t very well borrow more money from them. They’d already paid for her resurrection, of course, and then equipment. Even today’s meal. Though, it was a bit late to be bringing that up now.

Besides...

It’s more spacious here.

As that self-effacing thought wound through her mind, Berkanan’s lips curled into a slight smile. This mound of straw was better than sleeping over a rope or stuffed into a wooden box the size of a coffin. Even the smell of horses was something she’d already gotten used to back in her hometown. Berkanan stretched out her arms and legs.

“What’s going to happen to me from now on?” The words slipped out, unbidden. She had come all this way, pushed along by the stream of events, caught in the current.

I was worried they’d treat me strangely, but that didn’t happen. The man who seems to be a mage...Iarumas? I never have any idea what he’s thinking. And the redheaded girl, Garbage. I think she’s probably kind. What land is she from? And...that boy. Raraja. What about him? I know he’s the one who had resurrected me.

Those silly words... “I want to kill the red dragon.” I don’t know why they came out of my mouth.

With a deep sigh, Berkanan sat up in the hay. She lay back down and sat up again. Over and over.

Tomorrow, they would head to the dungeon once more. To that dusky place—that endless abyss.

As her eyelids closed, the darkness spread out before her, lit by flashes of red flame. When they opened again, she saw the roof of the stables.

I'm scared, but...

Strangely, she felt no desire to run away. Even though she could have packed her bags and skipped town easily enough. But she also lacked the courage to sleep. Berkanan's features creased with a smile as she thought about how pathetic she was.

It's probably the crackling noise. Sparks sounded from the fire that burned in a square lantern hanging in one corner of the stables.

It's true what they say about Scale being a town that never sleeps, Berkanan thought. She was impressed—after all, it would have been unthinkable for Berkanan's hometown to be so bright at night. Fuel was precious. Wax, oil, even dung. They couldn't afford to use it often. Night was for sleeping. They only had to be careful that the charcoal fire in the stove didn't go out.

That's why learning under her grandmother had been...

It sure was hard.

Berkanan rolled over in the hay, hugging her knees, changing her sleeping position. She suddenly wanted to cry. Why was that? Not because she wanted to go home. Could it have been because she wanted to see her grandmother?

"Don't cry!" Berkanan scolded herself, sniffling. She slapped her cheeks. It stung.

There were many other adventurers in the stables—men and women with little money and untreated wounds. The stench of animals, sweat, and iron. The aroma of blood, death, and ash. Groans and sobs. If she perked her ears up, the stables were alive with many sounds besides the crackling flames.

Surely it was the same for Scale—for the dungeon too.

And I'm a part of it, I guess.

It was odd...even though this place and her homeland existed under the same

sky.

“Hey, you still awake?”

“Wha...?!” Berkanan jumped at the sudden voice. Her black hair shot up, then whipped back down and struck the straw like a horse’s tail. The sound of collapsing straw echoed in the stables, sending the big girl into a panic.

And that’s why it took her some time to realize that the one who’d spoken was the boy—Raraja.

It was even longer before she noticed he’d been waiting silently for her to figure that out.

“Um, er, uh, sorry... I, uh, well...”

“Quit twitching so much. Settle down,” he said awkwardly. “I’m not here to gobble you up or anything.”

After a moment’s pause, Berkanan nodded. “Right.”

“I’m gonna sit next to you,” Raraja said before plopping himself down in the hay.

How old is he? Berkanan looked at the boy, whose head was lower than her shoulder while seated. Was he her age? Older? Younger? Berkanan didn’t really know what pubescent boys were like.

“You can’t sleep when you’re so exhausted.”

“Huh...?”

“I figured you’d be awake,” he said, looking her up and down. “You must be dead tired after today, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” Berkanan nodded, her head bobbing repeatedly. Her hair bounced up and down with the motion. “I’ve never run like that before... It feels like I aged a whole bunch of years all at once.”

“That Iarumas guy makes no sense to me, and the same kinda goes for Garbage too, y’know?” Raraja’s struggles were apparent from his tone, although it contained a sort of amusement as well.

“Um, how long has it been...?”

“Huh?”

“How long since you formed a party...or became an adventurer...? I...” *Have no idea.* The rest of the words were lost in Berkanan’s mumbling.

It was always like this. She didn’t know what was okay to say and soon regretted whatever came out of her mouth.

I bet I’m going to get yelled at again. Or driven away—what do I do if they kick me out?

Berkanan shut her eyes tight and hung her head.

Nothing happened. She waited in mute confusion.

“Hrm... I wonder... Not long, I think?” Raraja hadn’t changed his attitude toward her. He just seemed to be thinking. It looked like he also wasn’t all that bothered by her vague, irresolute manner of speaking. “To tell you the truth, well, I didn’t really understand what was going on when I first teamed up with them either.”

“You didn’t...?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t much different from you. Before I knew it, I’d been taken in by him—incorporated into the party, sort of.”

“Hmm...”

After that, Raraja awkwardly told her tales of his past adventures while scratching the end of his nose. Of course, he was probably trying to make them sound fun and exciting, unlike how things had actually been in reality. Nonetheless, she was surprised when he told her the story—one about how they’d suddenly been thrown into the depths of the dungeon, about how the three of them had ended up exploring together.

According to Raraja’s story, they’d even encountered a dragon...and defeated it. It’d been a green one, though.

When Berkanan murmured, “That’s amazing,” Raraja shook his head awkwardly.

But she really did think it was amazing. Heading into an unexplored region of the dungeon, charging into a hidden room... It was all so incredible.

But she didn't want to irritate him, so she just mentally whispered, *I really do think it's amazing, though*.

When Raraja recounted the bit about him being kicked by Garbage while opening a treasure chest, Berkanan couldn't stop herself from laughing out loud.

"Oh, um, sorry..." she blurted out, waving her hands frantically as she tried to defuse the situation.

"Nah, it's fine." Raraja forgave her, albeit with a scowl. Then, sighing, he glared up at her. Berkanan shuffled around nervously atop the pile of hay.

"You're kinda soft on that leftover monster snack...uh, I mean Garbage."

"You think so?"

"Normally, I'd expect you to be scared of her. I mean, she was chasing you around with a wooden sword, y'know?"

"Hrm..." Berkanan paused, thinking about it seriously—or at least, seriously as far as she was concerned. "Really?"

"*Really?*" repeated Raraja. "Oh, come on."

"I mean, she's not as scary as the red dragon."

"If that's your bar..."

"Besides, I didn't get a bad feeling from her."

Yeah. Berkanan nodded, her hair swinging vigorously. *I didn't sense anything nasty from her. It's not like she was thinking,* "I'm gonna bully her," *or something like that. I got the feeling that she was enjoying the chase...but that was, well, it was like she was playing around.* If the girl had enjoyed hurting her, Berkanan would likely have run away as soon as possible.

Yeah. That was the reason why she hadn't run away. They were going to ask her to pay them back for helping her. She didn't expect to get anything for free. But it didn't mean they'd demand anything more from her than that.

They weren't good or evil—in a way, that made things easier on Berkanan.

"Well, not that it's a problem or anything," said Raraja.

Berkanan's face collapsed into a goofy grin.

Raraja gave her a sideways glance, then sighed. "I'll give you this before I forget. Because I bet you're gonna get run ragged again tomorrow."

"Ah..." Berkanan blinked as she looked down at the thing he'd just tossed into her lap. It was familiar to her. A crude haversack—the one she'd carried with her when she'd first come to this town.

"You got lucky. It'd have been disposed of by tomorrow, I'm sure."

Berkanan let out a sigh. She stroked the bag softly so as not to make a sound. It was fortunate she'd left it at the inn. Even more fortunate it hadn't been stolen. That was probably only because it wasn't worth stealing...but it still made Berkanan happy.

Look at how much I still have left.

"If you get some sleep, your emotions should catch up with the rest of your body," Raraja told her. "Or so I hear."

"Yeah..." Was he showing concern? Worrying about her?

After he said that, the boy stood up. Berkanan followed him with her eyes as he left, and despite their drastic height difference, she had to look up.

"Thanks, um... Raraja...-kun?"

"Drop the -kun." Raraja replied, clicking his tongue. "I'm not a kid."

"Right... Sorry."

"And don't apologize so much."

Waving, he left the stables as silently as he'd arrived.

The wind was blowing outside. Nighttime wind, across a town that never slept. Berkanan took a deep breath of that night air. Her lungs felt strangely light inside her chest, so she said one last thing, not caring if anyone heard.

"I'm gonna do my best..."

Tomorrow—we go to the dungeon.

§

The town of Scale never slept.

Even with the red dragon casting a shadow over the chaos and depravity, the light had not faded. But did that mean there was no darkness in town? The answer was no.

In the depths of the labyrinthine alleyways, in the corner of a forgotten tavern, in the underground waterways, or perhaps in the dungeon—these places where the light could not reach would never vanish. Not as long as Scale remained a city.

A group of men, and perhaps women, were gathered in that darkness, in a murk that could have been anywhere. A group with matching cloaks, hoods drawn low over their eyes—surely, no one would be fool enough to pry into their identities.

Or, that *had* been the way things worked—in the outside world, at least.

“And? How are the preparations?”

“I suppose I should say they’re going well enough. For now.”

One stroked the amulet—no, the shard—that hung around their neck. A faint light, mysterious yet beautiful, shone in the darkness. Someone gulped audibly.

“The red dragon has somehow crawled to the upper layers. Word of it has already spread far and wide.”

“Intense indeed...is the power that resides in the amulets.”

“They’re precious items.”

With a gesture that suggested they feared it being stolen, the one who’d spoken hid the amulet inside their cloak again.

“And he let one slip away... Damn that Egam.”

“Enough. He’s already dead.”

“Even if he’d managed to come back alive, he wouldn’t have lived to see the next sunrise.”

Tomorrow, the same fate could befall any of them. Of course, they had chosen to live in the darkness, so it wasn’t as though they weren’t prepared for

that outcome.

So why had they studied so hard, mastering the ways of magic, working at their craft until they could wield black arts that defied human comprehension?

For the sake of their duty, they'd use all of the difficult training that had brought them to this point. They prided themselves on that. They had nothing to be ashamed of. And yet, and yet...

"Much as it galls me to admit... There are things we've learned thanks to his efforts."

"Hmm," responded one hoarse voice. "Do you mean the power of that bastard child?"

"It seems, as we suspected, that these adventurers are not normal."

The dungeon easily crushed everything underfoot. Yet, that doglike girl, with her lowborn blood, swinging around a broadsword, had bested him.

No, it hadn't just been that she-dog. It was those who'd gathered around her too—people of uncertain backgrounds, ruffians.

An insignificant brat. An inscrutable mage. And the free knight who was that mage's friend.

"Not that we ever underestimated it, but...the dungeon truly is terrifying."

Their adversaries were all born of the dungeon. Those who returned alive gained power equal to the heroes of legend—of myth, even. They gained power that those from the outside could never hope to match.

Surely it was not the act of a sane mind to venture into that demonic frontier, that den of evil, that accursed pit so eagerly.

"Thus, the fire dragon? The red dragon?"

"That's right."

But it was hard to imagine that even the heroes of legend could resist that red dragon. It was a monstrous incarnation of death itself, and not even an amulet could fully control it. They had hoped to pull it all the way to the surface, but surely, this was still a good-enough result.

“If that animal is killed by the dragon, then good. Because if not...”

“Then we’ll get no further without delving into the dungeon?”

“That’s right.”

No matter how this played out, it couldn’t harm them. It irritated them to have to resort to a plan like this, but they never hesitated to do it. Plots, ambushes, conspiracies, traps, assassinations... These were all common practices in war. Let those who called them underhanded or cowardly say what they pleased. The defeated might complain, but their words meant nothing.

“We’ll buy ourselves time and look for an opening. That thing is an animal. It cannot possibly have the intelligence to understand the moves we make.”

“However...”

“What?”

The one who’d objected did not immediately respond, seemingly afraid to put it into words. It was as if they thought that the idea, once spoken, might become reality.

“If that girl were to slay the red dragon...”

“She can’t possibly kill it,” came a groaning denial.

Or perhaps—

“She can’t...”

—the denial was a prayer.

Chapter 3: Dragon Slayer

Clink, clink.

A gold coin bounced along what looked to be a stone floor. The sound echoed along stone walls before being absorbed by the darkness of the dungeon.

Reeling in the coin he'd thrown out, Raraja moved another step forward. Beside him, Garbage opened her mouth wide and yawned. Berkanan held her staff and shield in hand—she followed the coin with her eyes.

Her gaze, attached to the coin, crawled along the floor and back to Raraja's hand, then traced an arc through the air...and back to the floor.

Clink.

"Erm... What are you doing?" Berkanan asked.

"Searching for traps," Raraja responded. He grabbed Garbage by the scruff of the neck, yanking her back as she attempted to take off running. The girl gave a confused yelp and was stopped in her tracks.

Indeed, the redheaded girl was prone to rush into burial chambers the moment the opportunity arose. How many times had it been now? Fortunately, at this point, they were still just moving along the corridor. Berkanan felt a constant tension nonetheless.

"Don't you have a map...?" she asked.

"Even with a map, you can still get lost. Or so I'm told."

The boy spoke these words resentfully. Berkanan tried to imagine why, and though she didn't quite understand, a shudder racked her body. *Why would something like that happen?* It was beyond her imagination. And perhaps beyond Raraja's too.

"If you don't know what lies ahead, you just gotta do everything you can..." The small boy glared into the darkness of the hallway, and Berkanan quietly looked down at him.

For some reason, she was glad he was a thief.

The outfit Berkanan currently wore beneath her breastplate had been sewn for her by her grandmother. It was one of the few changes of clothes she owned—fabric was expensive in her homeland—and it'd been in the bag the boy had brought her last night.

I'll follow Raraja-kun. Everything will work out if I do...

"Hmm..." That black-clad mage—Iarumas of the Black Rod—was standing in the back row, behind the three of them.

According to him, having three front-liners made things easy. Berkanan felt awfully anxious about being counted as one of those three. *Still, I'd feel wrong making someone else go ahead of me...*

Not that it had bothered her all that much before, during her first exploration of the dungeon with her original party. Back then, it had taken everything out of her just to fulfill her role as a mage—was that why she hadn't dwelled on the fact that others were in front, shielding her?

Berkanan pondered that, idly watching Raraja's hands. He dug through his pack to remove the map, then spread it out to check their current position and the corridors of the dungeon. He was apparently looking for discrepancies between the map and what he was seeing in front of his eyes.

Scout ahead, check the map, draw on the map. Maybe fight too, since he was on the front line.

Perhaps I should do the drawing? Berkanan wondered. *Ha ha.* It would've been nice if she could have said that, but considering that she fought using a staff, it'd be pretty difficult...

"Oh, right. I forgot."

"Whuh...?!"

When Iarumas suddenly spoke after being silent all this time, Berkanan nearly jumped out of her skin.

"Huh?" Raraja grunted suspiciously.

"No, it's nothing important. But..." Iarumas slowly shook his head.

As far as Berkanan could see, this man showed no signs of tension despite

being in the dungeon. It was like he was lounging around in his own home—that was the impression she got from him. The relaxed way he gestured down the hallway, indicating with his chin, was exactly like a person at ease.

“Is that okay?” Iarumas asked.

Raraja spat out an “Ugh!”

And by the time they both turned to look, it was already too late.

“Woof... Awooo!!!” Garbage kicked down the door to a burial chamber and rushed in, swinging her broadsword with glee as she disappeared from sight.

“That idiot!”

“Ah... Ah...!”

Raraja raced after the girl, and Berkanan belatedly followed the two of them. As did Iarumas, though his pace was much more measured.

The burial chamber they entered looked huge to Berkanan...and also empty. Stone walls and floor. The pale color of death. Dark blue gloom. She squinted. Sweat ran down her forehead. She blinked.

“Arf!”

Together with that sharp bark came the clear sound of metal colliding with metal, of sparks flying. In the flash of red light, she saw human figures. Leather armor...

“A-Adventurers...?!” Berkanan stammered.

“No!” Raraja shouted. “They’re not!!!”

“Eek...?!”

Berkanan probably would have gotten herself gutted if Raraja hadn’t shouted a warning.

A chipped, rusty longsword cut through the air, heading right for her. Though she wore a breastplate, her stomach remained unprotected. She screamed and jumped back—avoiding the blow and surprising even herself—but the fear of death ground down her spirit (hit points) massively.

“Wh-Why are...people here...?!”

“The hell if I know! But it’s happened before!”

“Yap!”

Holding his dagger in a backhand grip, Raraja parried the incoming blade. Garbage barked and let it rip with her broadsword.

Sounds of battle came from all directions. The world seemed to spin around Berkanan.

How many are there...?! She trembled, desperately digging her feet in as her legs threatened to collapse out from under her.

There was one foe she could at least see. It looked intimidated by her height yet had a vulgar smile plastered on its face. *She ain’t as tough as she looks. This’ll be easy,* it seemed to say. She gripped her staff, held up her shield.

“Uh, uh, uh... Ah...!”

So far, she’d spent a lot of time getting chased around, but she barely knew how to swing her weapon or defend herself.

What if it only looks human, but it’s a monster? If it’s a horrifically strong fighter, then I, I...

“They’re a variety of burglar. Nothing to be overly afraid of,” Iarumas said casually, as if he were just shooting the breeze. This effectively threw cold water on Berkanan’s train of thought.

His words were so calm and clear—they quelled the feverish frenzy she had been working herself into.

“Normally, they’d be deeper than this, skulking around. The fire dragon must have chased them out.”

“Grahhh...!” Perhaps out of indignation at this low estimation of its abilities, the burglar roared and pounced on Berkanan.

“Whah...?!”

She felt a powerful impact collide with her left arm. The round shield she’d held up in the heat of the moment had blocked the sword strike. As she stumbled backwards, Berkanan desperately held up her staff, arm trembling.

She was hesitant to point it at a person. *Is it really okay?* But, nonetheless...

This breastplate feels tight, and it's hard to focus!

This was all she had going for her.

"Hea lai—"

"No spells," came a flat voice from behind Berkanan. The words struck like a blow.

Shocked—and forgetting her current situation—she turned to look. Two piercing eyes stared at her from beneath his cloak.

"Using magic would defeat the purpose."

"No way?! Then what am I supposed to—whah?!"

Another impact. The shock of it shuddered through her round shield. Her left arm was now numb and stinging. She hadn't dropped the shield, but that was only because it was strapped to her arm with a leather band. Blow after blow, her arm numbed, her strength drained away, and she desperately tried to keep the shield from sagging any lower.

If it slits my belly I'm dead. This was about the only thought in Berkanan's head.

Her foe didn't let up. *Clang, clang.* The noise ground away at her nerves. She couldn't hear anything else around her or even tell what was going on. How was Raraja holding up? And Garbage?

Her ears were ringing. Her vision narrowed, almost like she was looking through a slit of a window.

"Ah, eek, eeeek! Uwah?! S-Stop it...?! Augh?!"

Even though her shield was taking the pounding, she felt so dizzy that she could've sworn it was her head getting bludgeoned. It wasn't like she was brandishing the shield or using it to defend herself—no, it was more like she was hiding behind it.

The thought of swinging her staff had completely slipped her mind. All she could do was shut her eyes tight. Try to endure.

So, of course she didn't notice.

"Whaaah?! Owww!!!" The gouging pain in her shin forced a scream of agony from Berkanan. She fell to the ground.

Had everything been leading up to this? Or was it just a coincidence? She didn't know.

In order to counter her height, the burglar had crouched down, attacking low.

"Whah, ahhh?! Ow...! It hurts...?!" Unable to withstand the pain, Berkanan grasped her leg and thrashed around. Blood oozed from between her fingers.

Am I...dying?! Berkanan looked at Iarumas, her vision bleary. She wanted him to help. Her gaze locked upon his cold eyes.

Iarumas stood with his arms crossed, saying nothing—he wasn't going to do anything for her.

The next instant, Berkanan's vision was stained with a red splash.

"Woof!!!"

The swing of a broadsword split the burglar's head clean in half, like nothing more than a piece of firewood.

Showered with blood and gray matter, still writhing in pain, Berkanan looked up, dazed, in the direction of the clash.

It was the redheaded girl. She used her cloak to wipe the blood caked on her forehead, then shouldered her broadsword. Those clear, blue eyes—like two bottomless lakes—stared back at Berkanan. There was an odd overlap between the sparkle in them and the raging flames in the eyes of the fire dragon.

Berkanan could only assume what Garbage might be saying.

"*Is she gonna be okay?*"

§

Looking purely at the results, Berkanan had actually managed to serve her role. She'd drawn the enemy to her, had defended against their attacks, and had endured without allowing them to break through to the back row. And while Raraja and Berkanan had received enemy attacks, Garbage had been free

to run around swinging her broadsword.

The battle was over before Berkanan really registered it.

“I knew having three people in the front row would make things easy,” Iarumas said with satisfaction. He applied a painkiller to the sobbing girl’s ankle and wrapped it with a bandage.

The way he acted felt totally mechanical.

Once the assault had concluded, he’d immediately pulled a small bottle from his pack, pouring the contents out around them to form a circle. From what Berkanan could tell just by looking (and wetly sniffling), the circle served some sort of magical function.

“A...barrier?”

“That’s right.”

There you have it.

Meanwhile, Raraja, whom Berkanan searched for with pleading eyes, had his back turned in the opposite direction as he fiddled with the treasure chest. From this angle, she had no idea what kind of expression he wore.

Garbage was next to him, her broadsword resting on her shoulder, one foot on the treasure chest. She looked somewhat proud—she must have tried kicking the chest before Raraja had even been able to attempt to open it.

The look in her eyes was unchanged from earlier. Had her gaze held such intensity this whole time? Since they were on the surface? Or perhaps even earlier?

I hope...I didn’t let them down... Berkanan thought absently.

Whether exploring or in battle, the other three all seemed so experienced. It was like they each knew their role, knew what to do (even if Iarumas hadn’t *done* anything). Berkanan, on the other hand, had gotten so flustered that she’d been unable to do a thing.

Regret, a sense of pathetic impotence, unease, pain in her leg, fear—all sorts of feelings raced round and round inside her head.

That's why she didn't notice when Iarumas moved away from her, or when Garbage trotted over to her side.

Looking up vacantly at the familiar "woof," Berkanan saw the girl holding out her palm to Iarumas. He said nothing, just simply dug through his bag to fish out a piece of dried meat. He gave it to Garbage.

Berkanan watched this exchange in a daze. Then, with tottering steps, the dried meat was brought closer to her.

Right before her eyes, Garbage tore the meat into two pieces, and half of it—

"Yap."

"Erm..."

"Yap!"

—was forcefully thrust toward her. It wasn't so much offered as it was pressed against her forehead.

Berkanan looked around, confused, then hesitantly reached for the dried meat. "Um, er, uh..." She broke into a silly grin. "Thanks...?"

"Arf."

Garbage nodded as if to say, "*That'll do,"* before plopping herself down next to Berkanan. From there, she began noisily tearing into her own piece of jerky. Berkanan watched for a while, then resolved to do the same.

It was awfully salty.

"But what're we gonna do?"

"About what?"

Raraja had asked the initial question as he fiddled around, attempting to unseal the treasure chest. He didn't look this way, and Iarumas, who'd responded, wasn't looking at Raraja either.

"The dragon." Berkanan shuddered at the boy's mention of it. "We've gotta do something about it, right?"

"What do you mean by *something*?"

“I’m asking if you know some way of getting past it.”

“Oh...” Iarumas murmured. It was as if he’d expected something more. “That’s all?”

That’s all?!

Berkanan’s eyes bugged out, dried meat still in her mouth. She stared at Iarumas in shock.

That’s. All. He made it sound so easy. As if it were truly nothing to worry about. This black-clad mage seemed to be suggesting that he could do something about the dragon.

Without realizing it, Berkanan swallowed. A salty taste slid down her throat into her stomach.

“We’ll pray.”

“Huh...?”

Was that confused exhalation Raraja’s...or Berkanan’s? Garbage didn’t care.

“We simply pray. That we don’t encounter it. And that we can escape if we do. Then, we move forward.”

That’s all there is to it. Iarumas said this simply before going very quiet. In response to a “woof” from Garbage, he tossed her a sealed waterskin. His mouth remained shut—not another word was uttered.

The redheaded girl caught it with both hands and poured the contents into her mouth, gulping without reservation. Then, wiping her mouth with her sleeve, she let out a single, “Yap!”

“Erm...”

Slosh. A waterskin now hung in front of Berkanan’s eyes. She timidly accepted it. Garbage gave an exasperated, “Arf.”

As Berkanan stared at the uncorked waterskin, she hesitated for a moment...even though there was no need to hold back.

Gingerly, she raised the vessel to her lips, drinking with small sips.

It tastes good.

“Whew...” Raraja let out a sigh of relief. “Got it open!”

“Woof!”

Garbage raced over and immediately kicked the treasure chest. The lid fell open with a clunk, and Raraja exclaimed, “Oh, come on! What’s wrong with you?!”

As for Berkanan...all she did was watch. Her heavy emotions had, at some point, lightened somewhat.

The problem was...

I don’t know if my prayer will do any good.

§

Pray she did, but alas, it went unanswered.

“Huh... There was no sword this time?” asked Berkanan.

“All that work and we just get one piddling ring?!”

The party advanced through the dungeon with Raraja, who was playing with the golden ring, taking the lead. They didn’t smell a whiff of sulfur.

On the seemingly endless path to the stairs down, they were only impeded by the guardians of the burial chambers. With the exception of those initial burglars, Garbage basically mowed them all down with a single blow.

This was fortunate for Berkanan, who was now walking like a decrepit old man.

“I think a ring’s pretty amazing...” A topic Berkanan understood had finally come up, so she’d naturally become a lot more talkative.

“Huh?” Raraja turned to look at her. That’s when she finally realized what she was doing—she shut her mouth. She didn’t want to blurt out something stupid and be branded as the girl who said stuff she shouldn’t.

“Y’know,” Raraja said, “now that you mention it, I think I heard something like that before. From Moradin...-san.”

That name was unfamiliar to Berkanan. Of course, this came as no surprise—there were only a few names she *did* know. As such, the boy’s comment didn’t

elicit any shock on its own.

"So, what's so amazing about it?"

"Huh?"

"The ring."

"Oh, uh, right." Berkanan was surprised that he was asking her.

Is it okay to tell him? She glanced to their rear. Iarumas was as inscrutable as ever. Garbage trotted along, always moving forward, showing no sign that she was afraid of the darkness.

Well then...

Slowly, Berkanan opened her mouth. "Some are cursed, while others are imbued with magic, allowing you to cast spells..."

"Even if you're not a mage?"

"Y-Yeah. That's right..."

"Like *that* ring, huh?" Raraja murmured. Seeing the question mark over Berkanan's head, he lowered his voice. "*He's* got one. A Ring of Jewels... It lets you know where you are, he says."

"Wow, that's amazing...!" Berkanan exclaimed, then—*oops*—she covered her mouth in a hurry. A Ring of Jewels was a *real* magic item, after all. She'd always known there'd be stuff like that in the dungeon.

Then the Dragon Slayer...

It might exist too. A *genuine* magic sword. The Dragon Slayer...

Not that Berkanan could imagine herself being able to kill a dragon with it.

"So, y'think this ring has that kind of power?"

"Who can say, really?" Berkanan smiled vaguely. To her, it just looked like a gold ring. In the gloom of the dungeon, under the faint light, the design carved into the metal seemed to waver. Were the shadows doing that? It depicted a muscular man. No—those were tusks. That meant the figure was...

A troll, maybe?

“Will you hold on to it?” asked Raraja.

“Huh?”

“The ring, duh.”

“Oh, um, err... Are you positive it’s okay for *me* to carry it?” *Why wouldn’t it be?* She wasn’t sure what she was doubting.

As she was hesitating, Raraja tossed the little gold band in her direction. Flustered, she rushed to catch it with both hands.

“I’ve gotta use my fingers, so I can’t be wearing rings.” The boy flexed his fingers as he gave her what sounded like nothing more than an excuse.

Berkanan desperately searched for the words to give him a considerate response. Her tongue moved into action.

“Uh... Sure.”

In the end, that was all she ended up mumbling as she held the ring tight in her hands. When she pushed it onto her index finger, the ring slid smoothly into place.

Am I not being cautious enough? she thought...but only *after* it was already on her.

“If you feel it sucking the life out of you, we’ve hit the jackpot,” Iarumas muttered. Her eyes bulged as she turned and saw a dark smile beneath his cloak. “Rings of Death sell for a high price.”

“Ah, ha, ha ha...”

Was that a joke? Berkanan decided it was best to just give him a placid smile and leave it at that.

Suddenly, Raraja came to a stop. Garbage let out an “arf.”

In front of the party, there was a large hole in the ground.

And the next floor of the dungeon...was right before their eyes.

§

The labyrinth looked more or less the same everywhere, but it felt as though

something in the air had shifted. After trudging down the stairs—or what looked like stairs—Berkanan shivered. She felt a chilly presence. Looking around fearfully didn't tell her anything, and she clutched her staff tightly in both hands.

"What do you think is going to come out...?"

"I dunno."

A murmured question. A whispered response. Berkanan hadn't been counting on an answer, so she was happy that anyone had responded at all.

Raraja was right next to her, with Garbage on the opposite side, scrunching up her nose. If there was anything scary here, Berkanan had no doubt that the redheaded girl would pounce on it in an instant.

Berkanan couldn't quite identify this feeling in her chest, but it sure felt like something close to relief.

"Iarumas...do you know anything?"

"I may have once. But I don't remember."

An insolent response. Berkanan's shoulders slumped. Still, glancing at Iarumas's face, she could tell that he'd been entirely serious.

"Besides," the man continued, "we really shouldn't rely on that in the current situation. Things aren't exactly normal right now."

"I'm having a hard time imagining the dungeon ever being *normal*," Raraja said bitterly.

"You can say that again."

Ha ha. They all laughed casually. Iarumas kicked the floor with a booted foot.

"But there's some sort of law. I believe in it. That's how things are."

"'Pray,' huh?"

"Yeah."

In response to Iarumas, Raraja tossed the coin once more, an air of resignation about him. He threw it—and that was all. No sound followed.

Silence.

Raraja crouched down. Garbage lowered her posture too, growling.

“Huh? Ah...?!” Reacting late, Berkanan slowly lifted her staff and shield.

If there was no sound...

Then something’s there!

Well, possibly.

Holding his dagger in a backhand grip, Raraja gave the fishing line attached to the coin a slight tug. It stretched taut.

“Is something holding it?” Berkanan whispered. “Or is it just caught on—”

“Looks like it’s neither.”

“Grrrrr!!!”

Garbage gnashed her teeth, spittle flying. She held her broadsword over her shoulder, winding back as far as she could.

Something’s...there...?

Even though she was afraid, Berkanan desperately squinted into the deep darkness. She couldn’t see it. Instead, there was a rustling of some sort—a grating, unpleasant noise.

“Ahh,” Iarumas murmured. “I get it. This is one of *their* nests, huh?”

Who are they*?*

Before she could voice the question, the answer came pouring out of the darkness toward them.

A giant swarm of al-ankabut—spiders.

“Wha...? Ahhhh...?!”

I think the biggest difference between people and spiders is that spiders aren’t people.

That thought floated unbidden, somewhere deep in the recesses of Berkanan’s mind—the more active part of her was focused on wildly swinging her staff.

With clicking jaws and eight writhing hairy legs, the monsters scuttled toward them—spiders, spiders, spiders.

“Wahhh!!! Wahhhhhh?!?!?!”

Half in a state of terror, Berkanan struck out with her staff. Left, then right. A leg was cracked in half; an eight-eyed carapace, smashed. The juices of gore drenched her, and she screamed pitifully all the while.

Her hatred of them hadn’t faded. Berkanan was like a big lump of arachnophobia, and all she could do was keep on swinging.

“Damn it!” Raraja cursed. “There’s always so many of them!”

“Rrrruff!”

Raraja was right next to Berkanan, swinging his dagger, and the familiar howl of Garbage’s broadsword sliced through the air. The redheaded girl had jumped right into the center of the swarm, swinging so wildly that whatever she hit was a matter of luck.

Or maybe it was better to say that she was dancing with her sword.

She surged, throwing the full weight and speed of the massive blade into her attacks, then used the recoil to spin and give the sword momentum. Doing this over and over, she appeared to dance as she fought, jumping and twirling around.

Berkanan had never heard of a style like this existing in the west. She certainly hadn’t seen anything like it in her homeland to the east. It wouldn’t be until later that she’d be able to analyze it and come to a realization—*Garbage must have been self-taught.*

At the moment, Berkanan was just desperate to survive, to keep the spiders away, to crush them.

“Is your leg all right...?!” Raraja called out to her.

“I-I-I...!” Berkanan’s voice cracked. “I don’t knooow!!!” she cried, swinging her staff with reckless abandon.

It was true—she didn’t know what was going on with her leg. It felt hot...or something. She couldn’t sense anything else.

Seeing this, Raraja clicked his tongue. Then, looking over to Garbage, who was going wild with an enthusiastic “Arf!” he clicked it again.

“Hey, Iarumas?! What’re we gonna do about this?!”

“They attacked us before we entered the burial chamber. These are wandering monsters. If they have anything on them, it will just be gold.”

“That’s not what I was asking!”

“We’ll strike the source. Press forward, into the burial chamber.”

“The source?!”

“Take out the giant one.”

“These ones look huge enough to me already...!” Berkanan protested weakly.

“No, we’re not after one of the huge ones. It’s *giant*,” Iarumas said in a grandiose manner. He crouched, taking hold of the black rod. “I’ll handle the boss. You follow Garbage. Her instincts are good.”

“Ah, damn it!” Raraja groaned. “If these things are crawling all over, then I guess there aren’t any traps here!”

He looked at Berkanan as if to say, *Let’s go.* She nodded, then lurched forward, feet almost tripping beneath her.

“Woof! Groooooowl!!!”

Raraja and Berkanan were guided by the howling they heard up ahead and the scattered remains of spiders. She followed behind the boy with firm steps, so her sandals wouldn’t get caught in the bugs’ sticky fluids.

“Damn it, Garbage! You leftover monster snack! We can’t keep up like this! Give us a break!”

“Yap!”

I guess that means “Hurry up!” maybe? That last bark had sounded a bit different from her usual battle cries. Berkanan smiled just a little.

“Is that guy, Iarumas, going to be okay...?” she asked between panting breaths.

“Knowing him, he’ll be just fine!” Raraja laughed. Then, as if spitting a curse at the man, he added, “Probably!”

§

I knew having three people in the front row would make things easy.

Iarumas smiled faintly. He sensed countless spiders pressing toward him from behind.

Honestly, unless someone had a good reason to do so, adventuring solo was for fools. Gathering a party had changed what he was capable of. It’d given him the leeway to do more. He would’ve loved to have gotten together a party of six, but for now, four would do.

Even though he traversed the dungeon like he was out for a stroll, Iarumas still maintained his sense of tension. Even he never knew what might happen where, or how it might kill him.

Preparation and vigilance—training and equipment. If having all of these things could ensure his safety and security, this wouldn’t be a dungeon.

Indeed—in the dungeon, things like this could happen. A nest of spiders. Some floors had large numbers of them skittering around, but never this many.

It brought a smile to Iarumas’s face. How *intriguing.*

Nonetheless...

The beasts currently gnashing their fangs as they came for him were huge spiders. It wouldn’t be terribly amusing to let himself get worn down taking on such lesser foes. He felt no aversion to death, but there was probably a time and a place for him to die.

Consulting the spellbook inside his head, he decided that it would be fine to simply put them to sleep with KATINO...but were spiders susceptible? If he wanted to play it safe, enveloping them in darkness with DILTO was another option, but it wouldn’t hurt him to act like a *mage* once in a while.

Screech—Iarumas’s boot scraped against the ground. He turned to face the arachnids, his cloak flapping as he did. There really were scads of them. At a time like this, there were one or two spells he ought to choose.

Iarumas formed the signs with one hand. True words flowed from his slightly open mouth. Behind him, he sensed Berkanan turning to look. Whorling magical power—a slightly chill air. No spell was better than any other, but Iarumas liked this one because it took only two true words to cast.

It was a spell sadly forgotten now, though its meaning was simple and clear.

"Daruarifla tazanme (*O storm of ice*)!!!"

The very next moment, the lethal blizzard of DALTO blew through the dungeon's halls. It was a great magical spell of the fourth level. Surely, there could be no one in the outside world who spoke of it anymore.

The icy hell Iarumas called forth swallowed up the spiders in an instant.

It wasn't just freezing cold air—the raging wind was laden with shearing ice and snow that tore their exoskeletons apart.

As the surviving monsters skittered away, Iarumas began to run.

"MAKANITO would have been a bit much..."

Indeed it would have. If just firing off powerful spells one after another was all it took, this wouldn't be the dungeon. Yes. That was why he—why they—why adventurers—delved into this place. A belief that they could kill the great wizard who possessed the amulet...

Wasn't that it?

§

"Wooooooof!!!"

Garbage cheerfully kicked in the cobweb-covered door. Raraja and Berkanan followed behind her.

"Ugh, what is the matter with her?" Raraja grumbled. Berkanan just offered a mild smile.

It wasn't that she'd gotten used to it. Just...well, being showered with spider juices had numbed her to all sorts of things.

I went through something like this not all that long ago, didn't I...?

Thinking back, it might've been thanks to that giant frog's soggy saliva that

there'd been any bit of her charred remains left behind. Though, Berkanan wasn't quite gritty enough to simply be *happy* about that fact.

That was incredible...

She didn't know what spell he'd used, but after seeing the blizzard Iarumas unleashed, she could understand why the "ultimate" spell her grandmother had taught her was treated as just a "little fire." Though Berkanan's HALITO was advanced magic in the outside world, even the mightiest expression of that power was only a basic, first-level spell in the dungeon.

Would she also be able to use a spell like Iarumas's one day? Could she learn to be a mage like him?

Berkanan couldn't even imagine it.

"Arf."

"She says it's the giant spider," Raraja translated.

"I'm not seeing it... Do you think it's in here...?"

Berkanan slowly, slowly walked through the burial chamber, Raraja stayed by her side, matching her pace. Being cautious of the unseen threat, or perhaps just tired, Garbage had also slowed to a walk and was sniffing around.

The three naturally assumed a circle formation—although it was too sloppy to truly be calledt that—looking in three separate directions as they advanced.

Berkanan felt reassured to have someone else at her back. Something lurking in the darkness of the chamber felt bizarrely oppressive, but it was an incredibly subtle sensation.

Someone let out a surprised grunt. Who? Not Berkanan. She hadn't made so much as a peep. Her eyes focused on the head of a spider far more enormous than any they'd faced so far. Its eight eyes—which would have once glared ferociously at them—were clouded, and its fangs would move no more.

Everything below the head...was gone.

It was dead. Plainly dead. Yet, atop its corpse, there loomed something else.

"Ah, go figure," Iarumas muttered as he finally strolled into the burial

chamber. “This is why you can’t get by with MAKANITO alone.”

Standing more than ten feet tall, it was—

Garbage bared her teeth. “Hissssssss!!!”

—a giant mantis.

§

“Eek?!”

This was the first time Berkanan had ever seen Garbage yelp and jump away like that.

A sharp sound. Something sliced through the air. Garbage dodged the scythe on the mantis’s raptorial foreleg just in the nick of time. Only strands of red hair danced in the air where she’d stood a beat before. Having gained some distance, Garbage shouldered her broadsword.

“Grrrrr!”

Wow. Berkanan blinked at the way Garbage could act surprised yet not afraid in the slightest.

“Don’t stop! Keep moving! You’re going to die!” Raraja shouted. He was already running across the center of the chamber.

“Oh, r-right...!” Berkanan belatedly launched into action.

Garbage is in front. Raraja’s circling around to its right. So I should go...left?

“Give it all you’ve got,” instructed Iarumas. “Sleep, blizzard, and death spells are all ineffective against the giant mantis.”

The man in black stood in the rear as if to block the door. Carefully, he surveyed the battlefield.

Raraja, on the other hand, darted around like a bolt of lightning as he tried to avoid the gaze of the mantis’s bulging eyes. “What’re we gonna do?!” he cried.

“I wonder that myself.” Iarumas was smiling. “But if we can’t beat this creature, then we stand no chance against the fire dragon.”

Yeah, we know that! But still...!

As far as Berkanan was concerned, both the dragon and this giant mantis were monsters far beyond her level.

“Hea lai—augh...?!” Even as she attempted to cast the spell that Iarumas had previously forbidden, her incantation was cut short.

The mantis kicked her aside—a mere nuisance.

Berkanan groaned as the air was blasted from her lungs. She was sent bouncing away, rolling like a toy ball. Were it not for the breastplate she was wearing, her ribs would have surely been crushed.

“You okay...?!” Raraja shouted.

“Au...u...u...ugh...!”

Berkanan couldn’t speak. Yet, she slowly sat, then stood, using her staff for support. Honestly, what she really wanted was to stay down. To just curl into a ball, ignoring everything. But that way led only to death. And it was one she was unlikely to return from again.

Once he saw that Berkanan had risen despite her sobbing, Raraja said no more. He had important work of his own to do—drawing attention away from Garbage.

“Yooow!” Garbage yelped.

The bug’s eye turned from Berkanan—at least she’d been of *some* use—to glare at Raraja on its other side. That was the moment when Garbage sprang, swinging her broadsword horizontally, lurching into a wide spin that sought to cleave through the insect.

“Woof?!”

However, the giant mantis leaped, spreading its wings, and it flew up into the void.

Berkanan glared resentfully upward as she wheezed. “Why...is this chamber...so biiiiiiig?!”

On the opposite side of the mantis, Raraja was probably thinking something similar. He switched to a parrying stance with his dagger. Garbage was probably seeking another opening, looking to charge again and slam the creature with

her broadsword.

What should I do? What can *I do? What? I... I...*

“In that case,” murmured the mage of the black rod, who had been watching this scene unfold, “I’ll use this.”

As he formed signs with one hand, Berkanan felt magical energy swirling around the chamber. He spoke words of power, true words.

“Mimuzanmere laiseen (*O fear, come.*)...!”

MORLIS. The fear spell. Berkanan had heard of it. *Is it also weak by dungeon standards? Or am I misunderstanding something?*

Despite her doubts, the effect was instantaneous. What did the mantis see? What did it fear, if anything? That was not for others to know. However, this green monster, this shadow that could cut down anything, spread its wings and raised its sickles in a stance of intimidation. It was a behavior performed to drive off enemies. To look more powerful than it really was.

Here, it served no purpose whatsoever.

“Groooowl!”

Garbage was not one to miss such an opening.

“Just kill it already!”

In order to support her as she sprang, Raraja immediately started running over from the side, his dagger held ready.

“Ah...! Wahhhhhhh!!!”

Belatedly, Berkanan raised her staff and desperately rushed to stand in front of the creature too. She swung the staff around in one hand. Though, since she’d never learned to fight, it was like watching a child flail around with a scrap of wood.

However, Iarumas had said: *“That’s good enough.”*

Here in the dungeon, the hero from a foreign land and the young boy from the village were equal—the weakest of the weak. One could only learn to fight the dungeon’s monsters here, in the dungeon. Everyone had their strengths and

weaknesses, of course...and Berkanan didn't think she was suited for this.

"Wahhh...! Wahhhhhh!!!"

However, even if she was crying and afraid... As long as she kept on flailing away with her staff, she could at least draw its attention.

A shriek tore from Berkanan's throat as she held up her shield to protect herself from an incoming scythe; another of the mantis's legs swept beneath her, knocking her to the ground. Despite all of this, Berkanan kept telling herself, *I've gotta do something.* She forgot her leg injury. She forgot everything else. She just yelled.

If this is all I can do...then this is what I should *do,* she thought.

In the end, Berkanan wasn't sure what she managed to accomplish, or how much help she really was. All she knew was one thing.

"Woof!"

While Berkanan was swinging away with reckless abandon...

Garbage's blade broke the beast's neck.

§

"Arf!"

"I told you not to kick it, didn't I?! What if my hand slips and we both get blown away?!"

Garbage gave it another good hard kick and puffed out her meager chest. Raraja just got mad at her.

I've seen this before, Berkanan thought, smiling faintly. *It's just how they are.*

Once the battle ended, only routine work was left. They all knew what to do—set up the barrier, watch the surrounding area, and unseal the chest. The thief fought a lonely battle with the entire party's lives on the line. This was why they didn't alter their routine. Because they shouldn't—probably.

Berkanan tried to justify it that way, but did kicking the treasure chest have to be part of it?

Maybe Garbage...-chan just wants to boast a little? But when Berkanan

thought a bit more, it seemed unlikely that the girl had put any deep thought into it. *"I won. I found it. How do you like that?"* This was probably all there was to Garbage's sentiment.

As Berkanan contemplated, her gaze crossed with the girl's clear, blue eyes. Berkanan flinched and shuddered.

"Ahem!"

Garbage stared at Berkanan as she gave the chest a firm kick. It was as if she was saying, *"How's that? I'm gonna do it. See?"*

"I've told you not to do that!" Raraja yelled.

Berkanan just smiled vaguely, of course. *I may've been thinking about a lot of things too deeply for no good reason.*

No one else seemed to care all that much. But at the same time, they cared more about *her* than she would've ever thought.

Oh, so that's it.

Maybe she'd just been spinning around in circles. The tension melted out of her shoulders. But the moment it did, the throbbing pain in her leg flared back up. Her face twisted into a grimace. The warm feelings that had lit up the inside of her chest went cold in no time, and she hung her head dejectedly once more.

"That's just how it goes."

Iarumas stood beside Berkanan. He'd finished his task of drawing a barrier on the floor of the burial chamber.

She looked up but couldn't see his face. That was probably how other people usually saw her.

But then, Iarumas effortlessly crouched down next to her. Their eyes met—and of course, he had a seemingly coldhearted smile on that inscrutable face of his.

"There's little a fledgling fighter—or adventurer—can do, and no one expects all that much of them."

"That goes for everyone...and not just me?"

“That’s right.” He nodded. “No matter who you are, when you first start delving into the dungeon, this is just how it goes.”

“Oh, I see.”

“But if you survive, that’s another matter.”

Iarumas said this definitively. Berkanan remained silent, following his gaze—to the boy who was investigating the chest and the girl running around in circles beside him.

“Survive once, and you’ll get stronger. And the same goes for the next time, and the time after that too. If you keep on repeating the process, people will come to expect something from you.”

“Even from me...?”

“Most likely.”

You’re not going to say that definitively, huh? Berkanan didn’t voice the complaint, just pursed her lips slightly.

“Really, it’s fine to whine about how you can’t do this or that. Just as long as you don’t give up.” That was something to be proud of, said Iarumas, mage of the black rod, an adventurer who’d come before her. Then, in the very same breath, he called out to Raraja. “If you can’t open it, then give up. It’s dangerous.”

“Oh, shove off! I’ll get it open!”

Berkanan couldn’t help but laugh at that exchange. Just a chuckle... Just the slightest hint of mirth. When was the last time she’d laughed out loud? She couldn’t remember.

“Do you think it would be all right if I took a look?”

“Sure.” Iarumas nodded. “Do as you please.”

“Okay.” Berkanan got to her feet. “I’ll do that.”

Now that she was standing, her leg twinged. Trudging forward with clumsy steps, and taking care not to break the circle of holy water, she moved to the treasure chest.

Raraja turned one eye up toward her. “You can rest.”

“I’m fine,” Berkanan insisted stubbornly. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, she asked, “Do you think you can open it?”

“I’ll manage,” Raraja replied briefly, immediately looking back at the chest.

Berkanan watched him, but she couldn’t figure out exactly what it was he was doing. She crouched down, resting her elbows on her knees, and took a closer look at Raraja’s hands. He was inserting a number of narrow probes, thin knifelike files, and hooked rods into the keyhole, then moving them around.

She obviously understood that his goal was to disable the trap, open the lock, and unseal the chest. But as for how he was going to do it—Berkanan hadn’t the foggiest idea.

Eventually, there was a loud click. The lock came undone.

“It’s like magic...” she remarked.

“*You’re* gonna say that?”

“I mean, *I* couldn’t do it with magic.”

Raraja scowled. “Oh, yeah?” came his short reply. Then, as he placed his hands on the chest lid...

“Yap!”

“I knew you were gonna do it!”

Garbage came in from the side with a kick—the lid thunked heavily as it hit the ground. The redheaded girl ignored Raraja’s protests as she peered inside, nodding to herself. Then, apparently having lost interest, she trotted off somewhere—to Iarumas’s side.

As far as she was concerned, all that mattered was killing the monsters, opening the treasure chest, and getting the stuff inside. She probably didn’t care all that much about what that stuff actually was.

“We need to get her properly trained... Damn it!”

“You two sure get along well, huh?” asked Berkanan.

“I dunno about that. I can never tell what she thinks of me.”

She probably thought he was the omega dog of this pack. Well, that's what Raraja said, but Berkanan thought that role was likely reserved for her. Strangely, the thought of it briefly swelled her heart.

"Now, as for what's inside," Raraja began. "It's—"

"A sword?" asked Berkanan.

"You need to question that part?"

"Well, hey... I don't know, do I?"

She pursed her lips. The chest contained more gold than Berkanan had ever seen, along with a single sword. It was old, dusty, and faded. Here in the darkness of the dungeon, it was impossible to make out any of its details. No—perhaps it was obscured by the magical power that filled the dungeon, or the miasma. They could all tell it was a sword...but could perceive no more than that.

"Well, do you think this is it?" she asked hesitantly.

"Dunno. We'll have to take it back to town." Raraja casually picked up the sword and rested it against his shoulder like Garbage often did. He then nimbly got to his feet, turning to look at one corner of the burial chamber. "Now what, Iarumas?!"

"Let's see..." Iarumas mussed the red hair of the girl in front of him as if she were a dog. Ignoring her "woof!" of protest, he rose to his feet, slowly, as if he were some sort of specter. "I've used spells. Berkanan's exhausted. We were also able to take down a large enemy. We have something to show for it." He crossed his arms, thinking for a while before asking, "How about the map?"

"Done," Raraja said, digging it out of his pack. He then corrected himself, saying, "I mean, I'll do it now."

"Good."

That left only one conclusion.

"We're going home."

Berkanan could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

§

“Dammit!”

An adventurer cursed loudly inside Durga’s Tavern. There was nothing particularly unusual about that. Adventurers who’d lost companions—adventurers whose exploration wasn’t going well—adventurers who’d failed to resurrect someone. There were more of them than you could shake a stick at.

This adventurer, who had just violently slammed his mug down on the round table where he was sitting, was one such individual.

He was a fighter. As for what he’d been doing prior to coming to Scale, that tale was not particularly worth telling. Whether he was the hero of his village or just another hotheaded youth—it made little difference.

That said, we should probably speak of what he’d done since coming to Scale. He’d gathered companions, delved into the dungeon, fought repeatedly, gained treasures, and still, he moved forward. He’d kept pushing through the dungeon without ever hitting a dead end—and this was where it had brought him.

Nothing had been going well ever since his comrade Rodan had died. Had been reduced to ash on the altar. Raising more money for another attempt at resurrection had proved exceedingly difficult, and then...Rodan’s soul had dissipated, gone forever.

His friend was now one of the lost. Never to be brought back. There was no meaning to him living anymore.

He’d done some reckless things to get the money, like going around massacring monsters at random, hoping for a lucky break. It’d all been in vain.

“Damn the temple and their hypocritical cant...!” He beat his fist against the table as he shouted.

Before the table had received his ire, he’d taken it out on his party. Screaming. Shouting. Raising a ruckus. His companions had accepted it at first—but they, of course, had their limits.

Soon, one had dropped out of the party, then a second, and a third. They’d lamented the change in him—had said he was a different person after. They’d

chastised and mocked him. Then, they had left.

The fighter had needed to supplement the people who'd left the group. But the new members had been low-skilled. His party... He'd once felt proud that they'd been second only to the All-Stars.

But there was no trace of that now.

Exploration of the dungeon had progressed far past him—his days now began and ended with lurking the shallow floors to earn money. Even so, the thief had stuck with him to the very end. But that was over now too.

That red dragon!

His party had been wiped out.

What the hell was it doing up on the first floor? He could curse it all he liked, but it was too late now. With a blast of its fiery breath, all but the most capable adventurers were easily reduced to burnt corpses.

He'd practically fallen over himself trying to get away, carrying the dead bodies as he'd fled, then racing through the wasteland training grounds and to the temple.

"Screw all those guys!"

That was the end of it. Without the motivation to raise the funds for resurrections, the others had drifted away to join different parties. And now, he was the only one left. He rudely called over one of the serving girls. Had her bring him a beer.

Fortunately, he did have *some* money. Just not enough to pay the tithe to Kadorto.

And not enough that he could throw his weight around in Scale...

"You seem to be drinking an awful lot."

"Huh?!"

The voice was like magic—it seemed to slip into his ears from some point right beside him. He looked up with a start, searching left and right with his alcohol-blurred vision. In the dungeon, he would've been a dead man, but...

“Oh, when you’re young, I’m sure there are times when you want to drown your sorrows in drink. I know I did.”

The man—was it a man?—was now sitting beside him, wearing a cloak. It wasn’t anyone he knew.

A mage? Probably. Yeah. Has to be. Either that, or a priest...

“What, you inviting me to join a party? Hit up someone else.”

“No, no. I couldn’t venture into the dungeon. Not with these old bones of mine. Perish the thought...” The cloaked man waved his hand with forbearance, seemingly unoffended by the brusque refusal. He then pushed a dish—still steaming, so he must have just ordered it—toward the fighter.

The fighter eyed the mage with suspicion. *Go ahead, go ahead,* the cloaked man urged him.

“Drink on its own isn’t good for the stomach. Take this as a token of our acquaintanceship. Please.”

“You’re creeping me out,” the fighter said guardedly. “What’s your scheme here?”

“No scheme. Although, you aren’t wrong in thinking that I am here to invite you to something.”

“What?”

“Your path is outside the dungeon. Wouldn’t you agree?”

It was like a spell. Those words sunk fangs into the fighter’s heart, gouging deep into his chest.

It’s not like I haven’t *ever thought that...*

No matter how things may have been once upon a time, he was a different man now. If he left the dungeon, all the fame and recognition he could ever want were his for the taking.

He already had money. An incredible fortune. He only remained an obscure figure because he was here in Scale, where the dungeon was. If he slipped out of town, he’d have it easy.

Yet, to do that...

“But—”

“There is more than one path. Especially when you aren’t turning back, but moving forward.”

Without another word, the fighter tipped back his drink, draining the hot liquid down to the last drop. His stomach was on fire. He used his arm to wipe away the flecks that remained dripping around his mouth.

“What is it you want me to do?”

The mage spoke. An amulet swayed at his chest.

“There is someone I would like you to kill.”

Chapter 4: Adventurer's Inn

"This is almost certainly a Dragon Slayer."

"I...did iiiit!"

Berkanan's voice trembled. She rose so forcefully that the table jolted, but High Priest Tuck just gave a gruff smile and held it down with the palm of his rough-hewn hand.

Cheering joyously after finding the piece of equipment they'd been seeking—*that* was something any adventurer would find relatable.

"I did it! I did...! I found one! This is a Dragon Slayer! I found it!"

"All right, all right, we get it." Raraja scowled. "Settle down. It's not time for the main event just yet." He couldn't stand the way she squealed with glee and hugged him. His chair was knocked over with a clatter.

This wasn't an unusual sight in Durga's Tavern—except, given the current state of affairs, it actually was. This town's economy was wholly dependent on the dungeon, and the fire dragon had ground everything to a halt. The air seemed to have grown stale; the flow of money and items had halted and gone stagnant.

An adventurer who'd had enough "success" to start cheering... It was a rare sight now.

Berkanan got flustered as the chair tipped over, and Raraja rose to his feet with a string of angry words.

High Priest Tuck observed the exchange. He'd said he would pick up the tab—this would help Raraja and Berkanan put away more money toward paying off the latter's resurrection.

I don't know why it is...

Watching young adventurers make progress always put Tuck in a great mood.

"Maybe I've grown old..."

“Like that’s anything new.” Sarah cackled, her face red with intoxication. “You’re the oldest one here. C’mon, Garbage-chan, how’d you like some of this? Eat up. Eat up.”

“Woof...”

The redheaded lass was sitting meekly on the elf’s lap. When Sarah would bring the food to her mouth, Garbage would munch on it...but her expression made no secret of the fact that she was not a fan of her current predicament. However, the girl didn’t act irritated—either she knew she was no match for Sarah, or she thought that making a fuss would only cause more of a headache.

“Sorry, but bear with her, would you?” High Priest Tuck pushed a sausage toward Garbage as a token of apology.

Whether she could understand what he was saying—and whether he should have been talking to her at all—was another matter.

“Our own companion died recently,” the dwarf explained. “He’ll come back, I’m sure, but she’s been worried about you as a result.”

“Arf.”

Garbage replied with a single bark that perhaps implied, *“She’s hopeless.”* Tuck smiled a little at that.

“Ahh, sorry! I’m sorry, um, I...!”

Berkanan apologized profusely as she pulled Raraja to his feet. Despite his attitude, the boy didn’t blame her in the slightest.

“Don’t make such a fuss. It’s annoying... I’m fine, okay?”

Even as she looked away, refusing to involve herself, Garbage was mentally keeping tabs on the two of them.

They’re a good party, thought High Priest Tuck. He could imagine what they were like while exploring. Yes—fine young people and a good party. Hopefully they would be able to keep making progress through the dungeon.

But nonetheless...

There would always be walls that stood before them...and only the gods knew

if they'd be able to climb over.

I wonder what they're thinking.

§

"I never thought you'd be celebrating!"

"It's because I know what it's like."

"Oh, yeah?"

"For me, it's just another piece of equipment. But that doesn't mean *she* isn't happy to have gotten her hands on it, right?"

"Right you are."

A short distance away from where the others were making merry over the Dragon Slayer, two adventurers—the self-proclaimed free knight Sezmar, and Iarumas of the Black Rod—were sharing a quiet drink.

That said, it was fairly normal for Iarumas to just silently watch everything, whether it be equipment appraisal or the burgeoning comradery of this party.

Sezmar considered him for a moment. *This guy never tells other people what to do.* If the two (or three) kids wanted to have a raucous good time, then Iarumas could be expected to silently allow it.

But this time, he'd even put up the money for it. Was that this eccentric man's way of showing consideration?

"You're starting to look like a leader now, aren't you?" Sezmar asked.

"It's not like I'm all that unused to doing things this way." Iarumas smiled between sips of cheap swill. "Probably."

"There're times when I'm not sure how much you've forgotten and how much you actually remember."

"Don't worry. It's the same for me."

"Glad to see you're so easygoing about it."

"It's not as though acting impatient would fix things." Iarumas shrugged. "As long as I know what I ought to do, that's enough."

“Right you are.”

The two adventurers shared a low, hollow laugh. Sezmar drank beer like it was water and tore into a piece of meat on the bone. No matter when or how he ate it, good food was good food.

Yet, his eyes were elsewhere—on the other table, where a large-framed girl with black hair was timidly holding a magic sword.

A Dragon Slayer.

Sure, he didn’t know her story. But Sezmar wasn’t that dense—he could figure out why she’d be so happy to have such a blade in Scale right now...and what enemy it would be pointed at.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” Sezmar asked in a low voice. “If you take on that dragon, odds are, those kids will die.”

“It’s fine,” Iarumas answered. “That’s just how adventuring is. How it has to be.”

“Yeah, sure it is. For you, maybe.”

Sezmar’s tone implied no urgency. As far as he was concerned, it was their problem. Anyone would feel the same. Perhaps even Iarumas did too. But Sezmar kept on talking anyway because of his inherent kindness. There was a reason he was good-aligned.

“Wouldn’t it be pretty miserable if they went in expecting victory only to get killed instead?”

“I’m sure I also went into battle thinking I’d win, only to end up dead.” Iarumas let out a low laugh. “I’m sure of it.”

“‘Every time,’ right?”

“Could be.” Iarumas knocked back his drink and drained it dry. His eyes had fled the present and were focused on another time and another place. He said, “A terrifying foe. Our own strength, greater than before. A reckless battle, fought without one doubt of our victory.”

It was an instant lost and forgotten. When had he last glimpsed it? But truly...

“That’s the most exciting time in any adventure.”

Sezmar fell silent. No words could rebuke this notion. At least, not any he possessed. He certainly didn’t want to become the kind of fool who couldn’t distinguish caution from cowardice.

That’s why, instead, he drained his beer and poured Iarumas a fresh one from the jar. Then, looking at the black-haired girl—*Berkanan*—he murmured, “She’s gained a lot of courage (hit points).”

“Yeah. The magic will come next.”

Iarumas sipped his new drink and smiled as though he’d remembered something.

“Starting tomorrow.”

§

“You *sure* you’re okay...?”

“Huh? Oh, y-yeah. I’m fine... Just fine...”

Berkanan bobbed her head up and down, but she didn’t *look* fine at all. She’d only had a little wine, but her face was flushed, and words were coming to her awful slowly. On top of that, well...

Raraja didn’t think he was particularly small, but Berkanan stood a full head taller. When she sat next to him making huge, exaggerated gestures, it was really hard to relax.

“I haven’t, um, you know, had much to drink before... This is good stuff...”

The problem was that she didn’t notice her own tone—slightly addled—and just kept on talking.

“Augh, listen!” exclaimed Raraja. “Just go outside and drink some water!”

“Huh? Oh, s-sure...!”

Berkanan got up from the table. She sat back down. Her movements seemed generally suspicious.

The boy’s glaring eyes seemed to ask a scathing, “What?” Moving slowly, she snatched the magic sword, the Dragon Slayer, scabbard and all. She pulled the

weapon close, hugging it tight, then peered at Raraja and asked, “D-Do you think...I could take this with me...?”

“No one’s gonna steal it from you.” Raraja sighed, waving for her to go. “Do whatever you want.”

“O-Okay...!”

He scowled as he watched her stumble off. *I sounded like Iarumas there.* It felt awful. He found it especially galling when the other adventurers around him began grinning pointedly.

Raraja scowled. “Something to say?”

“Oh, *nothing*.” Moradin the rhea, who had been making no attempt to hide his amusement, tried to play off his mirth as something unrelated. “I just remembered—they don’t drink much in the eastern desert. Or so I’ve heard. That’s all.”

“Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” complained High Priest Tuck.

“I figured we were plying her with drinks because we all *knew* that— Ow!”

Raraja didn’t see it, but he assumed that Sarah, who was now looking away and sipping her drink, had kicked Moradin’s shin under the table.

Red to the tips of her long ears, the elf continued on in high spirits, fussing over Garbage.

“Here, Garbage-chan. This dish is yummy too. See?”

“Yap...”

The blue eyes looked pleadingly at Raraja, but he was in no position to save her. All he could do was sigh.

But, well... That had nothing to do with Berkanan right now.

§

“Uhhh... Uh... Erm... Was it over here?”

Swaying one way, and then the other, the red-faced Berkanan stepped out of the tavern. She thought she was walking straight. But her feet felt kind of light.

It's like I'm dreaming...

Death—rebirth—training—an adventure in the dungeon—finding the treasure. She'd been pushed along by the rapid flow of events.

The cool night breeze felt refreshing against her hot forehead. Compared to her homeland, the sun was more muted here. Gloomy, almost...though both felt desolate in a similar way.

That's probably why it feels cold, huh? Even Berkanan's fevered brain could muster that thought. Whether she was fortunate or not...was another matter.

A drunken girl, stumbling around as she went off to get water from the well, was at all sorts of risk. Yet, Berkanan went unmolested by those sorts of criminals.

It was, in part, thanks to her large frame. However, the predominant factor was likely her position as an adventurer. This was a girl who could go toe to toe with the monsters of the dungeon. And, drunk or not, she was still armed.

One might say that, by clinging to the sword, she had protected herself without realizing it.

She filled a bucket with water, then took a scoop of it with a long ladle, drinking once, twice. The chilly water sloshed down her sore throat. "Ohhh..." A sigh escaped Berkanan's lips. "That's so good..."

If there was one thing she liked about this place, it was that she wouldn't have much trouble getting water. Who would have thought she'd be able to use it not just for drinking and cooking, but even for a luxury like washing herself? On top of that, the sun wasn't so scorching here, and it didn't get all that cold at night. It wasn't as though she'd been here all that long, but...when she peered up, even the starry sky felt somehow different.

I'm an adventurer in a place like this...

She had comrades—a boy, a girl, and a man. They were going to challenge the dragon with the magic sword currently clutched in her hands.

"It really is like a dream..."

"Well, that's just lovely to hear."

“Whuh?!”

That sobered her up real fast.

At the sound of the voice, Berkanan leaped back with a whoosh and a thud, then began whipping her gaze around in a panic. Her hand slipped to the unfamiliar hilt of the sword, despite having not the faintest idea how to swing it. Was this a result of newly gained experience? Whatever the case, she soon located the owner of that voice in her blurry field of vision and realized she had nothing to be wary of.

The town was silent. Shadows lingered between the glowing lights of this city that never slept, and from the dark depths emerged a small, flea-like figure, wrapped in rags and carrying a massive bag on his warped back.

“Huh? Erm, you’re...” Berkanan blinked. “Mister...Bank?”

The wrinkled face of the dink, Bank, scrunched up even more behind his gray beard—a smile, apparently.

“You remember me, do you? My, what a nice young lady you are...”

Berkanan hurriedly removed her hand from the hilt of her magic sword and then tried to turn and face Bank. Under normal circumstances, she probably couldn’t have managed even a greeting like “How do you do?” But tonight, she was feeling much more talkative.

“Um... Thank you. This is all thanks to the money you loaned us...” Berkanan quickly bowed her head, feeling flustered. Her braided ponytail flopped up and down. After a hesitant pause, she added, “But I can’t pay you back yet. Sorry.”

“Oh, that’s no problem at all, young lady. I don’t meander around hunting people down to collect on their debts.”

Bank waved his hand to dismiss the idea, then teetered over to Berkanan’s side.

He should put that pack of his down, she thought. Then she looked at the magic sword in her own hands, realizing, *He probably doesn’t want to.*

“I’m here to offer my congratulations,” Bank said.

“Congratulations...?” Berkanan echoed.

“We may not be all that close, but it always makes me happy...seeing good things happen to people I know.”

“Good things...”

“You’ve gotten stronger, haven’t you?”

Have I? Berkanan couldn’t really tell.

Cocking her head to the side, she looked at the Dragon Slayer she’d been holding all this time. She’d found a magic sword. A killer of dragons. In light of that...

“I dunno...”

Ultimately, she still couldn’t tell. She couldn’t imagine that she’d gotten stronger. So she just put on an ambiguous smile, devoid of any confidence.

His response was an ear-grating laugh, like two pieces of rusty metal being scraped against one another. “You never can tell when you’ve grown—when your skills have risen to a new level. And neither can those around you.”

It would sure be convenient if you could, though.

Bank shrugged. “The only thing you can know for sure is that you’ve moved forward. Treasure that fact.”

“Forward...”

Had she made progress? The answer to that was obvious.

I have.

Indeed—she had. If all the events leading up to this point had been a dream, then, perhaps... No, the weight of the sword told her that this was real. Already, she’d experienced things she never could’ve imagined back in her homeland. And so...

I’m...moving forward.

Seeing Berkanan’s expression, Bank’s face wrinkled further. “Ah, that’s right. Young lady—you were planning to challenge the fire dragon, weren’t you?” Bank pulled something from the massive sack on his back. “Then have this coin as a gift.”

“A coin...?”

“Heh heh. There are all sorts of coins out there, young lady. Some are even told of in legend...”

The coin looked old. In the gloom around them, it appeared to sparkle, reflecting the light of the tavern that now felt so far away.

“Young lady, have you ever heard...of the Coin of Power?”

“No.” Berkanan shook her head. “Never.”

“It’s a thing of wonder. On the first flip, you can become a magnificent knight. A second flip, and now you’re a saint.”

Berkanan brought her face closer to the coin. She scrutinized it, squinting her eyes. The face of an old man was carved into the obverse side. An elderly mage. The mage’s tongue stuck out in a mocking fashion, and his mouth was pulled wide in a mischievous grin.

“Although, they say that the second flip, perhaps because of the miracle, does turn you into a corpse...”

“Eek!”

“Heh, heh heh. Even if you’ve been turned ash, or if your soul has been lost, you’ll become a corpse. Isn’t that incredible?”

Having jumped back in fright, the girl gulped, unsure of what to say. However, it was also a mage’s nature—Berkanan’s nature—to be unable to overcome her own curiosity.

Hesitantly, she leaned in close to the coin once more. In a quivering voice, she asked, “What happens...if you flip it a third time?”

Bank’s answer was vague and uncertain. “Who can say?” He stroked the front and back sides of the coin cautiously, with his bony fingers, then placed it on top of his closed fist.

On top of *the thumb* of his closed fist.

“This could very well be the coin’s third time. May fortune protect you, young lady.”

By the time she could cry out a mental *Ah!* the coin was already spinning through the air.

“Ah, ah...!”

Berkanan spread her arms wide, a huge panic consuming her faculties, then began anxiously shuffling left and right. The glimmer of the coin, as it twirled up into the night sky, was smaller than a star. Even squinting, she had trouble following it with her eyes. She only saw the coin again when it plummeted back down, struck the rim of the well, and bounced off.

She reached out and quickly caught it. Oh so hesitantly, Berkanan cracked open her clasped hands to peer inside.

“Wh-Wha... It broke...?!”

The coin was split clean in half.

No, that wasn’t all—the coin must have been old because the metal had started to crumble away. By the time Berkanan touched it with her fingers to try and return it, the coin was already reduced to no more than dust.

As she stared at the powder in her hands, unsure of what to do, the dink let out another creaky laugh. “Well, young lady. You’re not dead. That’s a spot of good fortune. Very lucky indeed.”

“Mister... Bank... Were you also, um...” Berkanan asked the question that had suddenly crossed her mind. “An adventurer?”

The old man answered her with his usual ambiguity. “Who can say? It’s all too scary for me.” He shook his head sadly. “I’m sure that I’m no adventurer. Though I do have a desperate desire to delve to the bottom of the dungeon, I’m far too frightened, you see.”

Then, adjusting the position of his huge backpack, he lurched off into the darkness once more. As he went on his way, he swiveled around to face her.

“You have a fine ring there, young lady. Take good care of it.”

“A...ring?”

Oh.

Now that he'd mentioned it, Berkanan remembered—the ring. The one Raraja had left in her care after they'd found it in the dungeon. She'd completely forgotten. Should she go back and have the High Priest appraise it now? Even though they were having a party...?

The girl absently took out the ring and gazed at it. Would it be too rude to ask at this point? *Yes,* she decided.

And when she looked up, Bank was already gone. All that remained was a patch of darkness in the city that never slept and the distant clamor of the tavern.

Well, whatever.

Berkanan slipped the golden band onto a finger of her open hand. It fit like it had been made for her. The dust of the corroded coin was scattered in her palm—the glint of the ring shone on her finger. She clenched her hand into a fist, pressing the coin's grit into her skin, and murmured, "Thanks."

He'd done...*something* for her. Prayed for her good fortune. Berkanan didn't know if she would ever be able to repay him appropriately, but she saw no reason not to try.

"Okay..."

She clenched her fist tighter, her inner flame burning with determination.

I'm gonna do it.

Strangely, her head felt a little clearer—it did, but...

"Nngh..."

It wasn't because she'd sobered up. Berkanan had thought she'd shaken it off, but the feeling of intoxication was now rushing back. Her eyelids felt heavy—her body, sluggish. She rubbed her eyes as she felt a yawn coming on.

"Maybe I'll rest up a bit before I go back..."

Somewhere out of the way. Next to a barrel, maybe. Or in a corner. Somewhere she could relax.

Berkanan crouched down in one corner of the well area, hugging her knees

and the magic sword.

After all, I was told to get a drink and sober up. Yeah. Not that I think I'm drunk.

Not long after, the girl was nodding off, and her head fell.

§

I see. That's one way of doing it.

Garbage didn't think those exact words, but her sentiment was the same—the way her new underling, the big, dull-witted one, had slipped away was nothing short of brilliant.

On reflection, she didn't really mind the black and silver long-ears—or this long-ears—all that much. She just didn't like the way they fussed over her excessively, or when they rubbed strange smells on her.

The smells, especially. This one was the same dizzying, sweet smell that had wafted down to her from above that narrow room. Fortunately, the red-faced long-ears had let her guard down. Garbage slipped out of her arms with beast-like flexibility, then trotted right out of the tavern.

Leaving the big, crowded room, she came out into a bigger, darker room, one with no ceiling. The wind felt cool and refreshing. Garbage shook her head vigorously.

She hated stuffy smells. This wide-open place felt better.

After sniffing around to take in some fresh air, she let out a satisfied "yap." Then, she walked over to the stone-framed hole, casting aside her cloak as she went, and began stripping.

Once her clothes, her broadsword, all of it had been cast off, Garbage stretched her body. The dull luster of the dark and heavy collar around her neck was the only thing left on her pale, emaciated skin.

Though the black and silver long-ears always handled her with care, that made little difference to Garbage.

She tossed the container attached to the long thing into the well. When she heard the sploosh, she yanked it back up with the rope. Garbage had learned

that she could get water this way. And now that she had it, she dumped it over her head.

“Woof!”

A cold, sharp sensation. It felt good. She shook herself, sending water drops flying. The collar and its chain jangled as they hit her body.

Honestly, she wasn’t very fond of getting washed—that long-ears always went and rubbed the bubbly, weird-smelling stuff on her. But she’d figured out that if she just poured plain water on herself, it would get rid of all the strange smells that got stuck to her body.

That was nice. At least, it felt good now. Garbage was satisfied.

Yes, Garbage was satisfied.

After spending all that time forced into the narrow, cramped room, she’d been taken to a wider, more open place. There were more people around her now, like the big, dark one, the noisy one, and the big, dull-witted one. They didn’t look at her in a weird way. No mocking laughter. Laughter couldn’t hurt Garbage, but she wouldn’t tolerate being belittled like that.

She could eat all she liked, go as wild as she wanted, and anyone she didn’t care for got their heads chopped off.

Garbage was satisfied. In all of her short life, she’d never had it so good.

And that’s why it would’ve been unfair to say that she’d let her guard down.

“Eeeek?!”

A sharp, sudden blow to the back of her head. Garbage fell to the ground screaming.

“Aah?!”

Another merciless kick followed. She was rolling, bouncing like a ball. When she came to a stop, she cowered.

“Ugh...?!”

She clutched her gut, groaning, then barfed up stomach juices and bits of chewed food. She looked up, thinking about how the lost food was a waste.

An unfamiliar man stood before her.

A fighter. Although she wasn't familiar with the term, she could tell what he was just by looking at him. He was dressed like the guy who laughed a lot next to the dark one. Or the ones who'd previously held her chains.

A strange glint glimmered in the man's eyes as he looked down at Garbage, the tip of his long boot digging into her belly.

"Aah?!"

The man's crude adventuring boot trod cruelly upon her almost pitifully scrawny stomach. The girl's voice escaped reflexively, and her vision blurred. This was no frightened crying—not a scream. It was purely biological.

A faint scent hung in the air. Lingering fragrance. She'd never forgotten it. It was *their* smell.

Writhing under the crushing weight of the man's boot, Garbage bared her teeth at him, growling low in her throat.

"Grrr!"

She wasn't afraid. Not of this guy. She hated his eyes. Mocking, belittling eyes. His gaze implied that he thought he could do anything he wanted to her. She'd never tolerated that. Not even once.

"Awooooooooo!"

"Ngh...?!"

For a moment, the man flinched. But then he pulled his lips taut, drawing his sword.

"I don't have any grudge against you, so don't hate me—this is business."

That sounds like an excuse, Garbage might have spat mentally. But she didn't.

What she thought instead was...

§

Wh-What do I do...?!

Berkanan was crouching in the shadows, next to the well.

Shake, thud, crash. Those sounds had roused the girl. Had forced her eyes open wide.

Her vision was still blurry, and she blinked repeatedly. Once her eyes refocused, the first thing Berkanan registered was the pale, emaciated form of a redhead and the dark luster of metal.

One of her companions was here, where Berkanan had been sleeping. The girl had been taking a bath!

Wha...?!

Berkanan panicked, debating for a moment whether she should stay hidden or call out to the girl. Yet, at that same moment, a shadowy figure—an adventurer, a man wearing armor—emerged from the darkness and attacked Garbage.

One blow from behind. Another kick as she rolled, then a stomp. His sword, drawn back and ready to be swung.

Berkanan regretted having hesitated to ask herself what she should do. She bit her lip in chagrin.

“N-No...!”

“Huh?!”

Her cry lacked energy—the swing of her sword was timid. Berkanan hadn’t even removed it from its scabbard, but it got a reaction out of the swordsman. It must have been his intuition that warned him, cultivated by experience he’d gained in the dungeon.

The swordsman leaped back nimbly, then turned to face Berkanan.

“Tch, it’s a noob!”

“Hahh... Hahh! Hahh...!”

The swordsman scoffed at her. “You’re scared, huh?”

He’d hit the bull’s-eye. Though she had managed to interpose herself between Garbage and the swordsman, Berkanan was shuddering, and her shoulders heaved with each breath. Her fingers were tense; her palms, sweaty.

She failed, multiple times, as she struggled to draw the sword from its scabbard.

It finally came free with a metallic *shing*—she held it in a fighting stance under the light of the moon.

But...

Looks like it's just an ordinary sword...

Berkanan wanted to cry. It gave off a faint blue glimmer. That was all. But it was also all she had.

"Get lost, girl. I've got no business with you... You don't want to die, do you?"

"I-I d-don't want to die, no!" Her voice was shrill. "B-But I have business with you... Okay!"

It was almost instinctive. *I can't let him get away,* Berkanan thought, glaring at the swordsman.

After the beating Garbage had taken, was she still all right? Berkanan didn't currently have the composure to keep track of her.

No—she'd *never* had that kind of composure.

In the dungeon, she'd mysteriously been able to see the burglars, the spiders, and the mantis. But here, now, the outline of this enemy seemed awfully hazy.

The sword felt terribly heavy in her hands. Had it always been like this? It seemed to weigh a whole lot more now.

But it's not so heavy that I can't hold it.

It was odd. The hilt seemed to cling to her palm, so she at least wouldn't need to worry about it slipping from her grip. Shuffling her feet with unfamiliar motions, Berkanan closed the gap between her and the swordsman. She had no idea what her striking distance was.

The swordsman...didn't move. It seemed that he'd belatedly gotten intimidated by Berkanan's large frame. He was wary. Even if she was a noob, he couldn't afford to underestimate her—the abilities she'd been blessed with (bonus points) might allow her to unleash devastating blows upon him.

He's overestimating me, though...

Berkanan was grateful for the misunderstanding. The idea of calling someone—shouting for help—skimmed the surface of her mind, but the idea ultimately slipped away unused. She felt like the moment she went to open her mouth, the swordsman would lunge and run her through.

Frankly, she was terrified.

“Heh... Hehh... Hah... Hahh...”

They were just standing there, staring each other down at swordpoint, and yet Berkanan’s breathing was so horribly labored. When her opponent went right, Berkanan went right, and when he went left, she went left, always keeping Garbage at her back.

Sweat dripped into her eyes. It stung badly. She thought she’d gained some experience as a fighter today... Where had it gone?

“Aw, yeah!”

“Huh...?!”

The moment she uttered that, the swordsman stepped in closer.

A slash from above. *Clang.* Berkanan raised the Dragon Slayer and parried the powerful blow. Her hand went numb.

“Tch...?!”

The swordsman groaned. He was holding a Sword of Slicing—a magically enchanted sword, one that should have snapped any lesser weapon in half. But it hadn’t. This meant that his opponent was also wielding a magic sword.

“Well, I’m not gonna let equipment decide everything!”

It might have sounded like he was whining, but he was right—her weapon alone wasn’t enough to sway the fight in her favor.

“Eek?! Hah?! Ahhh?! Hahhh?!”

Blow followed blow. The sword techniques he’d polished by slaying monsters rained relentlessly down upon Berkanan. Yet, even as she cried out repeatedly, Berkanan kept on parrying. If she lowered her sword even a little, she was dead. That knowledge overcame the numbness of her arms.

Her eyes—those golden eyes that seemed almost flirtatious—were bleary with tears, and yet they glared at him, desperately.

“Ahhh!!!”

It really touched a nerve deep inside the swordsman. Garbage. The redheaded ex-slave. He’d been surprised at first that she was a girl, but she was an opponent he at least knew. He’d heard that she’d been taken in by Iarumas of the Black Rod. Joined that corpse hauler’s party. But he had nothing against her.

If the target had been Iarumas himself, it would’ve been another matter...but it wasn’t.

Now that he’d become an evil-aligned fighter, he killed people for money. That was all there was to it.

But the girl in front of him... She looked almost like she was a half-giant. The body and equipment she’d been blessed with, her timid attitude that was incongruous with her strength—all of it pissed him off.

If only he’d had her potential. If only he’d been placed in the same kind of environment as she had. He knew it was a grudge, one she hadn’t truly earned, but he couldn’t help it.

He resented her.

And now, it’d started to feel like *she* was the reason he was stuck in his current predicament. She was like the red dragon. If not for that dragon—if not for her.

“Damn you!”

“Wahhhh?!”

Obviously, Berkanan knew nothing of this. She couldn’t tell what her enemy was thinking right now. Even so—despite all her screaming and crying—she was calming down just a little.

I’m...not dead?!

That was, without a doubt, an accomplishment—a product of the power to survive (hit points) she had developed in the dungeon. Berkanan couldn’t hold

out for long, but she wasn't dead just yet. She could think about her next move. And...

"Roooooooaaaar!!!"

"Aghhh?!"

She had a comrade by her side.

As Berkanan drew the swordsman's attacks, a redheaded girl sprang up.

Garbage.

She lunged at the man from behind with an animallike precision, sinking her teeth into the unprotected nape of his neck.

The swordsman cried out and swung around, thrashing Garbage off his body.

"Aah?!"

The girl screamed. She hadn't been able to assume a safe falling position, and she slammed hard into the ground. Seeing that, Berkanan—

"Wahhhh...!"

—swung her sword around with big strokes, rushing straight forward.

"Tch?!"

The armored man moved to defend himself, clutching the back of his neck with one hand and swinging his sword with the other. This scene was the opposite of what it had been earlier—only now, neither the swordsman nor Berkanan had any composure left.

Where do I strike...? How...?!

Importantly, Berkanan had no experience cutting down a person. This was, after all, the first time she'd ever held a sword. Was it all right for her to kill him? She was unsure, though it wasn't out of any consideration for her opponent—it was because she feared the unknown. The question had sprung from a sense of self-preservation.

And that's why Berkanan couldn't believe it when her body moved so easily, reacting in an instant.

Was it because she'd taken off her breastplate? Her arms slid smoothly. Her fingers danced, set free from the sword, and her tongue sang.

"Hea lai tazanme (*Flames, come forth*)...!!!"

"Wha...?!"

Before the man's wide eyes, the pale blue flames of HALITO were unleashed...but only for a moment.

His face was scorched. A scream erupted from his burning throat as he doubled over in pain, tearing at his ruined flesh with his hands.

"Gyarrrghhh?!?!?!"

"I-I did it...?"

"Awoo!"

A muffled scream—confused elation—howling. A chorus of three different voices.

As Berkanan stared vacantly at her own fingers, Garbage rushed past her. Naked under the moonlight, she pounced on the man in armor, recovered broadsword in hand.

A fatal blow (critical hit).

With the echo of a satisfying *slice*, the man's head sailed through the air, splashing dark red under the pale moonlight.

Blood rained down from this gory fountain. Garbage spun around to face Berkanan.



A naked blade in her hands—her skin and face stained with blood. The redheaded girl stared intently at Berkanan with those clear, blue eyes.

She's so pretty.

Berkanan didn't know why that thought had crossed her mind. But this time, when the redheaded girl—Garbage—barked, she felt like she understood.

"Arf!"

It meant, *Well done.* Or, at least, that's what Berkanan wanted it to mean.

Chapter 5: Hawkwind

The real problem came later.

In an attempt to show off her prey—or at least, showing off seemed to be the goal—Garbage tried to rush back into the tavern while still stark naked.

Berkanan raced to stop her, but the girl was a bloody mess—coated with the gore of their fallen enemy. Though it was probably a bit late to be having an adverse reaction, Berkanan grew dizzy, and an unpleasant feeling came over her, like she was going to throw up. Also, Garbage was strong.

As the redhead dragged a half-crying Berkanan behind her, a man languidly made his appearance.

“Is it finished?” he murmured.

Iarumas. The black-clad man. Mage of the Black Rod. Their party’s leader, probably.

Nodding at the “yap” Garbage gave him in response, he turned his attention to Berkanan. “I figured if you were going to get robbed out behind the tavern, there was little hope for your future prospects.”

This guy knew! Thoughts like, *That’s awful! How could he?* and *I can’t believe him!* swirled through Berkanan’s head. But ultimately, just one made its way out of her mouth.

“Do something...!”

“Right.”

Iarumas had, in fact, been doing something, so Berkanan didn’t know where to direct her anger. Ignoring her complaint, the man mussed Garbage’s hair, then headed over to the well. After drawing a bucket of water, he washed away the pool of blood that had spread across the ground, then chucked the pail over to Berkanan.

“Ah, ah...?!”

“Get some clothes on Garbage. If any other adventurers come, tell them you

were nearly robbed.”

“Huh? Huh? But I just... Is what I did okay?” Even if it was in self-defense, she’d just killed a fellow adventurer in the middle of town. There were laws against that. Against killing people. *Erm...*

“It happens all the time.”

“Whaaa...”

With that said, Iarumas went back into the tavern to tell someone, then returned and threw the corpse over his shoulder. And Berkanan, after a great deal of struggle, somehow managed to make Garbage put her clothes back on.

“Arf! Yap?!”

Iarumas looked in their direction. Perhaps he’d just suddenly noticed Garbage’s cries of protest. His eyes weren’t on her, though—they were fixed on Berkanan. For no particular reason, she started fidgeting awkwardly. Uncomfortably.

“What, you went back to being a mage?”

Berkanan pursed her lips. “I’ve always been a mage...”

“Hmm,” Iarumas murmured. “I suppose that makes sense.”

More importantly, Berkanan was curious about the owner of the head Iarumas had just picked up... It had, until only recently, been attached to the corpse that was now slung over his shoulder.

“Um, er... What are you going to do with him?”

Dump the body? Hide it? Bury it? Iarumas looked at her as if to say, “What are you talking about?” After that pause, he replied, “Corpses get taken to the temple.” As if it were obvious.

Unbelievable as it seemed, he really was planning to do it.

Berkanan wasn’t feeling inclined to return to the celebration in the tavern, and she didn’t want to go to sleep in the stables just yet. She followed Iarumas. And Garbage, whom she’d managed to dress somehow, trotted along behind them. Perhaps the girl’s furious nose-breathing was her way of saying, *“How do*

you like that? Did you see? I'm coming too!"

In the end, Berkanan just smiled ambiguously.

When they reached the temple, they were met by a silver-haired elven woman—*Ainikki.* Berkanan remembered. This was the person who had resurrected her. But what was she doing up so late at night? *When does she sleep?* A vague suspicion passed through Berkanan's mind. Long ago, in the age of myth, elves hadn't needed to sleep.

"Oh!" Sister Ainikki exclaimed. "My goodness!"

Berkanan found herself caught up in the rapid flow of events, just as she had been all this time. She was dragged out into the backyard of the temple along with Garbage, then stripped naked and forcibly washed.

"Eeeek?!"

Berkanan shrieked as she was scrubbed down and then changed into a new set of clothes. Everything moved so quickly, and it was all finished before the girl could even register what was happening. After that, she was abandoned at the inn, and the next thing she knew—

It's morning.

She hadn't gotten a spare moment to think about anything. She was simply sitting in bed, wearing those simple undergarments again.

Berkanan let out a sigh. "Am I going to be able to keep up with them...?"

It might have been a bit late to ask herself that, but nothing here was as she expected. All the common sense she'd learned in the outside world seemed to no longer apply.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door of this simple room. The walls were made of stone—like the burial chambers of the dungeon.

"Huh? Oh, c-come in."

Once the words were out of her mouth, Berkanan blushed, wondering if that had been the appropriate thing to say.

"You're awake?"

Fortunately, when Aine popped her head in, there was a kind, gentle smile on her face.

“Breakfast is ready. Would you mind joining me?”

“Uh, um, I...” Berkanan tried to decline, but her stomach betrayed her—it gave a tiny rumble that seemed incongruous with her large frame. “I’ll join you.”

“Please do!”

§

“So...who *are* these guys?”

Everything from the previous night was now over and done with. Raraja asked his question in an irritated tone, annoyed that he had been left out of the loop.

“Not *guys*,” Berkanan corrected him in a murmur. “There was just one man...”

They were both currently at the temple, sitting in a reception room—or something like that. Despite the vast amounts of donations it received, the temple was mostly plain and modest in appearance. However, this place was an exception.

Deep pile carpet. A couch with soft stuffing. A brilliant stained glass window.

Berkanan sank into the couch; Raraja and Garbage did not. Iarumas just stood by the wall.

“No, it’s *guys*!” Raraja grumbled. “This is, what, the fourth time now? And that’s only counting the ones I know of...”

“It’s the fourth,” Iarumas confirmed.

“The second time was at the weapon shop, right? And the third was in the dungeon.”

“Uh, so when was the first...?” Berkanan asked.

Raraja didn’t answer. He hadn’t told that part of the story when they’d been talking in the stables the other night. Instead, he quietly glared at Iarumas. The boy knew it was safe to ignore the redheaded monster snack shaking herself back and forth—Garbage seemed to be enjoying the springiness of the couch.

“I bet they’re after you, aren’t they?” Raraja asked.

Iarumas simply looked at him. “You don’t really think that, do you?”

“What, you’re saying it’s *her* they’re out to get?” Raraja pointed at Garbage, who bounced up and down next to him with a satisfied “woof.”

The filthy little waif looked like nothing if not a stray dog. There was no reason for anyone to target her—well, okay, maybe Raraja had one. But not enough to kill her. Just enough to get back at her for all the kicking.

“How much trouble did you cause?” the boy asked her. “And who’d you piss off in the process?”

“Arf?”

Garbage gave him a look that said, “*What’re you talking about?”* then hopped off the couch before he could slap her. She must’ve gotten bored. The girl trotted around the room freely, taking an interest in the stained glass window. It depicted a youngster in diamond-like armor descending deep into the dungeon alongside a beautiful woman. This wasn’t one of the heroic tales Raraja knew. It was probably from a long, long time ago. Nothing to be concerned about now.

“We’re about to go and absolutely murder that red dragon,” Raraja pointed out. “We don’t have time to deal with this crap too.”

“I’m not good at finding these things out,” Iarumas admitted with a deep sigh. “I’ve never gone around gathering information from people.”

“Yeah, I’d bet not.”

That’s just the kind of guy he is, Raraja concluded, seeing no way to deny it. *I doubt he’s even interested.*

As the two of them fell silent, Berkanan looked awkwardly from one to the other. Her mouth closed. Opened. Closed again. And then finally, “U-Umm...” She spoke up. “I-I think...I have an idea.”

“What?” The sideward glance Raraja shot in Berkanan’s direction made her slowly lower her raised hand.

Sluggishly, hesitantly, watching how they reacted, she quietly murmured,

“Why not...ask someone who can? Have them ask around, investigate...”

“Hmm.” Iarumas crossed his arms, nodding slightly. “In that case, I have someone in mind.”

§

Frankly, it was just an insurance policy. Not a soul believed the girl could defeat the fire dragon. But no, this belief wasn’t limited to just the girl—indeed, *nobody* could slay it.

Not even if they’re an adventurer.

After all, adventurers were not immortal. They could, and did, die. Not just inside the dungeon either. And when it came to killing people outside the dungeon, *they* were the more experienced.

There were any number of ways to do it. Literally any number. If the adventurer he’d sent as an assassin finished her off, then good. And even if he hadn’t, it would serve as a warning...

As the man walked through the crowd, he thought of all these borderline excuses, as if trying to convince himself of their validity.

The air in Scale...was stagnant.

The source of this town’s vitality, both for good and for ill, was the dungeon.

That red dragon had severed the flow.

The things Scale needed—the things adventurers needed—the many things needed for entertainment, food, and to maintain a lifestyle. All gone. To obtain all those things now, people had to cough up the assets they’d accumulated before the dragon had appeared.

There was now a lid on the pot of endless gold.

As the man walked the streets, he saw adventurers shouting back and forth with a shopkeeper over the cost of bread. They had it better than most—prices that adventurers could barely afford were out of reach for the poor.

Beggars squatted in the back alleys, ones who hadn’t become adventurers and couldn’t possibly become merchants.

How lamentable.

The man hurried past, gazing upon the beggars, the shopkeepers, and the adventurers as he might look at feces left on the side of the road.

The price of bread ought to have been set by the royals and nobility. If the world were as it should have been, their men would go around making public notice of the decision. This kind of arbitrary lawlessness should not have been tolerated.

If only there were no dungeon. It was the cause of all this. That evil hole at the edge of town, gouged into the land outside the walls. If only that absurd dungeon had never appeared.

Then we wouldn't be struggling so much against that accursed redheaded bastard...!

"Are you so sure of that?"

"—?!"

Everything went black as the man turned the corner into the alley. His memories stopped there.

No—perhaps he had just come to his senses.

The man found himself in the darkness. He was unable to move. Tied up. Or bound with magic. He couldn't feel anything below his neck. So, instead of struggling, the man—the *spy*—stared into the depths of the gloom, seeking the owner of the voice he'd heard.

There was only darkness. Then, a shadow. It seemed to slowly rise from the ground, assuming human form.

A man clad in black—a man wearing a kimono—a masked man.

The spy could not speak.

What is this...?

Death incarnate.

If the spy so much as offended the man, he was sure he would die. Absurd, wasn't it? No one would have believed such a thing. Of course not...right? It

was just too silly, too patently ridiculous.

This man who stood before him was leisurely snacking on steamed grain that'd been formed into a ball.

If I move, I'll die!

The spy feared to even gulp. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't blink.

The man finished eating, eyes locked on his target. "Now then," he quietly murmured. "I've been asked to do this, so I'll do as I must." As he spoke, the man strode over at a relaxed pace. "I have many methods. Bound as you are, I could sacrifice you to Kadorto..."

The spy clenched his stomach muscles. He was probably in for torture, an interrogation, or something of the sort. He wouldn't breathe a word.

If his mouth worked, he could cast a spell. Or even bite his tongue. He wouldn't submit so easily.

And yet...

"Die if you wish. I'm doing this to kill time anyway."

Why was it that the spy felt like anything he did would be meaningless?

§

"They're the Church of Fang."

That evening, they were gathered in a room at the temple. The black-clad man—Hawkwind—revealed this information cheerily.

Raraja hadn't heard the name before. But what about the other five in the room?

He looked at Berkanan. She shook her head vigorously. Her black hair, which was tied back, swayed from side to side. As for Garbage...there was no point even asking. Sister Ainikki just smiled silently.

Sezmar shrugged—it was Iarumas who, finally, in an exasperated tone, asked the question.

"What does that mean?"

“It seems they’ve been reduced to being spies for the royal family. Or perhaps, for them, that’s moving up in the world.”

Huh? Raraja felt a sudden confusion at this exchange—a disconnect—an answer incongruous with what he’d thought was the question.

It didn’t sound like Iarumas had been asking who they were.

However, whatever oddness he was picking up on was blown away by a casual whistle from Sezmar.

“Nice job making him talk.”

“Everyone has a weakness,” Hawkwind gloated in a low voice. “No one is an exception to that.” Berkanan thought he might’ve glanced in her direction. Even if he had, it was only momentary.

Hawkwind crossed his arms, leaning against the wall in the corner of the room. His posture gave the impression of finality—like he felt he’d done his part and had said everything he ought to say.

Berkanan, whom Hawkwind had looked at, spoke in a hesitant murmur. “Th-The royal family... The king...?”

“I thought I’d seen her somewhere before,” Aine whispered.

Sezmar nodded. “I’ve been thinking her hair’s the same color as the current prince’s.”

In the not particularly capacious room, the redheaded Garbage stared into space as if this had nothing to do with her. However, she soon picked up on the fact that everyone was now staring in her direction. She glared back suspiciously. Those blue eyes looked at each of them in turn. In the end, her piercing gaze fixed on Raraja.

The boy gawked at her. “You mean to tell me she’s a *princess*?”

“Arf.”

“Yeah, no way. Not a chance.”

“Woof!”

The next moment, Raraja jumped and let out a cry of pain. Garbage had given

him a good hard kick in the shin. The girl surely didn't understand what he'd said, but she was no doubt sensitive to the belittling sentiment. She stared down at Raraja with a self-satisfied snort as he clutched his ankle and writhed in agony.

Berkanan mumbled, "I think it's fine," as if making excuses. She then waved her hand, averting her eyes as Raraja peered up at her resentfully. Berkanan was probably trying to avoid being kicked.

No one—not even Sezmar, who was watching in amusement—made any attempt to help Raraja.

"Whatever her history, it doesn't mean much," Iarumas muttered.

Cursing under his breath as he stumbled to his feet, Raraja pursed his lips at this comment. "It's gotta matter for something..."

"Do you think the dragon cares?"

"Well, no..." Raraja grumbled. "But that's not the point."

"You wouldn't want them interfering, Iarumas," said Sezmar. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I've heard rumors about this Church of Fang too. Spies for the royal family. Magic users. In the outside world, they're pretty terrifying opponents." After this, Sezmar added, "Dunno how far that'll take them in the dungeon, though."

How was Raraja to interpret that? *Well...* the boy thought idly. *So far, she's managed to come out on top, but...*

"Grrrrr..." Garbage snarled.

"A princess, huh..." *She sure doesn't look like one*. The moment Raraja thought that, he sensed another blow coming and jumped away.

"Whoops! I'm not gonna let myself get kicked that many times!"

"Arf! Arf!!!"

"L-Let's stop this...!" Berkanan hurriedly interceded. But her words weren't going to halt Garbage's assault.

The squabble raised a ruckus in this small room within the temple, but the

other three ignored it. Two hardened adventurers and a nun gazed at one another, as if they were thinking, *Well, what do we do?*

"Regardless, I think she'll be safer in the dungeon. It will be better for her if we don't raise a clamor about the situation." Sister Ainikki spoke in her usual gentle tone of voice, running her fingers through the redhead's curly hair and patting her head. Garbage bared her teeth and growled.

Yet, although the girl had acted irritated at first, she ultimately gave up and quieted down. It wasn't that she'd accepted the fussing—she hadn't—but she'd no doubt realized that trying to struggle against Aine was futile.

While continuing to pet the redhead like she was a little dog, the silver-haired elf carried on casually. "Yes, safer in the dungeon. Isn't that right, Wind of the Hawk that Brings Death?"

The man in black did not respond. However, his silence was more eloquent than anything. Aine nodded in satisfaction.

Yeah, she's got a point. Raraja could see where she was coming from. Whether Garbage chose to run and hide or to fight, Scale—and the dungeon—were good places to do it. Certainly much better than the vast wasteland around the town.

Inside the dungeon, her assassins, these bozos from the Church of Whatever, couldn't scheme against her. As far as the monsters were concerned, they were intruders—toys—prey—just like the adventurers.

The dungeon sided with no one. Raraja had finally come to realize that only just recently.

Although... That's assuming these assassins don't call monsters again like last time.

"But what do we do about it?" the boy asked. "We can't just sit around, waiting to be attacked night after night, y'know?"

"Hrm." Iarumas crossed his arms and groaned. "It would be a problem if they interfered with our exploration... Hey."

"Hm?"

It was Sezmar he'd called out to. Aine was still petting Garbage, and the self-proclaimed free knight had been busy watching the girl like he might watch a puppy. Standing next to Sezmar's large body, Berkanan looked almost like an ordinary girl. Although, that was exactly what she was.

"Any ideas?" asked Iarumas.

"Well..." The good-natured man considered the question in the same easygoing way he might have considered the menu for tonight's dinner. "Maybe you don't need to think too hard about it?"

"Oh?"

"Why did they choose to attack her *now*? They could have just left her alone. Because, either way, this girl—" The affable, handsome man continued with a smile, his tone no different from usual. "—is going to die taking on the red dragon."

Berkanan jolted with silent surprise—her voice trembled. One hand gripped her staff, and the other, her scabbard. Her gaze fell to her feet faster than a shooting star.

She didn't think, *He's awful.* No, her depression was always targeted at herself. Was her quest rash, reckless, and impossible, just like she'd always thought? Was slow Berka being an idiot again, not knowing her place?

As the thoughts swirled inside her head, Iarumas's words, "I see what you're getting at," pierced through them. "It's good news, then."

"Huh...?" Berkanan mumbled, confused.

"It means they're worried about what might happen if the girl takes on the red dragon...and wins," Aine explained.

Berkanan raised her head. Raraja flashed a grin at her.

Sezmar nodded, his expression unchanged. "So, here's what I'm saying..."

The heart of the maelstrom—a redheaded girl—stared off into space, paying no regard to the conversation around her.

"Let's be heroes."

“Arf?”

Chapter 6: Dungeon and...

The headman of Scale's merchant's guild groaned, clutching his head. "Sheesh, that red dragon... It's like a cancer."

A deadly disease, weakening the body unto death—yes, that was exactly what the beast was. Scale was dying, slowly but certainly.

And he had no way to fix it.

In that regard, none of the merchants gathered here were all that different from the headman.

"But there's nothing we can do like this..."

"Nobody on the outside knows what's happened in the dungeon yet, right?"

"Of course not. So people and items are still flowing in. However..."

"We have no income with which to pay for them," someone said with a hollow laugh. "Rather than grow fat off the trade, we're just wasting away."

"We'll have to raise prices, but there are limits to how far that can go. People are already complaining."

"Shouldn't we try asking the adventurers again?"

"By now, those same adventurers are about ready to explode..."

Scale had been a village with nothing. Small, desolate, with only the sky, the ground, rocks, and people.

That had been all...up until the dungeon appeared.

Famous heroes had flocked to the village as its people had cowered in fear of monsters. So, too, had come unknown vagabonds, lured by the chance to get rich quick. And, of course, there'd been an influx of merchants who hired such people as bodyguards.

In no time, the tiny village had been transformed. However, if things continued the way they were now, the people of Scale would be chewed up and spat out...

In the beginning, there hadn't even been space for all the newcomers to stay. The village chief had fought hard to fix that.

He needn't have bothered, thought the headman. That was the cause of all his current troubles. At the same time, he understood why there had been no other choice. The chief's actions had preserved Scale until today.

He hadn't done anything particularly remarkable. But it had been a lot of bother.

He'd made it so that travelers who visited Scale—adventurers and those who returned from the dungeon—could stay overnight.

In those days, they'd begun to learn that adventurers came back from the dungeon with power beyond the realm of human knowledge. And in order to deal with large numbers of those kinds of people, the village chief had negotiated with the merchants, had brought them all together.

Yes, he'd brought them together.

No one could manage or control the adventurers. But, the chief could lay the foundations of a city, commanding the merchants and watching the flow of wealth. At some point, the chief's house had become the adventurer's inn, and the innkeeper, the head of the Scale Merchant's Guild.

And now, today...

"Hey, you. Can't you just tell the adventurers in the inn that if they don't kill the dragon, you'll chuck them out on their ears?"

The innkeeper—the man who had inherited the name Gilgamesh, master of the War God's Tavern—let out a deep sigh. "Why don't you go ahead and try it?" he asked. "I don't want them to blow me away with magic, inn and all."

"You've got it backward. If they torch the inn, there's no way the other adventurers would keep quiet about it."

"And so the whole town would get blown up by adventurers fighting each other, huh?"

Someone let out a hollow chuckle. As this despair-tinged laughter echoed in the background, the rest closed their mouths and were very quiet.

Scale had been a village with nothing. Now, it was a town with nothing. Nothing but the dungeon and people. The things Scale needed for sustenance had to come in from the outside. Those things all required money; money had always flowed from the dungeon.

But the flow had stopped.

People now had to cut into their personal savings to acquire the things they needed to survive, and that would run out eventually. It was only a matter of time. A slow death—one that wouldn't come tomorrow or the next day, but in a few months, a few years from now. Who could tell?

As for how long the dragon would live...

"It's a creature out of myth. The beast is probably immortal."

Waiting for a hero to slay the dragon? It was like they were living in a fairy tale. The joke was so humorless he couldn't even laugh.

But then...

"Bad news." One of the younger members in the meeting had approached Gil to whisper in his ear. "The shoemaker's son started boasting about how he's going to slay the dragon. He led a group of people into the dungeon."

"The shoemaker's son. You mean..."

"Schumacher."

"What a stupid thing to do..." The fool was already dead. No one entertained the notion that he might survive. No one considered going in to save him.

Adventurers and non-adventurers were fundamentally different. No sane person went to the dungeon.

Even if they managed to adapt to the environment, if a newly minted adventurer—one who'd first delved yesterday or today—went up against the dragon of red death...they would surely die. No contest.

The ability to lose one's head, or the optimism to think, *I can do it, I'll be fine,* despite the odds—these were privileges of youth. At the same time, this trait was always getting young people killed. That was all there was to it.

“Money is the bigger problem. Even if the guild were to provide a little to everyone, it wouldn’t be enough...”

“Gilgamesh-sama.”

Gil turned as another of his subordinates approached him. “What is it now?”

“Two adventurers, with an introduction from Sister Ainikki of the temple...”

“From Aine-sama?” Gilgamesh’s eyes sparkled.

Due to its position, the temple was not involved with the merchant’s guild. And yet, no one who wanted to do business in Scale could ignore them. There was no question that the temple had the most money in this town.

And this was Sister Ainikki. Gilgamesh had never thought of her as just a simple nun.

“Let them in. I want to see them.”

“Yes, sir...”

Soon, the pair were led in—two girls. Gil recognized both.

One was a filthy, redheaded boy—no, a girl—clothed in rags, with a collar around her neck and a broadsword on her back. This was Garbage, the adventurer who was so named because she was the monsters’ leftovers.

Beside her stood a black-haired girl so tall that he had to peer up at her. This one was slow and hesitant, almost pitifully scared, clutching her staff like her life depended on it. He had fresh memories of her from just the other day—she’d stood around the tavern looking for companions. It hadn’t been long before she’d vanished. Gil had been relieved when he’d seen her come back with a sword at her hip. He’d had little to do with her, but he liked to think he had enough empathy to feel happy when things went well for others.

That sword still hung at her hip. Gilgamesh’s eyes narrowed in satisfaction.

“So, I’m told you come with an introduction from Aine-sama. What can the guild do for you?”

“Arf,” barked the redhead. Berkanan gulped then stepped forward.

“We intend,” she said, voice trembling, eyes wandering, but nonetheless

resolute. “We intend...to slay that red dragon.”

Gilgamesh let out a deep sigh. His eyes narrowed slightly more, and his lips curled upwards.

Sheesh, this is why I can never quit...

He felt like he could understand his ancestor’s feelings.

§

Raraja leaned against the wall of the meeting hall, glaring into the darkness of the back alleyway. There, he saw sunken, hollowed-out sockets—a skull, eyeballs consumed by rats.

One of the poor? A failed adventurer? Since all of the wretch’s worldly possessions had been taken, they could have been either.

Should he take the body to the temple? This guy probably wouldn’t be coming back. There was no point.

A crow appeared from nowhere—the rats scampered off. The black bird landed on the skull, having failed to catch a live meal. Letting out a vexed cry, it brandished its beak, tearing into what little flesh remained on the bones.

As Raraja listened to the pecking sound, he heard the meeting hall’s doors open.

“Hey, you done?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Yap.”

Berkanan seemed frightened, while Garbage looked at him with a face that said, “*What, you’re still here?”*

As this contrasting couple came out of the meeting hall, Raraja waved in greeting. He had no doubt they’d succeeded. In a way, they already had before entering the meeting hall.

Moving away from the wall, Raraja went to stand opposite Berkanan, with Garbage in between them. The trio walked together. Raraja’s eyes ran across the masses of tired and disaffected people.

No one's acting strange at the moment...

Royal spies—an adventurer like him. It was probably best not to try to compare the two in terms of experience or ability.

Intuition is fed by experience. In other words, it is the accumulation of what we do each and every day.

That was what Iarumas had said. So, if Raraja watched his back and the area around them as they walked, it was also training. It galled him to be doing as the man said, but he had to admit that it was effective...

"You're sure you didn't want to be there too, Raraja? Um..."

"Huh?" Raraja arched an eyebrow at the sudden voice from above.

"Be there. To let all sorts of people...like the guild...know you're one of the adventurers who's going to, um, slay the dragon..."

"Me? That's not my style."

Berkanan gets concerned about the weirdest things, thought Raraja.

"*You* want to kill the dragon, and she *has* to. It's got nothing to do with me," he explained. "I'll help, though."

"Yeah." Berkanan gave a slight nod.

As for redheaded Garbage, who was in the middle of their trio, she meandered back and forth between the two of them. Raraja glanced at her, then returned to surveying the area around them. He intentionally plastered a goofy look on his face. There probably wasn't any point to it...but it would have galled him to let the spies think he was scared. Compared to being seen as a timid coward, looking like a fool who was all giddy about walking with *a girl*—Garbage didn't count—suited him just fine.

"So, did it go well?"

"Um, probably?"

"Why the questioning tone?"

"Well, I mean... I don't know the first thing about negotiating," explained Berkanan. "I didn't talk to people much in my village."

“Oh, yeah?” Raraja replied.

The boy sensed that some of the people nearby were watching them. Iarumas of the Black Rod’s lackeys. The sneaky one. The monster’s leftovers. And the big girl.

Setting Garbage aside, when it came to Berkanan, well—even Raraja thought she was a looker. If she would just keep her head high and her chest out, there’d be a deluge of guys who would want to come up and speak to her. Although, he could understand why she wouldn’t want to talk to guys who approached her for a reason like that.

The atmosphere in Scale was already rotten enough as it was. He could smell it. It was a warning sign—adventurers who could no longer delve into the dungeon might become urban adventurers. The tasks involved were the same: exploring, kicking in doors to enter rooms, murdering the residents, stealing their treasure chests, and avoiding roaming marauders. The only difference was that they’d be doing it above, not below—in town, and not within the dungeon.

“You go with them today.” Raraja was starting to understand why Iarumas had ordered him to do that.

Obviously, it wasn’t out of concern for Garbage or Berkanan. No, it was actually for Raraja’s sake—if anybody were to come after them, the boy could take advantage of the attack to get some training in...

Look at what I let myself get talked into. Damn it.

“Anyway, we were able to talk to the...” Berkanan floundered for the word, “headman? Some important person in the meeting hall. Aine sure is amazing, huh?”

Raraja nodded. “Sure is. Even Garbage is no match for her.”

“Woof...” Raising her head with a start at the sound of Aine’s name, Garbage glared at him. Ultimately, she settled for just growling in response.

Raraja had just belittled her, but given the person in question—Aine—maybe Garbage had been forced to admit that she was no match.

I’ve found her weakness.

“Arf!”

“Ow!”

Even so, just a moment later, Raraja managed to incur a bark of protest and a good hard kick that bowled him over.

It wasn’t clear what she found so comforting about their squabbling, but Berkanan smiled just a little. She waited for Raraja, who was rubbing his leg, to get up.

“So, anyway,” she continued. “If we really do slay it, they said they’ll pay us... Though, uh, I guess that kind of went without saying.”

“They’ll recognize you in the future, right?”

One look at Berkanan’s lumbering frame, or at the way Garbage was dressed, would have affirmed that—Raraja didn’t need to ask.

Still, Berkanan responded with a pleased, “Yeah,” as she walked, her back hunched and head hung low. “So our, uh...objective? It was a success, I think. That’s step one done. Right? Yeah...”

“Sure is. There would be no point to this if they didn’t learn your names and faces first.”

She hesitated. “Yeah.”

“Now we just go to the dungeon, brutally murder the dragon, and come back home. Simple, right?”

More hesitation this time. “Yeah.”

Her reply lacked energy. Garbage let out a low moan of exasperation, and oddly enough, Raraja felt exactly the same way. *Agreeing with Garbage... Strange things do happen, huh?*

Raraja glanced up at Berkanan over the top of Garbage’s red hair. It felt weird. Though he was looking up at her, the way she hung her head made it look as though she were peering down at him. He met the gaze of those golden eyes, which wandered back and forth uneasily.

“You’re the one who said you’d murder the dragon. Don’t go getting all

scared about it now.”

“I-I...!” Her voice cracked. Her body jolted. Raraja jumped back so she wouldn’t end up smacking him. “I’m not...scared.”

“Well, what are you, then?”

A pause, and then, “Tense, I think.”

“That sounds like ‘scared’ to me.”

“They’re different...!” Berkanan protested adamantly. Raraja didn’t care to disagree.

Yeah, I can understand. It wasn’t that she was afraid of the dragon. She just felt uneasy about how things would go. And there was no point in saying, “It’s okay to fail,” to someone who felt that way. She was the one who’d pay the price if things went badly. Although, in this case, Raraja was in the same boat.

As he considered this, he came to a stop, crossing his arms, and let out a low groan.

Berkanan stopped too. As did Garbage, with a look on her face that said, *“What’s he think he’s doing?”*

He found the words in no time...but he didn’t want to say them.

“We’ll have to pray, I guess.”

“You got that from Iarumas...?”

“Yeah.” *That’s why I didn’t want to say it.* Raraja scowled. “All we can do is pray.”

Pray that they might meet the dragon—that they might fight it on advantageous terms—that they might kill it. They could train, prepare equipment, and gather companions, but in the end, it all came back to that.

Nothing was absolute. In the dungeon, there was no such thing as certainty.

Raraja bit his lip and started walking. Garbage trotted along behind him.

“I mean, that’s what makes it an adventure, right?”

After standing still for some time, Berkanan found her resolve and stepped

forward down the main road.

The adventurer’s inn was already in sight.

§

“So, ultimately, you guys aren’t going?”

“Well, it’d defeat the purpose if we did.”

Iarumas nodded in agreement at Sezmar’s answer. “I guess it would.”

In one corner of the War God’s Tavern, Iarumas and Sezmar were talking. It wasn’t just the two of them—High Priest Tuck, Moradin the thief, and Sarah the elf were also present, along with Hawkwind, who was standing silently with his arms crossed.

One member of the All-Stars was still missing.

“Are you having trouble bringing Prospero back?”

“Hardly.” Sarah snorted. “This is us being considerate, Iarumas. It’s for Garbage-chan.”

“You gotta feel bad for Prospero, though...” Moradin added with a low snicker.

“Hey now,” High Priest Tuck cautioned. “He’s serving as our excuse for turning down the request from the merchant’s guild.”

“If we resurrected him, we’d have to go!” Sezmar said with a raucous laugh, tipping back his full mug of beer and truly savoring it. He cleared his throat. “It also means that if we go with you guys now, that’d be changing our minds after we’ve already declined. Not a good look, right?”

“See, we’re being considerate, Iarumas! Real considerate!” Sarah banged her mug on the table, drawing the eyes of other adventurers.

Iarumas of the Black Rod—Iarumas the Corpse Hauler—was talking to the All-Stars? Some of the eyes on them were tired, while others were simply curious.

Most adventurers were risk averse and wouldn’t delve into the dungeon while the red dragon was around. However, an exceedingly small but not nonexistent number of them could sneak past the dragon to explore deeper.

Someone nearby muttered, “How can you delve into the dungeon if you’re afraid of the Dragon?”

Iarumas smiled and whispered, “How can you delve into the dungeon if you’re afraid of Werdna?”

He scarfed down the rest of his gruel then turned to the red-faced elf. Lately, every time he saw her, she seemed to be drunk.

“You’ve had a lot.”

“Of course I’m gonna drink. How could I not?”

Moradin helpfully refilled her mug, but from the water pitcher, not the jar of beer. Sarah didn’t even notice. She knocked it back, letting out a weak groan. Then, she poured a drink herself, from the beer jar, and took a sip. She glared at Iarumas.

“You’re taking Garbage-chan and Berkanan-chan with you, right? Dragon-slaying.”

“Well, yes. I am,” Iarumas answered after just a moment’s thought. Was he taking *them* with *him*? Or was it the other way around? He was going because they were going—more specifically because Berkanan was going. This time, Iarumas’s own will was hardly a factor.

The red-faced elf scoffed. “I don’t like how much fun you seem to be having.”

“I think we call that misdirected anger, Sarah.”

“Shove off, Moradin.” Sarah ignored the rhea thief’s ribbing and fixed Iarumas with a stare. “I’m saying that I don’t like how much you’re enjoying this.”

“Hmm.” Iarumas stroked his chin. He didn’t *think* he’d been enjoying himself...but maybe he had been. “Well, I won’t actually deny it.”

His exploration, which hadn’t made progress in a long, long time, was finally moving forward. His days of lurking the shallow floors of the dungeon, finding and hauling back corpses, were at an end. Now, he was training Garbage and Raraja. Berkanan had joined them too. The range of things they could accomplish was growing. And they had an objective, an additional one, on their way to the bottom of the dungeon.

Killing a dragon—it wasn’t half bad.

Yes, now that she mentioned it, he *was* enjoying himself.

“Then be grateful.”

“Grateful?” asked Iarumas.

“To Garbage-chan, Raraja-kun, and Berkanan-chan.” *Oh, and Aine too, I guess,* Sarah mentally added, pursing her lips at the idea.

Iarumas nodded. “Well, I suppose you’re right.” Then, after a moment’s thought, he put a spoonful of gruel in his mouth, chewed it, and swallowed. “Let me buy you a drink when we get back.”

“One more thing,” Sarah added, waving a hand as she knocked back her mug. “I don’t want to lose a bunch of money either.”

“Money?”

“We’ve got a bet going,” Moradin explained with a smirk. “On whether Garbage and Berkanan—the monster’s leftovers and the big girl—can kill the fire dragon.”

“Souls extinguished, turned to ash, dead, alive, victorious.” Hawkwind listed off the possibilities in a low voice. “Victory is the long shot.”

“It’s gonna be a real pain in the butt confirming how they died,” Moradin added with a grin.

“How inappropriate...” High Priest Tuck shook his head with a scowl. The old dwarven priest apparently did not approve.

“Hey, what’s the harm?” Moradin countered. “Garbage-chan and Berkanan-chan are getting kind of famous.”

Garbage, the monster’s leftovers. The mage girl who stood a full head taller than most.

People knew that they’d repeatedly delved into the dungeon where the fire dragon roamed...and that they’d been successful. Their notoriety was partly due to the celebration in the tavern the other day, but also, with Scale the way it was now, the two really stood out.

A growing number of people were watching to see what they would do—it was the same way people watched the six adventurers who stood on the front line.

“I don’t know what’s up, but listen,” said Moradin. “If you plan on making a hero out of Garbage, there’s no reason *not* to cash in on it.”

“You certainly have a point.” Iarumas never would have thought of that—never would’ve even considered it. In his mind, the world consisted of two things: the dungeon and everything outside of the dungeon. That was all. “It’s a good plan, Moradin.”

“If you really think that, then bet on something.”

“Sarah made me put some money in the pot too,” Sezmar added with an interminably cheerful laugh.

They’re a likable bunch, thought Iarumas. He didn’t mind these folks. He respected their abilities and found their personalities endearing. But that was as far as it went. He never would’ve imagined that they trusted him—believed in him—this much.

It occurred to Iarumas that, if their positions were reversed, he probably wouldn’t be acting the way they were now. And though he had no intention of changing that, he also didn’t intend to turn his nose up at their kindness.

His killing edge was best when it was dulled *just* the right amount. Being of neutral alignment, balance was important.

“I’ll have to make sure you win your bets.” Iarumas smiled. “It looks like we’ve got a rigged game going here.”

“It’s fine as long as no one finds out.” Sarah snorted as she casually rolled some small bottles across the table to him.

Each vial of liquid had a little stone inside. Potions of DIOS. Iarumas gratefully accepted and slipped them into his pocket.

“Don’t let us lose out on this, Mifune,” Sezmar said, his large palm clapping Iarumas on the shoulder without reservation. Iarumas shrugged his aching shoulder, then rapidly gobbled up the rest of his gruel.

Eat something. Get a good night’s rest.

In order to win, he figured he should at least put in this effort first.

§

“Well, shall we be going?”

The night had passed without further incident. At the edge of town, the pale light of the dawning sun broke through the thick clouds.

Standing at the entrance to the dungeon was Sister Ainikki. She waved to them, seemingly in high spirits. In another place, her demeanor might have implied that she was there for some sort of romantic rendezvous, but—

“When I hear you’re heading off to slay a dragon, I’m not going to stay quiet about it. You’re taking me with you!”

—the impressive set of body armor she wore over her habit, and the rude mace she carried, said otherwise.



Berkanan stared vacantly. “Huh?” She blinked a few times, taking in how the nun was dressed. Raraja had apparently seen this coming, while Garbage muttered, “Yikes...” with an indescribable look on her face.

Ignoring the rest of his companions’ reactions, Iarumas of the Black Rod strode forward.

“In the front row? Or the back?”

“Which are you in?”

“Me?” Iarumas smiled. “Back row. I am a mage, after all.”

Aine was silent. For a brief moment, she seemed to be seriously agonizing over what to do.

“I’ll take the back row too, if you don’t mind. I’m a priest, after all.”

“Okay.”

That short exchange was all it took before Iarumas allowed the silver-haired elf to accompany them.

“Is this okay...?” Berkanan murmured.

Raraja just shrugged. He wouldn’t have felt right spreading rumors about what’d happened in Catlob’s shop. *Come to think of it, Sister Ainikki’s not using a sword today,* he noted. He said nothing about it. Her reason would probably have been, “Because I’m a priest.”

After elegantly taking her place in the back row of the party, Aine bowed her head to them. “It’s a pleasure to be working with you.” Then, noticing the sword hanging at Berkanan’s hip, she tilted her head to the side a little. “I thought this the other day as well...but I see that you carry a sword despite being a mage.”

“Huh? Uh, y-yeah.” Berkanan nodded. “Is that...weird?”

“No, not at all.” Sister Ainikki smiled gracefully. “I think it’s good.” However, when she saw Berkanan standing *in front* of her, she furrowed her brow. “Are you certain you don’t want to move to the back row?”

Berkanan nodded again. “Yeah.” Then, after trying to gauge the nun’s

reaction, she added, “I do have a sword, after all.”

“I suppose that makes sense...”

Raraja pretended not to notice when Aine muttered, “I should have brought mine too...”

§

Stairs led down to the first level of the dungeon. The area at the base of these stairs was normally crowded with adventurers, but now—silence. No one remained. This was partially because the number of adventurers delving had declined, but it was also because...

“That dragon is a wandering monster, not a chamber guardian.” As Iarumas spoke, his indifferent voice echoed hollowly through the wide, empty space. “They must have decided it was safer to move, rather than all hanging around in one place.”

“Is it actually safer?” asked Raraja.

“I wouldn’t move around if I didn’t want to meet it.”

“Hmm...” Garbage murmured. Did she get it? She probably wasn’t even listening in the first place. The girl prepared to take off, leading the way into the dark dungeon.

“Ah, wait...!” Berkanan hurriedly called after her.

“Arf?”

Garbage turned around, looking truly displeased.

Raraja scowled. “That’s not how she reacts when *I* say it.” Garbage had never stopped for *him* before.

Regardless, Raraja looked up at Berkanan beside him, wondering what the delay was about.

“Erm, um, I... Here...”

Hesitantly, with unfamiliar motions, Berkanan unsheathed the magic sword that hung at her waist. It came free with a metallic *shing*. The blade was burning, wreathed in a pale, flickering glimmer, and it emitted a faint hum, a

growl—it even seemed to be trembling.

Like Garbage when she's hunting for prey, Raraja thought.

"It's probably 'cause there's a dragon."

"Is that a genuine Dragon Slayer?" asked Sister Ainikki. She let out an enraptured sigh. "It's lovely."

"It's too soon to say," Berkanan answered with some embarrassment. She had been warned that most Dragon Slayers found in the dungeon lacked spirit. "But if we do as the sword says, then probably..."

"It will lead us to the dragon," Aine concluded for her. After gazing at the pale blade for some time, she loudly cleared her throat.

"Mimuarif pezanme re feiche (*O great shield, come quickly from beyond*)," she chanted. Followed by, "Mimui woarif (*Let there be light*)."

The two spells had an instant and dramatic effect.

Raraja felt something invisible, but most definitely tangible, enshroud his body like a curtain.

"Ugh?!" Garbage growled—probably because the whole area suddenly brightened. The girl patted her body all over, mystified by this new sensation, and then turned her head around, looking in all directions.

For some reason, in the pale light, Raraja saw the dungeon as a thin wireframe, stretching out as far as the eye could see. But it only lasted an instant. When he next blinked, the walls had returned to cold stone. Though, it was still amazing that he could now see farther than usual.

"MAPORFIC and MILWA, huh?" Iarumas murmured, feeling somewhat nostalgic. "Not LOMILWA?"

Aine nodded. "Instead, I'll cast this." She began chanting her third spell, weaving the words together like a song. "La'arif tauk mimuarif peiche (*O six senses, fill the air*)."

This time, Raraja wasn't sure what happened.

"It's LATUMAPIC..." Berkanan explained in a tremulous whisper. Although,

just hearing the name didn't tell Raraja anything about what the spell actually did.

Exhaling, Aine brought a hand to her chest. She smiled. Her long ears swayed, seeming proud in some way. "With this, we can see through the enemy's shadows. That should be convenient when searching for the dragon, right?"

"It will, no doubt," Iarumas agreed.

Raraja let out an involuntary sigh. He'd never had so many spells cast on him in such a short time. Initially, he'd felt a little uneasy when he'd heard that Sezmar, having already turned down this job, couldn't come along. But now...

Maybe we'll be fine like this.

The protective spell covering his body felt reassuring in a way he couldn't describe. He stretched his arms. Bent his knees. It didn't seem to get in the way of him moving. Excellent.

Garbage still wasn't sold on it. She kept patting herself, checking her entire body. She'd probably be fine. Raraja thought it might even have the benefit of making her more docile than usual. As far as he was concerned, that was a good thing.

This is pretty sweet.

They were also traveling light this time, without excess equipment, allowing him to move around more freely. Although...

"Come to think of it—are we gonna be all right, bringing so little food and water with us?" Raraja asked. Iarumas was the one who'd given the orders. Would they still have enough now that Ainikki was joining them?

Iarumas gave him a slow nod. "We're just going to search for the dragon, kill it, and head back. If everything goes well, it won't take all that long."

"And if it doesn't?" Raraja asked hesitantly.

"We won't be needing food."

Raraja let out a dry laugh. Berkanan looked at him, eyes wide. The boy felt like he was starting to understand why Iarumas's laughter always sounded so hollow.

But he only thought he understood.

§

Clink, clink.

An oft-heard sound echoed in an oft-seen corridor.

Raraja tossed the Creeping Coin, sending it bouncing across the stone floor, then reeled it back in. They had been down this path in the dungeon time and again, but he had no intention of changing this habit.

“I did cast a light spell...” Sister Ainikki murmured with a strained smile.

“Tell that to Iarumas.” Raraja shifted the blame. *It’s not my fault.*

After advancing down the corridor for a while, they came to a turning point, a branch in the path—it was someone else’s turn to lead.

“Hey.”

“R-Right...”

Taking a sluggish step forward, Berkanan pointed the magical sword at the crossroads. She closed her eyes, focusing. Right—forward—left. The sword hummed.

“It’s...to the right, I think? Probably...”

“Woof!” Garbage barked, immediately bounding off in the direction that Berkanan’s sword was pointing.

Raraja clicked his tongue as he chased after her, seizing the girl by the scruff of her neck. “Now listen, you! There’s a dragon! Don’t just rush in!”

“Yap!”

Ignoring her protests, Raraja felt around in his bag with just one hand, intending to pull out the map. As he struggled a little to do so, he heard Iarumas murmur, “You were forgetting about that.”

Raraja scowled, looking back over his shoulder. “And you, don’t say things like that. Makes me uneasy...”

“It’s not like it caused any problems.” Iarumas waved his hand. “Don’t worry

about it.”

“Sheesh...” Raraja looked at the map with a groan. No matter how many times he traveled these corridors, he still felt apprehensive unless he checked. His finger traced the dungeon drawn on the grid, confirming their current coordinates. “There’s a burial chamber ahead, y’know?”

“B-But...” Berkanan peered down at her sword, sounding less than confident. “I think it’s this way...”

“In all likelihood, you’re not wrong about the direction,” Iarumas interjected, unable to just watch. “But that’s only if we can travel in a straight line.”

“Ahhh... Makes sense.” Raraja looked down at the map once more.

The boy heard Aine chuckle and say, “You really are looking after them properly, aren’t you?”

Iarumas probably just shrugged. Raraja could tell without looking.

“Still, it’s good to at least know where we’re headed. Let’s see...” The question was whether to go around or cut across the burial chamber. Raraja couldn’t decide which was better.

“What’ll we do?”

“What should we do...?”

He and Berkanan ended up looking at one another without meaning to. That’s when it happened.

“Awoooo!!!” Garbage howled, dashing off down the corridor faster than their eyes could follow. She kicked in the door to the burial chamber.

I knew she was gonna!

Even as he scowled, Raraja was smiling just a little. Ultimately, this was easier to deal with than agonizing over things.

“Hey, we’re going!” he shouted.

“Oh, uh, right...!” Berkanan hurriedly replied.

Besides, Raraja was used to this by now. He raced into the chamber after Garbage. Berkanan followed behind him slowly and inefficiently.

After trampling over the kicked-in door, Garbage glared into the darkness of the burial chamber—the darkness of the dungeon.

Raraja sensed something lurking in the gloom. His eyes quickly scanned the room as it was lit up by MILWA.

Nothing. No, wait. This buzzing noise—Raraja recognized it.

“Above!”

The batting of wings. Flies? No...

He looked toward the ceiling. Aine, who’d caught up at the same time as Iarumas, glanced upward as well. “Ah,” she said. “Those are dragonflies.”

Sharp jaws plunged at them like a hail of arrows.

§

“They *are* dragons, I suppose,” Aine remarked, mercilessly swatting one of the flying insects with an effortless swing of her mace.

“You said it,” Iarumas agreed, stabbing through the creature with his black rod, then finishing it off as it struggled on the stone floor. Treading over the juices that spilled out, he said, “Don’t worry about these. Conserve spells.”

“Easy for you to say!” There was a *whoosh* as Raraja doubled over backward, evading the menacing jaws that flew at him.

Yes, he’d dodged it.

Maintaining composure—watching the enemy’s movements—connecting his mind to his body—getting safely out of the way.

Whoa?!

Memories of a past fight (that one had been against a dragon too, huh?) flashed through his mind. Back then, he’d only been able to stay on the defensive, but now...

“Hah!!!”

Raraja’s dagger tore through the dragonfly’s wings as it shot past him, the sharp insect jaws narrowly missing his face. He lacked the skill to stick his blade through an opening in its carapace, or the strength to crush it, but the

experience and technique he'd cultivated allowed him to at least cut a wing off. Even once it had fallen to the ground, the dragonfly kept on chittering until Berkanan swung at it with a listless attack.

"Y-Yah...!"

Perhaps because the sword was magical, or because the insect was also a dragon, the blade neatly severed its head.

"I-I... I did it...!"

"There's another one coming!"

"R-Right...!"

Berkanan seemed stunned for a moment, but when Raraja shouted at her, she turned to face the next dragonfly. The creature flew at her with a high-pitched screech. Somehow, she managed to line up her blade and strike it down.

Perhaps she felt that it was nothing to fear...at least compared to the huge spiders from before.

Now, as for Garbage...

"Whoa?"

The girl was a little bewildered as the bug's jaws seemed to slide away, as if deflected, a short distance from her body. However, it seemed that she'd finally figured it out—the protective power surrounding her body was effective in battle.

Her head shot up with a fierce, sharklike grin.

"Woof!" The redhead barked as she swung her broadsword, gleefully leaping into the swarm of dragonflies.

There, she performed a whirlwind attack.

Her swings had always been wild, hitting only if she got lucky, but their vigor was only rising. She must've decided that she didn't need to worry about the dragonfly jaws and fangs aiming for her lithe body. Now, all she had to do was swing without thought.

No doubt—she was thoroughly enjoying it.

“Yap! Yap!”

“Gah! Don’t make them bounce! You’ll get bug guts on us!”

“Y-Yah! Yah!”

Her broadsword roared, and those it missed were finished off by Raraja’s dagger or the Dragon Slayer. As for Iarumas and Ainikki, the two of them only rarely had to hit a dragonfly with their rod or mace. They looked at one another.

“How does it feel, Iarumas-sama? You’re seeing the results of looking after them.”

Aine was in high spirits; her long ears swayed proudly. She was pleased about this party’s progress, almost as pleased as she would’ve been about her own.

“Well,” Iarumas murmured. He looked at the trio in the front row, then nodded. “It seems we won’t have to waste spells here.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake...” Aine muttered with an exasperated smile. *There’s no helping some people.*

Iarumas was smiling too.

§

Maybe we can pull this off.

That was Schumacher’s initial impression.

He didn’t feel like he was taking the dungeon too lightly. And he’d never expected to be able to slay the dragon right away.

But Schumacher had been born and raised in Scale—the dungeon and adventurers had been facts of life here since before he’d drawn his first breath. Even the mere son of a shoemaker knew how utterly dependent Scale was on them.

Like any other child of Scale, Schumacher had dreamed of becoming an adventurer on many occasions. And every time, his father had stopped him.

His father had a saying: “The dungeon’s no place for people to go.”

Schumacher had been a good enough kid. Even when he'd pushed back against his father's wishes, he'd always reluctantly done as he was told.

But that was also why he was taking action now. His hometown was dying a slow death. He knew there was only one way to prevent it, and nobody else was doing it.

If they won't, then I will...!

A descendant of the legendary hero. A great sage who spent their life in the study of magic. A brash youngster from the village. Inside the dungeon, they were all equal—the weakest of the weak.

In that case, nothing makes me any different!

The son of a shoemaker had just as much right to challenge the dungeon as anyone else. Everything was equal.

"We go into the first burial chamber, fight, and then head back to town... Right?"

"Yeah, that's what they say... I heard it in the tavern, so I'm pretty sure it should be right."

Schumacher had gathered companions who felt the same way. Assembled some cheap equipment. They entered the dungeon, ignoring any branches in the path as they headed to the first burial chamber.

After kicking in the door, he stepped inside to trade blows with a creature. Humanoid—that was all he could discern about the thing.

He fought terribly.

Schumacher had thought that, even if he became tense, he could keep a level head. But all of that had gone out the window once an enemy stood in front of him.

I'm gonna die. I'm gonna kill it. Oh, crap. Those were the only three thoughts in his head as he swung his sword around. He had no clue what he was doing.

And yet, the next thing he knew, he was standing atop a monster's dead body. Everyone was wheezing, their shoulders heaving with each labored breath.

He stared at the cadaver. It had a head like a dog, or maybe a lizard. But that didn't matter.

"Nobody's dead...right?"

"Uh, right."

"P-Probably..."

Maybe we can pull this off.

The dungeon was a frightening place. Schumacher wouldn't deny that.

But maybe it's not as bad as dad's been making it out to be, he thought. *The six of us haven't learned magic or anything. We just brought weapons, but we're still alive.*

"Okay, let's pull out. We should call it a day—"

"Hey, it's open!" came an exuberant shout from the corner of the burial chamber.

The locksmith's son had gotten the chest open. Schumacher gulped at the golden light that poured forth from inside.

Scale was awash in gold, but that didn't mean all of the residents saw it. Nobody in Schumacher's party had ever made this kind of money before. In retrospect, he would reflect and realize that he must have been literally blinded by greed. If there was a point when things could have gone down a different path, this was it.

"What do you say...we keep going a little farther?"

"Y-Yeah." Someone nodded. "We can keep going. Let's do it!"

"We said we're gonna kill the dragon. If we settle for doing just one room before we go home, we're never gonna pull it off..."

Some of them were likely forcing themselves—going with the flow or just acting stubborn—but the decision was unanimous.

"Let's go," Schumacher said. They marched onward to the next burial chamber.

Their luck held out, but perhaps...that in itself was bad luck.

They won.

The next burial chamber contained a slimy creature that bubbled ominously. Surrounding the ooze, they whaled on it with their weapons until it dissipated. They were able to open the treasure chest here too.

Then on to the next chamber—and the next.

They continued advancing with feverish enthusiasm, racking up wins and treasure. But, at some point, they realized.

“Which way’s the path back home...?”

“Huh?”

His party member stared at him vacantly. Schumacher instantly seized the man by the front of his shirt, demanding, “Hey, you were drawing a map, weren’t you?!”

“Uh, I *was*, but...”

Schumacher looked at the map he held out. It was rough work, but he could still figure out the path they’d taken.

The problem wasn’t with the map, though.

He looked up. The dungeon spread out across his field of vision, identical no matter where they went. Almost interminable stone floors and walls. A bizarre darkness that obscured their vision only a few steps ahead. He looked to the left, to the right, to the front, to the back—the same sight spread out in all directions.

Schumacher was shocked.

“Wh-What do we do?”

“We’re in trouble, aren’t we?”

“No... Let’s move forward. It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. Maybe it’ll work out somehow...”

“Should we really be moving around?”

“Who’s gonna come save us if we just stand here?!”

The party, his friends from the surface, were divided in their opinions. They needed to decide on a leader—but they didn't know that. No, even if they had known, they wouldn't have done it. They were friends. No one was above or below anyone else.

Schumacher had proposed this adventure, but that was all—he wasn't their commanding officer. As such, they couldn't decide what to do. No one was able to make that call.

"A-Anyway, let's go forward! It's better than sitting still."

"R-Right..."

Nevertheless, Schumacher raised his voice. Took action. However, it was not with everyone's approval.

Little by little, things started to fall apart.

"No, this isn't the way..."

"You're the one who chose this corridor, right?!"

"Well, which do you think was the right one?!"

Being reckless, thoughtless, and rash were privileges of youth. No one could have laughed at them for what they did.

But the courage that'd driven them continually onward was now waning. The dungeon's depths seemed endless. Monsters stalked the area around them, making it impossible to move forward or go back. The walls started to feel oppressive, like they were closing in.

Schumacher's breathing quickened. *What do we do?* He looked in all directions.

"Hm?"

Because he was peering around, he was the first to notice. The pebbles scattered at his feet were trembling slightly.

What?

Before he could put voice to this observation, he felt his body lurch upward—a tremor shook the ground.

The air filled with a strange, sickly stench.

Something was coming. Something massive. Terrible. Unstoppable.

“Wh-Whaaa?!”

“H-Hey, don’t tell me—it can’t be?!”

In an instant, they finally remembered—*this* was what they had descended into the dungeon to defeat.

“SSSKREEEEEEEEEONK!!!”

The dragon.

§

A ferocious burst of hot wind and miasma blew into the burial chamber from the corridor, scorching the air.

“Eek?!” Garbage yelped, jumping away from the door.

“I-Is it...?!” Berkanan looked down at the sword in her hands, confused. Her blade burned with pale light. The ringing sound, like a sword being drawn or sheathed, was high-pitched—and rising.

Berkanan shuddered.

“The dragon...!”

“It’s gotta be...”

The Dragon Slayer was humming. For Raraja, that settled it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

It was out there. In the corridor beyond this burial chamber.

Of course, they’d come here to face it. He hadn’t lost focus (HP). He could do this. He knew he should be able to.

But...!

Raraja felt his grip tighten around the dagger in his right hand. *Let’s go.* He couldn’t say those two simple words. His throat ached; his gaze wandered. He looked to the back row—to Iarumas.

“You got your wish.” Iarumas was smiling. In the middle of the dungeon, lit up

by MILWA, it looked like a void had opened up. Darkness in human form. No face, no nothing. It was just something—a shadow—with the name Iarumas.

But the shadow soon took on the form of a black-clad mage, letting out a low, deeply amused laugh. Iarumas went on, enjoying this as if they were out for a stroll. “Are we going?”

“I’m ready anytime.” Sister Ainikki’s long ears swayed. “But it’s up to the rest of you.”

Up to the rest of them...

Me, thought Raraja. *I’ll go. But I’m not the one who ought to say it.*

“Hey.”

“Huh? Oh.” Berkanan blinked. “M-Me...?”

“Is there anyone else?”

Well, actually...

“Woof!” Garbage barked, raring to go.

“I... I...” Berkanan stared down at the Dragon Slayer she held in her hands.

Slash. Kill. Go. It was like the humming of her blade was impelling Berkanan to move. There was no time to delay. She knew that. The stench of sulfur hung in the air. She sensed the dragon nearby. They couldn’t let this moment slip away. The dragon had breathed fire. It would take time to fill its lungs again.

Was that the will of the Dragon Slayer flowing into her? Or was it Berkanan’s own delusion? She couldn’t tell.

There were reasons to go and reasons to stay back. Would it work out? Was this choice of her own will?

Berkanan took a deep breath, then exhaled.

“I think...I’ll go...!”

She took a step forward. A second, then a third. With a fourth, she walked past Garbage in the doorway.

“Arf!”

That was a compliment.

Why did Berkanan think that? Because after that bark, Garbage trotted up alongside her, matching her pace for a fifth step.

“Oh, come on. Please, let Garbage be the only one who goes charging in on her own...”

Raraja came with them, despite his attitude.

“Sorry.” Berkanan smiled. Somehow, she sensed she was going to be okay now.

She heard Iarumas and Ainikki walking behind them. There was no need to count her steps anymore.

Heading from the chamber out into the corridor, she no longer needed the sword’s guidance. The miasma told her where to go.

The back of the corridor—a door had once been there. Had it been burned away, or had someone kicked it in?

With a sense of determination, Berkanan stepped through the gaping entrance to the burial chamber.

It’s here.

She knew this—it wasn’t thanks to MILWA or the howling of her magic sword. It wasn’t even because of the young man next to the door, fused to his half-melted armor, gasping, on the verge of death.

She stuck her tongue out slightly to lick her dry lips.

No, she knew because, in the darkness before her, there was an overwhelming presence.

A massive body, red like molten rock. It moved, scales glistening like they were wet. It flapped wings so large that they seemed to obscure the ceiling, sending a gust of miasma into Berkanan’s face.

The beast raised its head, mouth full of fangs so sharp that they could chew through steel.

“Y-Y—” Berkanan’s voice trembled. Her hands tightened around the magic

sword. She stepped forward, taking a breath, standing straight, gazing upward. “Y-You...may not...remember me, but...!”

Eyes filled with white-hot fire—the dragon *looked* at Berkanan.

And Berkanan roared, “I haven’t forgotten you!”

Thus, the battle began.

Chapter 7: Dragon

“SSSKREEEEEEEEEEONK!!!”

The soul-grinding roar of a dragon shook the burial chamber and agitated the air.

That monstrous cry alone was enough to blow away Berkanan’s focus (HP), yet she still rushed desperately forward.

“W-Wahhh! Wahhhhhhhhh...!!!”

It looked almost as though she was being pulled along by the magic sword. However, this momentum would have been impossible had she not taken the first steps on her own. She had mustered her courage, even as she was terrified, cowering, and trembling—that was why Berkanan was here now.

“Don’t get scared! We’re doing this!”

“Grrrr!”

And that was also why her comrades—Raraja and Garbage—followed her.

The boy held a dagger as he psyched himself up and broke off to the right. The redheaded girl raced to the left, broadsword in hand. Though they had split up as a precaution against the dragon’s fiery breath, the three youths stood bravely against their foe.

Watching them, Ainikki’s beautiful lips curled into a smile. She wouldn’t let anything get in their way.

“Mimuzanme nuun tai nuunzanme (*Let sound stop like iron and words hang in the air*)!”

She wove these true words, so much like the language of the dragons, into an elegant melody. This silver-haired elf knew better than to underestimate a dragon that could even use magic.

Berkanan never noticed the shackle of MONTINO’s silence close around the beast’s throat. She didn’t have the mental capacity to spare. Besides, she’d never known that fire dragons could use magic in the first place.

No, she only knew one thing.

Its lungs aren't completely filled yet...!

That was something the sword had told her, but it was also her own wish, her own hope. Clinging to that hope, she stepped in, winding back into an unfamiliar fighting stance, preparing to swing the blade, but—

"Huh...?"

—just before she did, she stopped, standing there in a daze, unable to process the meaning of the white light emanating from deep inside the dragon's maw.

"ROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!!"

"Uhargh?! Agh, arghh?! Hot! Hooot?!?!?!"

She hardly felt the heat—only pain. Berkanan's skin peeled, and her exposed nerves felt like they were being crushed. As blue and white flames consumed her field of vision, Berkanan screamed, her cries reduced to weeping.

"Uh, uh, uhhhhhh!"

She bit down hard on her lip, hoisting the Dragon Slayer that she was holding tightly in both hands. If there wasn't much air in her lungs, then she just needed to hold on to what she had left.

It was bad luck that the cunning red death had recognized the Dragon Slayer as its enemy. Yet, in a stroke of better fortune, it had not given a second glance to the other riffraff in the chamber. It targeted only Berkanan with its breath—the flames scorched her flesh, but her magic sword tore through the inferno.

The "big shield" of MAPORFIC was still intact. As were the guts (HP) she had cultivated as a fighter. Berkanan stood her ground.

"I-It's just...pain... That's...all it is...!"

Her voice was mostly a whine, but nonetheless, Berkanan remained, valiantly fighting the dragon. This also meant that she was drawing the enemy's attention, putting her life on the line to protect her companions, and creating an opportunity.

Raraja and Garbage sprang at the fire dragon without delay.

“Take this!”

“Woof!”

Raraja, at least, didn’t expect his dagger to work against the dragon. He was a thief—he accepted that Garbage was the party’s main damage dealer. The redheaded monsters’ leftovers might have been like a yappy, annoying stray dog, but he’d vouch for her skill with a blade.

That’s why, instead of going for a critical strike, he swung his knife toward the dragon’s forelegs, at the base of its claws—to take attention away from Berkanan and Garbage.

He prayed it hurt at least as much as being stung by an insect.

“Rrrruuufff!”

Meanwhile, Garbage ground to a halt, planting both legs and transferring momentum to her broadsword. Was she being swung around by the blade? Or was she dancing? Either way, she struck with all the might in her scrawny body.

Had they been facing an orc—even if it’d parried her blow—she would have cleaved straight through its body, armor and all. The dragon’s legs were built like thick trees covered in scales, but Garbage saw no reason why she couldn’t cut through them too.

“Agh?!”

“Eek?!”

“Ungh?!”

The fire dragon casually swatted the two of them away with its front legs and tail, then descended, jaws wide, lunging at Berkanan.

Claw, claw, tail, fangs. Three screams echoed throughout the room.

Sent flying like a pebble, Raraja bounced across the stone floor several times, then rolled. His vision was blurred from the pain, but he saw Garbage sailing through the air like a piece of refuse.

“Ahhh?!”

There was a sound like fruit being smashed. A yelp of pain ripped its way out

of Garbage's throat as she hit the wall. She dropped to the ground, unmoving.

However...Berkanan had it even worse.

"Urgh?! Agh?! Guh...?! Eagh?!"

Hearing the screams, Raraja crawled along the ground. He peered up.

It was an awful crunching noise. The crack of teeth crushing flesh and bone. The slick sound of organs being torn apart and eaten.

Though the gaps in the dragon's fangs, Raraja saw Berkanan's white limbs—they jerked and flailed each time the dragon chewed. It seemed unreal that she was still alive...but they had the spell to thank for that. Another thing they owed Sister Ainikki for.

If Raraja had survived, then Garbage was fine too. And so was Berkanan, for the moment. That's why he had to act now.

But what *could* he do? Raraja ground his teeth, unable to decide on a course of action.

"Unghhhhhh...!"

Even if his bones were broken, or his innards crushed, so long as his limbs still worked, he had to stand—walk—*do it*.

Each time an adventurer delved into the dungeon, they moved further and further from the bounds of humanity. If this was true, then he was surely no exception. Raraja wasn't positive, but he had to believe that—it was the only thing supporting his body now.

I need to do something! Somehow!

"Mimuarif nuuni fozanme (*O stone with a heart, reveal your proper form before the light*)!"

It was like divine intervention.

As Sister Ainikki raised her voice and chanted MANIFO, a beam of light appeared and bound the fire dragon.

Raraja couldn't have known this, but it was a second-level spell, closer to the bottom of the power scale than the top. The dragon of red death would not

become still as a statue. At best, the spell might create those conditions for an instant—but that instant was enough for Iarumas, who was already forming signs with one hand.

"Daruila tazanme (*O darkness, come*)!"

DILTO. This darkness spell was also second-level, but it hid the adventurers from the fire dragon's eyes. The effect was incomparably weaker than the one that'd been cast by Egam borrowing the power of the amulet, but darkness was darkness.

The dragon froze—its vision was shrouded. There was only one thing to do now.

"Screw youuuuu!!!" Raraja screamed, cursing at his body which ached as if all his bones were shattered.

He raced across the burial chamber.

First, he slipped past the raging dragon's feet. He lifted Garbage, who was lying on the ground, and threw her light body. He didn't need to see where she landed. As long as it was in Iarumas's general vicinity, the mage could take it from there.

"Ngh, rahhhhhh...!!!!"

Raraja then turned to Berkanan, who had slipped out of the dragon's fangs, and yanked her battered body away from the beast. She twitched, bleeding from her wounds with each hard spasm. But she was alive. That was enough.

As Raraja dragged Berkanan, it was like her body was a paintbrush—a long stroke of bloodred trailed behind her across the stone floor.

He moved toward Iarumas, Garbage, and Ainikki—the elf stood ready to protect them with mace and shield.

"Ah...hh..."

Garbage twitched repeatedly in Iarumas's arms. Her breathing was irregular.

"I see you're not dead."

That may have been true, but it was also true that she was only barely

conscious. In this state, she wouldn't last long. There were few means of treating her. But they did exist. And, most importantly, if she fell here, it would be expensive to resurrect her.

Iarumas quickly gripped Garbage's jaw in his fingers, prying it open. Red blood gushed out. Perhaps it had happened when she'd smashed against the wall—Garbage had bitten her tongue when she'd impacted the wall—it was caught in her throat.

"Glurgh...guh..." A muffled gurgle escaped Garbage's windpipe. She was choking on her tongue and drowning in her own blood.

Iarumas thrust his fingers into her mouth, unconcerned with the risk of her biting them, and immediately dislodged the obstructing meat of the girl's tongue. Supporting the back of her head, he lowered her jaw. Then, he pulled out a Potion of DIOS and poured it into his own mouth. Without hesitation, he pressed his lips to Garbage's as he held her in his arms, giving her the potion mouth-to-mouth.

A brief pause, then—*gulp*. Her scrawny throat moved ever so slightly.

"Ah?!"

The effect was dramatic.

Her delicate, underfed body twitched and shuddered. Blue eyes shot open. Her blurry vision came into focus.

"Ew?!"

The girl bit down on Iarumas's lips without the slightest hesitation, then tore herself free from his arms and jumped away. Her sharp eyes fixed on him, demanding, as if she wanted to ask, *"What exactly do you think you're doing?!"*

Garbage was back to her normal self. It was hard to believe she'd been on the verge of death mere moments ago.

"Grrrraaaarrrr!" she snarled.

"Good."

Using his sleeve to wipe the blood from his fingers and lips, Iarumas tossed another potion bottle to the growling Garbage.

“Drink it. You’re not done yet.”

“Woof!”

Her eyes remained set on him, deeply distrustful, but she nonetheless downed the potion. Once he saw that she’d drunk it, Iarumas stood up.

The roaring dragon. Raraja and Berkanan.

“Aine.”

“Right!”

It was time to switch positions.

Iarumas moved up to the front, holding his black rod at the ready, while Ainikki rushed over to Berkanan’s side. A clear sound of impact—the black rod parried the blind swings of the red dragon’s claws and fangs.

As that went on in the background, Raraja took a wheezing breath. He felt as though he’d hacked up a glob of blood.

“She’s gonna make it... Right?!”

“Ahhh...!” Berkanan was sobbing. “Ow...!”

“Yes, please rest assured of that.” Aine smiled gently. Her expression felt out of place here, yet so reliable. “The battle is yet raging, and the god Kadorto must surely know the value of seeing this to its conclusion!”

This isn’t where you ought to meet your ends. Sister Ainikki believed that from the bottom of her heart. And so, as she raised her palm toward the two of them—Raraja and Berkanan—a warm light appeared.

“Darui arifla mimuarif (*O power of life, pervade in all things*)...”

The curing power of DIALMA spread through Raraja’s body, knitting bone and reconnecting tissue. It did the same for Berkanan. Her skin—stained black and red, yet still deathly pale—flushed as the heat returned to it. Her cruelly gouged flesh seemed to swell up, bubbling, before regaining its original beauty.

Berkanan gasped. “Th...ank...you...”

“Yeah, thanks, you saved us!”

Ainikki, smiling at their words of gratitude, replied, “You aren’t asking me why I didn’t cast MADI, I see.”

“Hey,” Iarumas called out to them. The adventurer of the black rod leaped back and away from the fire dragon—the beast’s attacks had managed to tear away the magical darkness of DILTO. Iarumas shouted, “It’s getting ready to breathe!”

“Seriously?!” Raraja groaned as his reenergized body fell into a combat stance, hand gripping his dagger. He was surprised that he hadn’t dropped it. By the same token, Berkanan and Garbage were both still holding their weapons tight. He couldn’t be sure if that meant they’d all grown as adventurers, but...

“What do we do? Run away again?!”

“Grrrr!”

Garbage’s answer went without saying. Broadsword held at the ready, her will to fight showed no sign of flagging.

“I don’t imagine that it will let us go that easily,” Sister Ainikki answered, holding up her mace and shield with a smile. Then, in a whisper, “I should have brought a sword.” She sounded somewhat disappointed.

Raraja looked at Berkanan.

Silence.

There was something gaunt about her expression. Her hands trembled on the hilt of her magical sword. That burning blade was still emitting a low growl in the face of its hated enemy—regardless of the state of its bearer.

“I...” She forced a hoarse voice from her horribly dry throat. “I’m...”

“There’s no need to be so pessimistic,” Iarumas murmured briefly as he jumped back and away.

The fire dragon did not pursue. A whirlwind was forming in the dungeon. *Whoosh, whoosh.* Dry wind rushed past them. The dragon, raising its long neck, had opened its jaws and was sucking in air, filling its lungs with miasma. Then, the moment they were full...

“After all, you’ve been able to fight against the fire dragon,” Iarumas finished.

Berkanan gritted her teeth. She stood up, Dragon Slayer in hand. Before her was the massive dragon of red death. The moment drew near—soon, its flaming breath would burn everything away.

Not a second to spare. No room to hesitate. Berkanan cleared her throat, then said, “I...umm...have an idea...!”

“Well then,” Iarumas said, sounding truly amused. His lips formed a grin. “Let’s go with it.”

§

“SSSKREEEEEEEEEEONK!!!”

The setup seemed to be a redux of their previous attack: in the face of the dragon’s roar, three adventurers took off in three different directions. However, the beast’s glaring eyes were focused on the black-clad man in the back row, the elf, and—

“Y-Yahhhhhhhh...!!!”

—the magic sword in the hands of the lanky girl. Her cries had become so desperate it was comical, and the dragon needed to kill her. It needed to destroy the sword before the sword destroyed it, for that blade was the natural enemy of all dragons.

As for the little whelp holding it—the dragon of red death didn’t view her as any threat at all. It had gnawed on her, crushed her, and yet she had failed to die, had continued to stand before it. If nothing else, the beast approved of her foolishness.

She was no fighter. Her large frame was just for show. She was a maiden with tender flesh...drunk on the sword’s power.

The dragon was no longer so immature as to get excited over her virgin blood, but the taste of it had cleared the haze from its mind. It had been suddenly dragged into this hole. Given orders by insolent curs who’d dared to treat it like livestock. It had no intention of obeying them, but also no reason to leave things as they were.

The fire dragon meant to bury the Dragon Slayer here as a prelude to laying

waste to the surface.

“ROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!!”

The dragon exhaled, unleashing all the heat and miasma from its lungs. This was the breath of the strongest of dragons, able to burn away everything in this world. Its hellfire might have paled in comparison to the legendary TILTOWAIT, but it was equal to the fourth-level LAHALITO, and possibly greater.

In the face of an inferno that could burn away her very soul, Berkanan...

“Iarumas, Ainikki!”

Berkanan would hesitate no more.

“I’ll match your timing.” Iarumas’s voice was cold. “Do as you like.”

“I’m ready anytime!” cried Aine.

“Okay!”

Nodding at their responses, Berkanan opened her mouth. She knew Iarumas would follow her lead.

Chanting voices overlapped.

“Hea lai tazanme (*Flames, come forth*)!”

It was almost like they were singing in rounds.

This was the first-level spell, so basic as to be insignificant in this dungeon—Berkanan had been taught that this was her ultimate technique.

HALITO.

Twin fireballs swirled around one another, tearing across the burial chamber in a double helix, and slammed straight into the dragon’s breath.

Hot wind blew violently. The red dragon continued, unconcerned, its eyes twisting with a mocking smile. The combined power might have equaled the third-level MAHALITO. But that was all. It couldn’t push back a dragon’s fire.

“Lai tazanme kafaref nuun (*O flames, become a towering tempest and invite death*)!”

Instantly, a pillar of flame raced forth to support the two fireballs, shoving

back the dragon's inferno. Sister Ainikki offered a prayer as her silver hair streamed in the hot wind. Her spell was counted among the fifth-level—holy flames bestowed on the priests by the gods. However, it only had the same power as MAHALITO. Which meant...

"This is good enough for now!" Sister Ainikki boasted. The corners of her mouth spread into a ferocious grin, like a predator taking aim at her prey.

The double helix of MAHALITO fused with the flaming pillar of LITOKAN and swung down on their opponent like a scorching hammer.

"Basically," Iarumas said in a dry voice, his eyes narrowing, "it's LAHALITO."

This torch, formed by three overlapping incantations, collided head-on with the dragon's breath.

An explosion. The burial chamber filled with white light—the air seared. Thunderous calamity robbed them of sight and sound.

"ROOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAR!!!"

As the world was whited out, the fire dragon *tightened* its throat.

Ah, yes. These whelps with their finite lives had done well, racking their little brains to try and defeat it. But that had only been possible due to the dragon's negligence—it had, in a way, gotten lazy by simply trying to incinerate everything.

Did they think it couldn't do what it had before?

The beast's breath rapidly grew sharper, almost like a blade, tearing apart their LAHALITO, piercing through the flames. It was aimed at just one person—one sword. The Dragon Slayer held in the girl's hands.

"Ahhhhhhhhh!!!" Her scream was like a shriek. Or perhaps a battle cry. Her terrified tears instantly evaporated in the extreme heat. Regardless, Berkanan didn't back away a single step. She faced the lethal stream of heat, pointing the Dragon Slayer into it.

If it blows the sword away, I'm dead...!

Her hands trembled. The Dragon Slayer shook, howling, as Berkanan's sandals ground against the stone floor. It felt like she would be pushed back. Like she'd

be crushed. It was scorching. It hurt. She was going to die. She was scared. Scared.

But that's all...!

"Aghhhhhhhhhhhhh...!" Berkanan didn't know what, if anything, she was saying...but she desperately resisted the dragon's flames.

Hellfire danced in the dragon's eyes. First came the girl with the Dragon Slayer. Then the spellcasters on either side of her. The dragon didn't even register the rest of the riffraff. It didn't feel any need to.

That's why, right beneath the thunderous noise, white light, and miasma that threatened to blot out the world—

"I've just gotta do it from a place where it can't kick me!"

—Raraja was running, unchecked, as hard as he could.

His feet beat across the stone floor, seeming like they might trip him up. His hands scraped the ground, fingers burning. Forward. To the side of the dragon.

The dragon—yes, a dragon. Yeesh, it seemed so ridiculous. His cheek twitched, distorting the corner of his smile.

Indeed, he had to smile.

He'd left the countryside, had ended up a bottom-feeder here in Scale, and now, here he was. The pile of bones in the back alley—the rhea girl who'd died with a crossbow bolt embedded in her forehead—Raraja himself. What was the difference between them?

He didn't know. The dragon before him seemed like it ought to be able to kill with a look. And yet...

One shot wasn't enough. Not even a kick from a dragon could kill me. Raraja smiled. He was frightened, but also deeply amused. His hand tightened around his dagger, held in a backhand grip. He stepped up forcefully, as if planning to leap, and wound back to strike.

"Rahhh!"

He certainly wouldn't have considered it a lethal hit, but it was the finest

strike Raraja had ever made. It was, without a shadow of a doubt, critical.

The dagger he'd thrown with all his might turned into a silver dart and buried itself—

"AAARRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGH?!"

—deep into one of the dragon's eyes.

"How'd you like that?!"

The dragon writhed in unbearable pain, reeling. Its long neck rose. Its breath tore up the floor and stone walls. It melted the ceiling.

Molten rock dripped down like rain, and Garbage saw it—the dragon, head thrown back.

"Grrrrrrr!"

Garbage growled, brandished her broadsword, and pounced on the fire dragon without hesitation. Zigzagging left and right like a bolt of lightning, dodging the hot drops of rain, she closed in. One step—two steps—three steps.

She'd hated this huge thing from the beginning. Sure, it had surprised her at first. She accepted that. As much as it galled her to admit such a thing, Garbage knew she was clever. But she still couldn't tolerate it.

The huge thing never looked at her. Belittling mockery—that's what she saw in its eyes.

She'd never tolerated that kind of treatment. Not once.

"Awooooooooooo!!!"

The steel blade, swung by that petite body, buried itself deep inside the dragon's belly—then hacked through.

"SSSKREEEEEEEEEEONK?!?!?!"

The dragon's blood, like molten iron, spurted out, showering Garbage from head to toe. Her red hair got redder. Her cloak and her white skin were dyed crimson. Licking the blood from her cheeks, she bared her teeth.

Maybe this huge thing with the yucky blood wasn't all that clever. *What a moron, exposing its belly like that.*

“Yap!”

“Wahhhhhhhh...!”

Hearing Garbage’s bark, Berkanan cried out and leaped forward. Her whole body felt hot and painful. It was hard to breathe, and her vision was blurry, but...

She was holding the Dragon Slayer.

Her arms threatened to droop under its weight—her knees seemed ready to give out from beneath her.

You can’t possibly do it, whispered the voices in her mind.

Slow Berka. Dull Berka. Blundering Berka. Useless Berka.

Shut! Up!

I’m going to kill the dragon. Slay it. That’s what I came here to do. All this way. All this way...!

She gritted her teeth. Tightened her grip on the magic sword. Stepped in. Suddenly, several scenes flashed through her mind. Instantaneous, disjointed—a series of ridiculous images.

Her grandmother in her homeland. The dragon’s jaws. The frog. Flames. The dungeon. Raraja. The dragonflies. And lastly, behind the tavern, under the moonlight.

She saw the flash of a broadsword. The Dragon Slayer moved as if tracing its path. It seemed to dance. She didn’t resist. She thought she saw the gold ring sparkle on her finger. As if guided by it, Berkanan swung her arms up.

The disemboweled dragon’s long neck drooped. Fire burned in its eyes. Its gaze was fixed in her direction. At the sword. At Berkanan.

Jaws swung open. Flames crackled in the back of its throat.

What did she care? Bring it on. She was doing this.

Berkanan stretched her long form like a taut bow drawn to its limit, then unleashed the Dragon Slayer with all her might. The blade sliced through the concentrated ray of heat, and from there, it traced an arc.

The dragon’s eyes went wide. Shock. Terror.

“Y-Yahhhhhhhhhhh...!”

The Dragon Slayer did its job. That blade, forged for the sole purpose of vanquishing dragons, easily tore through scales, chewing through the flesh and bones of this apex creature like it was feasting.

Fire and blood erupted from the open wounds.

The dragon couldn’t even let out one last death cry. Berkanan tensed her arms even more, bearing down, cleaving all the way through.

A dull thud. The dragon’s head fell. She’d decapitated it.

It was a lethal blow (critical hit).

“Ah...”

The Dragon Slayer ripped into the stone floor and got stuck there.

Her breathing ragged, Berkanan stared vacantly at the massive body before her—a headless dragon. Mere moments ago, it had reigned as death incarnate. Now, it was completely powerless.

The massive body began to tip, like a boulder in a landslide. Its front legs snapped—it was falling apart. With a heavy thud, the fire dragon fell over onto its side.

All Berkanan could see was the dragon’s head. Those lifeless eyes would never burn again.

Only a slight, lingering flame remained, flickering where blood dripped from the severing slice—eventually, that extinguished too.

The red dragon of death...was dead.



§

No one said anything for quite some time. In the silence of the dungeon, only the labored breaths of adventurers echoed across the stone.

Berkanan stared vacantly in front of her at the head of the red dragon—into the eyes of the monster that had once immolated her, had just tried to chomp her to death. Those eyes had clouded over like two glassy orbs. No light lingered in them anymore.

She said nothing. The sword slipped from her hands. She fell on her backside and just sat there, exhausted.

What had she done? What was she looking at? She couldn't believe it at all.

Suddenly, her vision blurred and distorted. She found that tears were streaming from the corners of her eyes, wetting her cheeks.

"Arf."

The next thing Berkanan knew, Garbage had trotted over and barked right next to her. The redheaded girl swiped a hand across her own face and body, trying to remove some of the blood that was coating her skin. Then, she peered at Berkanan's face.

She let out a whine. Maybe that meant, *What's wrong? Are you okay? Yeesh.* Or, perhaps, *Well done.*

Even if Berkanan didn't know for sure, hearing it still made her happy. So happy she could cry.

"Uh, uhhh, uhhhhh...!"

"Yap?!"

Berkanan exhaled a weak-breathed moan that barely caught on her vocal cords and then wrapped her arms around the other girl's thin, delicate body.

The embrace bewildered Garbage at first. She started to twist around, resisting. However, perhaps she had another thought—she soon gave up and went limp, letting Berkanan do as she pleased.

At the feeling of a little palm mussing her black hair, Berkanan silently wept.

“Are you all right with this, Raraja-sama?”

“Being a hero’s not really my thing...”

The boy was just watching them—or rather, he didn’t have the will to stand. Raraja was too exhausted. As for Ainikki, who was standing beside him, she was all smiles despite the intense battle they’d just been through.

I guess, ultimately, she’s the same as Iarumas, Raraja concluded with a sense of resignation. Surely this was just how adventurers were.

He didn’t know if he could become like that, but... Well, it didn’t matter right now. He wasn’t interested in earning a name for himself as one of the heroes who’d slain the dragon...but the title did make his heart dance. Someone like him, whose name would never be recorded in history, had fought a dragon in the dungeon—and killed it.

He felt two emotions rise in his chest: a sense that this was enough, and a desire for more, to move on to the next challenge. Still, as Raraja was considering going to retrieve his dagger from the dragon’s eye, he glanced beside him.

The silver-haired elf, that beautiful nun, gazed gently down at him and asked, “Did you have something to say?”

“Uh, yeah,” Raraja muttered. He looked away, averting his eyes. “Thanks.”

“Oh, think nothing of it.” Sister Ainikki smiled. “I enjoyed myself.”

He saw where she was looking as she spoke—at the man in black, Iarumas, who stood over by the wall, alone.

Iarumas was staring at the dragon’s head and body where they lay, forever silent, on their sides. It wouldn’t rise again. *Well, as long as the master of the dungeon doesn’t raise it as a dragon zombie.* Those rotting corpse dragons easily deflected lesser spells due to the curse that held their bodies together. If they had faced such an opponent, they wouldn’t have emerged victorious. That was Iarumas’s view.

They would have fallen to a t’ien lung too. Or a firedrake, which had transcended the realm of fire dragons to become a spirit. Or a black dragon,

with its frightening melee combat abilities. Or an evil gold dragon...

Memories of dragons swirled through Iarumas's head. Were they real, or simply delusions?

Either way, if I move forward, I'll find out.

Removing his hand from the black rod hanging at his hip—his sword—Iarumas let out a sigh.

Somehow, they'd managed to overcome it. No one had died. He had no complaints. And yet, he was a bit dissatisfied about one thing: as a wandering monster, the dragon did not have a treasure chest.

If we bring back the scales, fangs, and whatnot...they'll be worth some coin.

It was probably fine. Nothing to get sour about. No, he was in quite a good mood. He'd long since stopped feeling any sort of excitement or sense of accomplishment—that was what he'd thought, at least.

But Iarumas couldn't say what kind of guy he'd been in the past.

He felt as though he'd explored the dungeon for a long time, yet he didn't believe he was the sort who would have accomplished anything all that special. At the very least, he was pleased by Berkanan, Garbage, and Raraja's growth.

Now we can journey onward.

Deeper. Ever deeper. The depths of the dungeon. To Iarumas, this was all there was.

If he told Sister Ainikki that, she'd probably say something like, "Well now!" and arch her pretty eyebrows. Iarumas shrugged as he imagined the scene. Some things were better left unsaid.

"Ur...gh..."

"Oops..." Iarumas murmured.

At that moment, a faint moan reminded him of the existence of something—he strode over to the door. A single adventurer was cowering there, his armor half destroyed. Come to think of it, if these men hadn't made the dragon exhaust its breath, things would have gone quite differently.

Not eager to ignore the man with Sister Ainikki around, Iarumas placed a hand on his shoulder. The man he'd thought was a corpse jerked and shuddered.

"Are you alive?"

A sigh he couldn't identify as either a "Yes" or "Mm-hmm" escaped from the man's charred lips.

"You're a lucky one." Iarumas smiled. Then, seeming to recall something, he added, "Let me buy you a drink when we get back."

Chapter 8: Contra-Dextra Avenue

“I see,” said Prospero, “that a lot happened while I was dead.”

Durga’s Tavern was exceedingly noisy—you’d have thought it was a holiday of some sort. Adventurers, merchants, and residents alike raised their cups in celebration.

The red dragon was dead!

That accursed dragon was dead!

The dragon of red death was finally dead!

Even the tavern’s owner, Gilgamesh, was in high spirits. He cracked open a barrel with an axe, declaring that drinks were on the house.

The stale air in Scale would blow away in no time. Even the usually leaden sky was, today, blue.

In the midst of all this ruckus, Prospero was sitting back and relaxing, having heard the tale of what’d transpired in his absence. With exaggerated motions, he poured himself a cup from the jar and elegantly took a sip. “And because of all that, I was able to be resurrected. I also get to enjoy a fine drink like this.”

“Don’t sulk about us leaving you dead awhile, Prospero.” Sezmar took a swig of beer, then tore into his grilled meat. The man could make anything he ate look delicious. “Thanks to you taking an extended dirt nap, we made more money than we ever would’ve if we’d gone hunting that dragon.”

“Well, Iarumas’ll be buying drinks for everyone too, but that’s gonna have to wait until later,” Moradin said, grinning, as he returned to the table. He held plates, stacked high, balanced on both of his hands. It was like he’d just gone and borrowed them from the tavern’s kitchen. This in itself was a sign that the flow of goods from other regions into Scale had resumed.

“You talked to the owner first, I hope?” asked High Priest Tuck.

“Of course. Nothing good ever comes from pissing off Gilgamesh.”

“Then all is well.”

Today, even the perennially complaining (at least, according to Moradin and Sarah) High Priest Tuck was smiling. He stuffed his stomach like it was a bag, packing away food and drink with a truly dwarflike voracity.

I haven't seen High Priest Tuck like this in a while, Sarah thought, before suddenly turning to Prospero. "Hey, not that I'm suspicious or anything, but can a mage really behead a dragon?"

"Well, it's not *impossible.*" Prospero gladly answered her question. Apparently, he wasn't in *that* bad of a mood, not really. His current high spirits might've had something to do with the mound of gold coins piled up in front of him. Mages could be an odd sort, but few lacked a fondness for gold. "I couldn't do it myself, but I know a way it might be accomplished."

"And what way would that be?" asked Sarah.

"The girl, Berkanan, was wearing a ring, right?"

"Yes," High Priest Tuck confirmed, his mustache full of frothy foam, "though I missed it during the appraisal. Haven't seen it since."

"In that case, it was probably a Trollkin Ring. Do you know of them, High Priest?"

"The Trollkin Ring. I've heard it has the power of healing and an ability to bring about lethal blows."

Quietly, Hawkwind murmured, "Is that what that was?" He was not usually the sort to eat or drink at this type of party, and today was no exception—he was just sitting at the table with them. No one let that bother them. The man was surprisingly good at getting along with others.

Prospero turned to Hawkwind. "Probably," he said, waving his hand. "I'm not a bishop, I'm certainly not Catlob, and I haven't seen the item in question. I can't say anything for certain."

"Okay, Prospero," Sezmar said, licking the grease from his fingers. "Can I ask you a question?"

"If it's one I can answer."

"I've been wondering... How could a mage swing around a sword the way a

fighter does?”

Sarah pursed her lips. “It’s because Berkanan-chan tried really hard, obviously.”

“Is that how it works?” Sezmar asked.

“It is,” she replied succinctly, her long ears elegantly swaying. Cheerily, she served herself another drink from the jar. Sarah had been drinking and partying a lot lately—she’d apparently decided that she could regret it later.

“And Garbage-chan did too.”

“And Raraja.”

“But not Iarumas.”

The All-Stars, even Hawkwind, all guffawed at that. They got along well with the adventurer of the black rod. Always had. Always would. Neither party owed the other anything.

They had all been genuinely pleased to see him taking the three youngsters under his wing.

One result of that was nearby—a young man sat at the counter in the center of the raucous tavern. He was a wreck. Half his body was covered in bandages, and he smelled somewhat like the ointment used to treat burns. There was a darkness in his eyes typical of an adventurer who’d lost most of his companions. He’d get used to it soon enough.

It was a rare occurrence for an upstart to have more experienced adventurers gathered around him.

“Hey, is it really true?”

“You sure you’re not exaggerating? Any chance you just saw it wrong?”

“Well, how about it? You made it to the dragon, didn’t you, bud? Tell us how it was.”

“Yeah...” the adventurer mumbled. “I...saw it...”

Someone poured him a drink, maybe out of consideration for the hoarseness of his voice. Taking the cup with quaking hands, the young man—Schumacher—

wet his lips and throat before continuing in a grave tone.

“I saw that girl as she slit the dragon’s belly. She got bathed in its blood. Saw the other girl too. Lopped the dragon’s head off...”

He wasn’t used to telling stories. The way he spoke was too simple, too ordinary. And yet, the crowd hung on his every word. Pressed him to go on. They were invested. Their hearts danced with glee.

This was the story of the redheaded slave girl and the lanky, raven-haired lass who’d challenged the dragon of red death alongside their party. It would be told over and over again. They’d never tire of it.

There could be no doubt—this was the birth of a tale...of heroes.

§

Speaking of the center of attention...

“Arf!”

Garbage was strutting down the main street in high spirits.

Her hair, a mess of curls. Her clothes, a pile of rags. Broadsword on her back. Crude iron collar around her neck. Nothing about her had changed. Not one thing. She was the same as ever—a leftover monster snack. And yet...

“Hey, look at that.”

“Garbage, huh...”

“The monsters’ leftovers, Garbage...”

“She’s a dragon slayer.”

“Bathed in the blood of a dragon...”

“There’s no way she’s an ex-slave, right...?”

“I hear the artists want to paint her portrait.”

“Of that stray dog? No...of that dragon slayer?”

“Rumor has it she’s a princess from somewhere... Think it’s true?”

People perceived her differently now. Only a small minority still mocked her, looking down on the filthy little slave girl with their belittling eyes. Over on the

side of the road, the kids were playing “dragon slayer” with big wooden swords tied to their backs.

Her name stood next to those of the All-Stars—the leftovers even a dragon wouldn’t eat.

Garbage.

This redheaded girl carrying a broadsword on her back was now a hero.

Although, that wasn’t the cause of her good mood. She didn’t care about that kind of thing in the slightest. No, the reason for her cheer was actually Iarumas. Or rather, what he was carrying.

“Iarumas the corpse hauler...” someone whispered.

Yes, it certainly was a corpse—the corpse of a dragon. Head, meat, hide, claws, fangs, and scales.

Once it’d been butchered into smaller parts, Iarumas had carried it back to the surface. Garbage had accompanied him. Bit by bit, little by little, the girl was getting to show off her trophy.

And that accursed cockroach, Iarumas the corpse hauler, was on track to add another meaning to his moniker.

“You sure got famous, huh?”

Raraja could be carefree about all this. After all, he was a step removed from all the gossip. It was rare for the thief boy’s name to rise to someone’s lips as one of the dragon slayers.

“He did a good deed.” Sister Ainikki was smiling. She was similarly excluded from the tales, though clearly, she wasn’t letting it get to her.

In that case, why should Raraja let it bother him?

“I guess this is mission accomplished, isn’t it?” the boy asked.

“Yes, it is.” The black-clad man, of course, remained as aloof as ever. In that sense, he wasn’t so different from Garbage, who trotted along at the front of the group without a care in the world.

“So... We’re seriously doing this?” asked Raraja.

“Let’s bring the dragon’s meat to the tavern,” Iarumas replied, “and let her eat it.”

“Blech...” The boy put on an exaggerated scowl. No wonder Garbage was in such a good mood. But if she was gonna chow down on monster meat, he wished she’d eat it somewhere else... It felt like only a master of the dungeon would go out of their way to do such a thing.

“Yeah, I doubt anyone in Scale does stuff like that.”

“Agreed.” Iarumas nodded. “I’ve never tried it either.”

“Woof!”

When they came to a stop, Garbage barked at them as if to say, *“Hurry up.”* She was eager for them—or rather, the meat Iarumas was carrying—to get where they were going.

Iarumas waved his hand dismissively, then shouldered the rope tied around the meat. But suddenly, he halted once again.

“Oh, right. I knew I was forgetting something.”

“Huh?”

He turned to Raraja and tossed something. The dexterity that the boy thief had cultivated in the dungeon allowed him to catch it in midair. He peered down at what he’d received. A bag. It appeared to be awfully thin...yet sturdy-looking.

Raraja deftly undid the clasps and opened the bag. Inside, he found it full of cartography supplies.

“What’s this?”

“A map bag. I had Catlob tailor it.” Iarumas spoke as if this explained everything. Then, seeming to remember another detail, he added, “Out of dragonhide.”

Raraja stared intently at the map bag in his hands. It was of solid construction. He could hang it from his shoulder or strap it around his waist, and it wouldn’t get in the way. Its design was polished and well-thought-out—even if it hadn’t been made of dragonhide, it probably would’ve been of excellent quality.

Had Iarumas collaborated with Catlob on the design, then sent it out to be made by someone else? Or were those two so experienced that they could make a bag like this themselves without much effort?

Either way, if he's giving this to me, then I guess I can assume that map-making's my *job, huh?*

With all sorts of thoughts running through Raraja's head, he didn't know what to say, so he simply fell silent. After a good while, he murmured, "If you had this kind of thing..." The boy still didn't know what he ought to say. But it was probably fine to just act like normal. "Shouldn't you have given it to me *before* we left?"

"I told you—I forgot." Iarumas smiled, shrugging at Raraja's sass.

"Arrruff! Yap! Yap!"

Garbage yelped noisily, letting out a sharp series of barks. She had to be reaching the limits of her patience.

Iarumas nodded to Raraja, then started walking. "Later, then."

"Sure."

Iarumas was leaving. With Garbage. Hauling the dragon's remains on his back.

Raraja watched them go. Nearby onlookers continued to chatter excitedly, but the boy ignored all of it. He strapped the map bag to his hip. It felt out of place. He wasn't used to it yet—but soon enough, he would be.

"Huh. I'm starting to feel like a real adventurer now."

That fact made him smile. With carefree steps, Raraja raced off down the streets of Scale.

§

She was a big girl.

Tall, with big eyes. Big muscles, big boobs, and a big butt too.

But more than all of that, what drew the crowd's eyes was just how *large* she was. She stood six-and-a-half feet tall. Large enough that people had to look up at her.

Her hair, which swayed behind her like a tail, was black, yet her timid eyes shone a brilliant gold. She walked like a ghost—slowly, hunched over, as if attempting to hide her great size in what little way she could. However, she seemed unaware that this posture naturally caused her bountiful bosom to stick out in front of her.

Standing on a street corner in Scale, she wasn't managing to make herself any less noticeable.

"Y'know, I don't think you're going to be able to hide with that sword hanging from your waist."

"Augh..."

Berkanan, Dragon Slayer at her hip, shrunk into herself even more.

It was already widely known—she was one of the adventurers who'd slain the dragon.

Berka the mage. Berka the dragon slayer. Berka the giant.

She'd come out here because it was awkward getting noticed at the tavern, and at the inn, but...

I think she sticks out like a sore thumb... Even more so here in town. That said, this attribute had made her relatively easy for Raraja to find.

"I told you—you should've come with us too."

"B-But," Berkanan murmured, hanging her head. "I already...paid you back..."

She's so honest.

Yes, she had already repaid the cost of her resurrection. In fact, slaying the dragon had likely paid enough to resurrect several newbie adventurers. Berkanan had already more than proven her worth. She probably felt like it would have been wrong to accept any more handouts...or something like that.

"Well, it's not like I mind... So, you wanted to look around Scale today, right?"

"Huh? Oh." Berkanan's head snapped up. She nodded repeatedly. "Yeah, I did."

"As far as interesting sights go, I don't think there's much..."

“But I only know the dungeon, the training grounds, the weapon shop, the tavern, and the inn,” she pointed out.

“That oughta be enough... Ugh. Sounds like something *that guy* would probably say. Fine, let’s go.” Raraja scowled. He didn’t want to become another Iarumas. He started to walk, leading Berkanan around.

Scale was peaceful.

Many people were strolling back and forth—a variety of goods were being bought and sold. Children ran around; adults went about their business.

The city that never slept—the dungeon town—the town of adventurers. It was called many things, but more than all that... This town was *alive.* For a time, that vitality had been threatened by the fire dragon, the dragon of red death. But now, life had returned anew.

In retrospect, Raraja felt like he hadn’t really spent all that much time out and about in Scale. At least, not during the daytime. Adventurers delved into the dungeon, fought battles to the death with monsters, came back to town to rest, and then delved again.

Raraja touched the map bag hanging at his hip for no particular reason. Was he going to become like that too? He wasn’t sure. But he did know one thing: they had no intention of leaving this town. Neither him, nor Garbage.

But what about her? No sooner had he thought that than the question was out of his mouth.

“So, what’re you going to do from here on out?”

“From here...on out...?”

“The dragon’s dead. Your debt’s repaid. What’s next?”

“Ohhh,” Berkanan murmured. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Oh, come on...”

She smiled shyly. “Before now, I had nothing but the dragon on my mind... Oh, but, as things stand, I haven’t paid back that old man yet.”

“Old man?”

“Bank.”

“Oh...”

Raraja remembered that bizarre old geezer too. Berkanan had searched around the tavern for him after they’d returned from the dungeon, but ultimately, she’d been unable to find him.

Iarumas would probably know where he was. Raraja wasn’t inclined to ask. Regardless, well, the old man had to be living somewhere in this town. And if that was the case...

“Eh, I don’t see the problem. Pay him back next time you see him.”

“Yeah...sure. I think that’s what I’ll do... It gives me a goal.”

Berkanan sounded pleased. She placed her hand on the sword at her hip—her sandals padded the ground as she walked through town. All the while, the girl glanced around, taking in every unfamiliar sight.

Did all the stares not bother her anymore? Or had being next to Raraja made her bolder?

“It’s like a festival,” she murmured, her voice light, without a care. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen so many people before.”

“Me either...”

Raraja pouted a little. He felt like she’d kind of dodged his question.

“Hey, you... What *are* you going to do?”

Silence.

Suddenly, Berkanan came to a stop.

“Oops.” Raraja stopped too.

Berkanan just stood there in the middle of the crowd, the flow of traffic parting around her. Raraja peered up, wondering what was wrong. He saw her expression twisted, conflicted. Those terrified golden eyes, full of indecision, stared back at Raraja. If Garbage’s eyes were deep pools, Berkanan’s were golden moons visible through the clouds.

“You know...I don’t like being called ‘hey, you.’”

“Come again?”

In an awfully weak voice, like she was sulking, Berkanan muttered, “I...might...prefer it...if you’d call me by name.”

Have I not been using it? Raraja searched through his memories. He’d never really considered it all that much. Perhaps he hadn’t been.

Had she been letting a little thing like that bother her? Or maybe...maybe a name wasn’t such a little thing after all?

Raraja hesitated a little. Then, finally, he spoke those unfamiliar sounds, as if trying them out.

“Berkanan...?”

“Berka is fine too.”

For some reason, he was very much *not* ready to call her that. Words were replaced by silence. Raraja looked away peevishly, then started to walk. He heard Berkanan chasing after him.

It was questionable whether she could hear his quiet voice amid the hubbub of the streets, but he nonetheless murmured, “Eventually. I will.”

“Okay!”

He didn’t know what she was so happy about, but when Berkanan smiled, it was like watching a flower bloom.

§

Just outside Scale, on the edge of town, there was a place for adventurers. It was called a “training ground,” though that was just a name. No one could control adventurers.

As for why this facility existed—despite its dubious name—the purpose was clear: it was there for the adventurers themselves. For those who’d come from the outside seeking to become adventurers. And for those who aimed to use such novices as meat shields.

The new and the old—this training ground had been established to meet the common interests of both groups. And that was why an unceasing flow of

people visited the facility.

The guard there had no inclination to learn the names of all the riffraff. He'd never see the vast majority of them again.

"Okay, next."

An adventurer was born, and the next aspirant came to stand before him. The same scene repeated over and over in unchanging repetition.

Yet, there were subtle shifts.

"Hey." A youngster whose eyes quivered with hope and expectations, with arrogance and uncertainty, asked, "Is it true? There's an adventurer who can slay dragons...?"

"Yeah." The guard nodded. He remembered.

The mage girl who, despite being so tall, had seemed strangely unconfident. She'd run around the training ground, shrieking, undergoing training to become a fighter. As for her reasons... The guard couldn't fathom them.

Adventurers never left Scale. The dead couldn't, obviously—but the living didn't either.

"It's true."

Her name was Berkanan.

Afterword

Hello, this is Kumo Kagyu. Did you enjoy *Blade & Bastard 2: Wireframe Dungeon & Dragon with Red Dead*? I worked really hard writing it, so I hope you did.

Now then, this time I need to start out by thanking one gentleman in particular: one of the creators of Wizardry, Robert Woodhead. I sent in a question about something, despite knowing how rude it might be, but he was all too happy to approve it personally. Thank you very much—both in regards to the matter in question, and also for creating Wizardry.

This volume is the story of a girl just getting her start as a mage who challenges the fire dragon that killed her. It's modeled on one of the Wizardry stories that was told a long time ago using Llylgamyn as its setting. If anyone is aware of the one I'm talking about, please consider this an homage/parody. Like, "Oh, look, that author guy Kumo Kagyu's writing this kind of stuff again."

While it obviously varies by scenario, the Wizardry games don't have that many boss enemies. So, Berkanan's self-imposed quest to kill the fire dragon is hers alone. Iarumas and the gang end up going along for the ride this time. That moment when they take on an enemy, uncertain of whether they can beat it, but believing that they can—I think that's incredibly entertaining.

Incidentally, the various things Berkanan does in this volume aren't just happening because this is a novel. If you play it right, you can do those kinds of things in the game. Although, whether it will result in a strong character or not is another question. But I think that it certainly results in a unique, one-of-a-kind, entertaining character. Hopefully, the rest of you will feel that way about Berkanan too.

Also, thankfully, it seems they'll be letting me write a third volume. So, I'm about to start working hard on that one too. In fact, all that's decided about the third volume right now is the title:

"Return of The KOD."

Until we meet again.