
NOVEL
12
THE Strange Adventure of a Broke MERCENARY
WRITTEN BY Mine
ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi

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“It’s been quite some time, Loren and Lapis. As for the elf and the woman, I don’t believe I know them. I presume this is our first meeting.”
This girl was dressed in an extravagant dress that was at complete odds with her desolate surroundings. As she casually stood atop the unstable rubble, she somewhat exaggeratedly flipped her hair aside.


Searching for a dragon alongside
a vampire and an elf...?!


The church bell rang.
As cheers resounded through the air, the church doors slowly opened, and from within them emerged a man and woman with a rather dubious air about them.

The Strange Adventure of a Broke Mercenary

NOVEL 12

WRITTEN BY

Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY

peroshi



Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

Fantasie Geshichte von
Söldner in großer Armut

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Prologue:
Collapse to Adapt

THE RUMOR WAS SPREADING—a remote town, wiped out. This was no mere settlement. Sure, it had been in the middle of nowhere, but it had still been a *town*. It had boasted a sizable population, and considering the number of people who might have had a blood relative in it, Loren didn't even want to think about how many folks had been impacted by the tragedy.

Especially not when he'd been the one to land the finishing blow. He really, *really* didn't want to think about that.

He hadn't had any choice in the matter—though perhaps that sounded like an excuse. But when he thought on it, he really couldn't think of anything more he could have done, given the situation. But even if he really had made the best choices he could, if relatives of Suest's ex-residents ever pointed their fingers at him and insisted he was the one who'd destroyed the town, he would be unable to protest.

That said, his life in Kaffa was so normal and peaceful that he wondered if those rumors had even reached it. This was something of a surprise to Loren. While the details of the situation had perhaps not been reported truthfully or in full, they had still been reported—and by an employee of the guild, no less. A receptionist named Ivy had accompanied them on that quest, and she had definitely filed *something*.

Given that, Loren had thought there would be a bit more of a sense of impending crisis or tension in town. To his dismay, the streets were the same as they ever were.

He headed to the guild as he usually did, where he sipped cheap ale in the adjoining bar as he listened to the conversations wafting through the establishment. Some did touch on the complete and utter destruction of Suest, but most adventurers didn't seem to consider it of interest.

"You hear about how Suest was annihilated?"

"Suest? Where the hell is that?"

"Well, I hear it's some town to the northwest… I think."

"Hmm. Anyways, what's going on with our next job?"

That was generally how it went.

If they hadn't known anything about it in the first place, he could understand no one mentioning it. But they knew about Suest, and they brought it up, and yet they showed complete disinterest. Loren struggled to understand how this could be.

"Isn't it strange?" he muttered.

It wasn't that he wanted his peers to scrutinize the events. Nor did he want panic to break out in Kaffa. But if his fellow adventurers were this indifferent, he worried whether, given the scale of the incident, they were really up to snuff.

At the very least, tens of thousands of people had died. Surely that should be regarded as a terrible event. And yet, now that he

thought about it, he could recall a similarly terrible event with similar results that had unfolded not too long ago.

‹I really don't want you to forget about that, Mister…›

Loren suspected he'd leaned too much on Scena at the end of their last quest, as she hadn't responded to his thoughts for a while after. Now her voice resonated clearly in his head.

The girl was a Lifeless King, the most powerful kind of undead entity. Loren didn't think she'd poof just from overexerting herself, but he was still relieved that she'd recovered enough to speak to him again.

"Oh right, your hometown. When that fell apart, it was a bit more… Well, I get the feeling it set a few more things in motion than whatever's going on this time."

"If they only saw the first round, don't you reckon they're used to this kind of thing now?" asked Gula, who sat across the table as she swallowed a hefty bowl of soup. Her spoon never paused for a second.

It was the kind of soup made for the express purpose of filling you up, thrown together from scrap meat and vegetables, flavored with just a touch of salt. Low quality, but dirt cheap. The concoction had been poured into a vessel as large as a washbasin, and Gula was immersed in the repetitive task of ferrying it down her throat.

You could afford better, Loren thought. But he was the one drinking the cheapest ale on offer. It wasn't particularly strong, and it would take several cups to get him even remotely drunk.

"Is that the kind of thing you get used to?" Loren asked back.

Gula had been given a brief summary of the party's adventures prior to her joining. Naturally, Lapis had told her all about Scena's journey from ordinary girl to Lifeless King. Gula had therefore also heard about the city-state once ruled by Scena's father, and so Loren assumed they were on the same page.

"Don't matter how big the news is," Gula said. "If it's got nothin' to do with 'em directly, then even if they hear the same story a good few times, it'll just become same old same old. Ain't that the way of it?"

"I guess so," said Loren, although he still thought that even if the news didn't directly affect people, news of sufficient size should pique at least a bit of interest. But Gula seemed to see it differently.

"Well, whatever happened, what's done is done, as they say. Just let Ivy take care of it and you'll be fine."

Their previous job had involved taking a request from Ivy in exchange for some information. That information pertained to the ruins that lay beneath Suest—the selfsame ruined town of rumor.

As a matter of fact, Ivy had turned out to be the Dark God of Envy, an entity that had existed since the time of the ancient kingdom. She'd had some extraordinarily detailed information on those ruins. However, they'd come upon the swordsman Magna in the same place—a man Loren's party had encountered far more than they liked—as well as his dark elf attendant. The ruins had also been depleted of their resources and rendered unusable for the time being.

Fortunately, the ruins were underground, running alongside Suest's sewer system. Ivy had sealed them off for now and promised to manage them until their resources were naturally replenished.

Loren had intended to use the ruins to create a vessel to house Scena's soul, but with everything that had happened, quite a few issues had been left unresolved. One of these was the question of whether they were going to have issues transferring an undead soul into a living body. The project had been temporarily shelved.

It wasn't a riddle they could solve in a day. Not to mention, the sewer system was infested with an unnatural outbreak of chemically enhanced vermin, thanks to Magna's mishandling of the ruins' supplies. Until those were taken care of, it would be difficult to move through the area at all, and Loren considered it best not to worry about it for now.

"But you know what, Loren? It pisses you off to leave on a losing streak, doesn't it? I'm starting to think that black swordsman guy is our mortal enemy."

"By *our*, you mean the dark gods, right?" Loren said, by which he meant: *Don't just casually lump the rest of us in with you*.

Gula rested her spoon for a brief moment and stared back at him reproachfully.

Though the details were still unclear, the swordsman named Magna seemed to be connected to the ancient kingdom. What's more, he was knowledgeable about quite a few things. For example: about the ruins where the dark gods like Gula had been made, and about

the ruins where Ivy had altered her body to retire from dark god-dom. He seemed awfully well-informed.

Seeing as Gula and her brethren had originated from the ancient kingdom, it was understandable if they had mixed feelings on the matter. As far as Loren could tell, the emotion Gula wore now seemed close to resentment, even hatred.

She was one of his comrades, for what it was worth. He wasn't opposed to lending her a hand if she wanted to work through a grudge to take down Magna. But that was only because they were colleagues—he wasn't going to put any more stake into it. Just because Magna was *her* enemy, that didn't mean he was everyone's.

"That's pretty mean, Loren…"

"Shut it. In the first place, say you wanna have a go at that guy. You got a plan or something? We don't even know where he is."

For starters, there's absolutely no chance he's settled down somewhere, thought Loren. Either due to his natural strength or the effects of his equipment, in a direct confrontation, Magna would easily overwhelm Loren. If a swordsman of his caliber—with a dark elf attendant, no less—were to stop for very long in any one place, word of him would instantly spread.

"Sure, we might have a chance if we got the jump on him. But for whatever reason, whenever we reach him, it's only just as he's finished his latest scheme. We're always nipping at his heels."

"Do we got any new info?" Gula asked. "The guild put out an official wanted notice, right?"

Swordsman Magna and Dark Elf Noel were now wanted in connection with the incident that had led to the destruction of Suest. Ivy had immediately arranged for this as soon as she returned to Kaffa. Now that the wanted notice was out and about, it was spreading through various means to adventurers' guilds all across the continent.

From what Loren had heard from Ivy, being a wanted criminal was quite a difficult existence. Any and all adventurers could hunt you down, regardless of rank. There would be a reward for even the slightest bit of information, and if a tip led to the apprehension of the fugitive, that reward became a fortune.

"Well, maybe they've heard something. No way for us to know, though."

"Why's that?"

"Well, I mean, the guild's paying for information. If they paid for it, they're not gonna hand it to us for free, right?"

Although the adventurers' guild was a mutual-aid organization for adventurers, it was not a philanthropic one. Surely they wouldn't just dish out pricey intel for free. If the need came around, Loren suspected he would have to pay dearly for any tidbits.

And he knew he had nowhere near enough money in his wallet to do so.

"How about you get Lapis to do it, then?"

"You think I can do that?" Loren asked. He could easily imagine Lapis nodding along if he did make the request. But considering

asking her and actually doing it were two completely different things.

Maybe he'd pony up if it were his own money, but he had a suspicion that if he started relying on whatever coins Lapis was carrying around, it was pretty much over for him as a human being.

"Look, I wanna help out, but…the debt I've got hanging over my head is already ridiculous."

Loren hadn't asked for a penny of it, but the debt was what it was. On top of that, the person to whom he was indebted was, in fact, a demon lord—and one who happened to be Lapis's mother. She had footed the bill for the destruction of a portion of the great demon king's castle—the great demon king being an individual who ranked above even a demon lord.

If anyone were to demand the full sum from Loren, the sheer size of the number might just straight-out kill him, to say nothing of who would be demanding it. Loren was helpless to resist.

"I always figure I'm gonna be stuffed into a sack any second now."

If the great demon king pressed Loren for repayment, he feared the living hell that awaited him. Honestly, it was hard to imagine he'd ever be able to return to a normal life after that.

As the reality of the situation slowly started to sink in, Loren realized he, too, did not have the time to focus on whatever had happened in Suest.

Chapter 1:
Proposal to Departure

"NOW THAT'S A rather gloomy face."

Loren turned toward a sudden voice to see a familiar girl. She wore priest vestments, largely of white, and her black ponytail swung back and forth where she stood peering into his face.

He hadn't even noticed her until she approached—no, he hadn't even noticed her approach until she'd called out to him. That was worthy of both shock and terror, but considering the girl's identity, it was entirely understandable.

The girl was Lapis, one of Loren's comrades.

At first glance, she was a lovely lass with an air that was at once prim and cute. In actuality, she hailed from a race detested all throughout the continent, one that made its home in a remote land surrounded by mountains. In short, she was a demon, and her physical abilities greatly exceeded anything a human could hope to muster.

The physical power concealed in her slender arms was perhaps even greater than Loren's own. Now that he thought about it, her limits were still largely a mystery to him. Either way, she probably had no trouble sneaking behind even a skilled swordsman completely unnoticed.

"Are you worried about something? How about I hear you out?"

"Well, it's nothing major," Loren prefaced himself before catching Lapis up on their Magna discussion.

Of course, he avoided all mention of his debt to the great demon king. If he were forced to say, he'd guess Lapis was more on the great demon king's side of the issue. If he brought it up without thinking, there was no telling what she might decide to do. It wasn't that Loren didn't trust Lapis; he just wanted to avoid any situation where she was plotting behind his back.

"A countermeasure for Mr. Magna? That really is quite a troublesome premise."

Acting as though that was precisely where she belonged, Lapis slickly pulled the chair to his left and sat with her arms folded in front of her chest, cocking her head and groaning. Despite her impressive physical capabilities, she wasn't exactly able to deploy them when she had no idea where their enemy was.

Even so, Loren welcomed her entry into the conversation, if simply because she had brightened the mood. He was about to change the subject when Lapis's arms unfolded and she hit her hands together. She'd evidently thought of something.

"I have an idea."

"I have a bad feeling about this."

Loren had inadvertently voiced his honest thoughts. Lapis, with a sullen look on her face, grabbed his left shoulder and shook him back and forth. Between them, he had quite the build advantage, but as if to prove the extent of the strength hidden within her, she manhandled him like a dog with a chew toy. On his opposite shoulder

—evidently startled by the sudden shaking—the obsidian spider, Neg, flailed wildly and lifted his two forelegs in protest.

"What *exactly* do you mean by that, Mr. Loren? I demand an explanation. I demand an *acceptable* explanation!"

"Just a slip of the tongue… Anyways, if you have an idea, how about we start with that?"

Addled as he was by the shaking, Loren felt himself on the verge of voicing another bit of unneeded honesty. In his inner panic, he tried to redirect the conversation.

Despite the journey to this point, Lapis still wanted to say her piece. Resentment still lingered on her face, but she released her hand from his shoulder and cleared her throat. Once Loren and Gula's eyes were on her, she lifted up her index finger. "I think it will be incredibly difficult to go after Magna himself. And so, when it comes to this matter, I think we should completely and utterly give up."

"Give up?"

Gula looked discontent, but Lapis paid her no mind as she explained, "I happened to overhear some things. Ever since the guild put out the notice, it seems some bits and pieces of information have come in—but far less than I would have hoped for."

This came as a shock to anyone who knew the adventurers' guild well enough. After all, the guild was an organization that had cast its net over the entire continent and its membership was accordingly vast.

The fact that the guild had put out an official notice meant that the searchers weren't just low-ranking copper and iron adventurers—the silver and gold ranks were seeking out information on Magna as well.

"Personally speaking, I was convinced we would have a highly detailed overview of Mr. Magna's movements and behaviors the moment the guild put out a notice."

"Well, yeah."

Regardless of how skilled Magna was, he couldn't completely erase all traces of himself. With silver- and gold-rank adventurers on the hunt, it was inevitable that someone would pick up the trail. One could just assume so. And yet the amount of information coming in was startlingly scarce.

"There are a few possibilities to consider. First, that Mr. Magna can conceal himself well enough to fool even the eyes of a gold-rank adventurer."

Their past encounters with the swordsman had made clear that he possessed multiple enchanted artifacts. So many, in fact, that one had to wonder where he'd acquired them all.

It's not so strange to think he might have a tool with which he can hide himself, thought Loren.

"Another possibility is that even if people know where he is, they are unable to report it."

This point didn't quite hit home with Loren. "What do you mean by that?"

"For instance, if Mr. Magna already possesses influence akin to that of a noble or king. The adventurers' guild is certainly a massive organization, but it was not designed to pick a fight with a nation. If they were pressured by a power of like influence, the information would certainly be left under wraps."

"Scary stuff, that."

Worst-case scenario, I guess there might be an entire Magna Land out there, huh, Loren thought.

Of course, if Magna's name and face had been made public, they would find out if this was the case soon enough. It would have to be a nation where Magna held power by pulling the strings behind the curtain—and as Magna's enemy, Loren certainly hoped this wasn't the case.

If it was and they happened to accidentally wander into Magna's territory, they might be put down by entirely legal means. That would be easy enough for a ruler.

As Loren considered what it would mean to chase down someone of that magnitude, he could feel his desire to pursue the matter withering away.

"And with that said, I do not think it especially wise to pursue Mr. Magna himself. That is why I proposed giving up."

"I'm convinced. But what do we do, then? Just wait until we run into him again?"

Loren nearly let out a sigh—he hated always being a step behind. But Lapis shook her head.

"I wouldn't call this tactic reliable, and we won't really be getting a preemptive strike. But there is hypothetically still a way to knock the wind out of his sails."

"If it's possible, there's something to it. But can we really ruin his plans if we don't know what he's after in the first place?"

If they were aware of his goal, they could figure out how to swipe it away before he could achieve it. But Magna remained an enigma. Loren had no idea what would even hurt him.

"Doesn't it seem we usually run into Mr. Magna at locations tied to the ancient kingdom?" asked Lapis.

Well, she does have a point, thought Loren.

"If that *is* the case, then if we take a tour of the ancient kingdom's most powerful artifacts and ruins and destroy them one by one, I imagine that will leave him at least a bit hampered. That is what I think."

"Hey, I get where you're coming from, but where do ya suppose you're gonna find those things?" Gula interjected. "If you're countin' on us to tell you, I'm sorry to say you're not gonna get much."

It made sense to turn to the dark gods who had actually been alive when the kingdom was flourishing. But Gula didn't sound too optimistic about that.

"Back in those days, we were practically their dogs. Sure, Ivy had some intel—stuff she learned before becoming one of us—but she's the exception. For the most part, we're clueless."

Once the kingdom entered its final years, Gula and her fellows had turned coat and aided the rebellion. They'd played a part in the kingdom's downfall. At that point, though, most information on powerful magic items and useful ruins had been buried or destroyed alongside the kingdom. According to Gula, there was little if anything useful to be found.

"We'd snapped at that point, see. I destroyed pretty much everything that caught my eye. Youthful indiscretion and all that."

"You'd call destroying the ancient kingdom a 'youthful indiscretion'?" Loren asked. It sounded like a terrible way to go. But the ancient kingdom had essentially created the reason for its own destruction, so it was hard to really sympathize.

Gula stuck out her tongue and laughed, but Loren couldn't even begin to imagine all the things that must have gone down in the ancient kingdom's final days.

"I was never expecting anything from the dark gods," said Lapis, entirely flat and blunt to boot. She ignored Gula, who fell from her chair as her eyes turned to Loren. "In the first place, you and your company are Sloth and Gluttony, Lust and Greed—not a single one of you evokes a favorable impression. There's no way I'd ever expect to acquire beneficial information from such people."

Loren couldn't quite argue with that logic. As a matter of fact, from what he'd seen of this crew, it would be stranger to see the dark gods serve any kind of benefit at all.

Gula crawled back up into her seat, but she had already personally declared that she had nothing to offer. She couldn't refute

Lapis's point and could only stare back at her reproachfully.

It was as though Lapis didn't even notice those loathing eyes as she went on. "But there is a far more reliable method by which to obtain the information we seek. It may be hard to get into contact with the source, but it will probably be all right."

"Who are you talking about?" Loren couldn't immediately recall anyone who fit the bill.

So it has to be someone she met before she met me, he thought as Lapis offered her proposal.

As soon as she heard it, Gula's mouth hung open, and she stared at Lapis in disbelief. Meanwhile, Loren let out a light sigh at all the trouble that certainly lay ahead.

"Hey, Loren. This is work for me, so I'll do what I can, but…I'm really doubting my own ears here. I'm additionally doubting your sanity."

The words were cast over the reception counter by Ivy, who kept a business smile plastered across her face. She had once been the Dark God of Envy—a woman whose literal name had been "Envy"—and she had accompanied them on their last job to the town everyone was muttering about. After that job was done, however, she'd returned to her role as a guild receptionist and continued working the desk, day in and day out.

There was, of course, a reason Loren had gone to her.

"There's definitely a quest that matches what you're looking for," Ivy said. "And I heard about this from Lapis and Gula, so I understand

why you want as much money as you can get. However, I do not by any means recommend it."

"Honestly, I agree with you there," Loren replied with all sincerity. Ivy sent him a questioning look, which he responded to with a grimace and a shrug. Planting an elbow on the counter and pressing his weight against it, he said, "It's Lapis. She said we should take a quest, since we're going anyways."

"I can't really counter that argument, but…"

After hearing the identity of the individual who Lapis hoped to shake down for information, Loren had headed to the guild counter to see if a certain quest was available.

It wasn't that he was reluctant, per se. He just didn't like the thought of a receptionist staring at him like he was an idiot. At first, he'd tried to turn down Lapis's suggestion, but then he was reminded of just how sorely he needed a payday—and he knew he would almost certainly succeed at this quest. So, as Lapis argued that it was better to claim a reward than to pass it up, he begrudgingly dragged himself to the counter.

Subconsciously, he aimed for the window Ivy was tending. Perhaps he thought it would be better for his mental health to meet with Ivy rather than face the bewildered skepticism of a complete stranger.

"I'm sure you're aware of this, Loren, but the adventurers' guild has two sorts of quests: those with restrictions, and those without." Ivy produced a hefty stack of papers from below the desk. It had been piled without much care and bound haphazardly with a string. It

seemed to contain a copy of all the quests currently posted on the bulletin board in the lobby.

A single glance at the stack revealed how sloppy the copy job had been, but Ivy slickly leafed through the pile until she stopped on the job she was looking for. She placed it on the counter so Loren could see it too.

"This one, right? A request to investigate the dragon that lives on Fireflute Mountain."

This location had been dubbed Fireflute Mountain on account of being a rather large volcano that lay a day's carriage ride due south of Kaffa. Although it was a volcano, it wasn't the sort that sported a billowing tower of smoke and red-hot magma at all times. It occasionally let off a puff of white smoke and, according to historical record, had not erupted a single time in the last hundred years.

Fireflute wasn't the official name of the place. It was just how the elders of nearby villages referred to it, and in essence, there was little to meaningfully distinguish it from the many other nameless mountains across the land. However, for numerous years now, there had been rumors that a dragon lived there, though hardly anyone claimed to have actually seen it. The dubious nature of these claims had led to this quest being posted at the guild, but that was about it.

As for why Loren's party was going to investigate this sort of place, he could blame that on Emily, the ancient dragon they had met in the land of demons.

At the time, she'd told them about ancient dragons more familiar with the human realm, who might consequently know more about the

ancient kingdom. Lapis had proposed they pay a visit to some to ask about the surviving powerful tools and ruins said kingdom had left behind.

According to Lapis, Emily had known more than one entity that had existed since the time of the ancient kingdom, but none that would be as knowledgeable as the one they were headed for. On top of this, dragons were given to collecting valuable items in their nests, and they would thus naturally know the most about the sorts of treasures Magna had set his sights on.

"It's pretty much a quest in name alone," said Ivy. "Once or twice a year, a party goes out to see if the mountain's still safe, but they barely even earn pocket change from the endeavor."

That didn't sound promising at all. Ivy's real reluctance, however, came from the restrictions placed on the job.

"All the same, for this request, there is a nonzero chance of encountering a dragon, so adventurers must be of silver-rank or higher to be permitted to accept it. Considering the worst-case scenario, it cannot be issued to an iron-rank adventurer."

"But there's no evidence there's a real dragon, right? Can't you give us a little wiggle room?"

In fact, the reason only one or two parties a year took the quest was related to the fact that it was limited to silver-rank adventurers. Silvers did pretty much whatever they wanted. They ranked among the top percentage of adventurers, and there was little to compel them to search for a dragon that might or might not exist. Perhaps if

the bar were lowered and irons were allowed to participate, there would be more investigations. But Ivy shook her head.

"There are no reports of *encounters* with a dragon."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"In short, no one has ever submitted a report regarding such a meeting. However, a number of participants simply have not returned."

Anyone who failed to come back alive would naturally be unable to report their findings to the adventurers' guild. Even if they did stumble across something, they couldn't exactly inform anyone about it.

This immediately caught Loren's attention. If only silver-rank adventurers and higher could take the job, how come so many had failed to return?

"Over the past ten years, twenty silver-rank parties have taken this quest. Of the twenty, eight parties never reported back. That means there's a 40 percent disappearance rate among silvers. That should tell you just how dangerous it is."

Few parties took the quest, and of those few parties, 40 percent vanished. That was quite dangerous indeed.

Of course, that didn't mean they'd all been done in by the dragon, but at the very least, you had to assume something was up with Fireflute Mountain. Something strong enough to put silvers out of commission.

"When a quest like this ends in failure, it likely means the loss of multiple lives. I can't just lower the restrictions and hand it out to anyone."

"I guess so," Loren said, his eyes going a little hard. He was getting a vague sense that she was telling him he wasn't up to the task. "But how can you say it like that after you've worked with us? You've seen what we can do."

Ivy took his gaze head-on, leaned slightly over the counter, and whispered. "Just go complete a few random quests to make it look like you're contributing and climb up to silver already. How long do you plan to bum around at iron?"

"I only became an iron recently, didn't I?"

"It's the worst joke I know. If you sparred with any silver, you'd incapacitate them in seconds."

If you asked whether he could do that, he'd admit he probably could. At the very least, if he had Lapis and Gula backing him up, his party could certainly take down a silver-rank adventurer with relative ease.

However, this would also mean potentially showing off some things Loren didn't want anyone to see, and as long as he had to contend with that possibility, he didn't want to recklessly pursue a promotion. As an iron, he was just one among the many adventurers wandering the world. At silver rank, he might become worthy of attention.

"Building your rep just brings more trouble. A merc with a moniker can throw their weight around, but they've got glory-seeking

goons coming for their necks every single day."

"Are you speaking from experience?"

"Of course not. I was a run-of-the-mill mercenary. It's not like I was particularly famous."

Ivy stared at him blankly for a moment, then rummaged through the space below the desk again. She pulled out a paper and scanned its contents, every once in a while examining its details against Loren's face.

"What?"

"Well, it may seem like the guild takes a rather laissez-faire attitude with its adventurers, but we actually do our share of research," Ivy whispered to him.

Apparently, what she was saying wasn't supposed to be shared in public. According to Ivy, the guild didn't do this for every single adventurer that registered, but it did reach out to its expansive network to gather intel on those that garnered significant attention.

"Don't get me wrong. We only do this to ensure we aren't harboring a criminal element."

"Yeah, I figured. But what about it?"

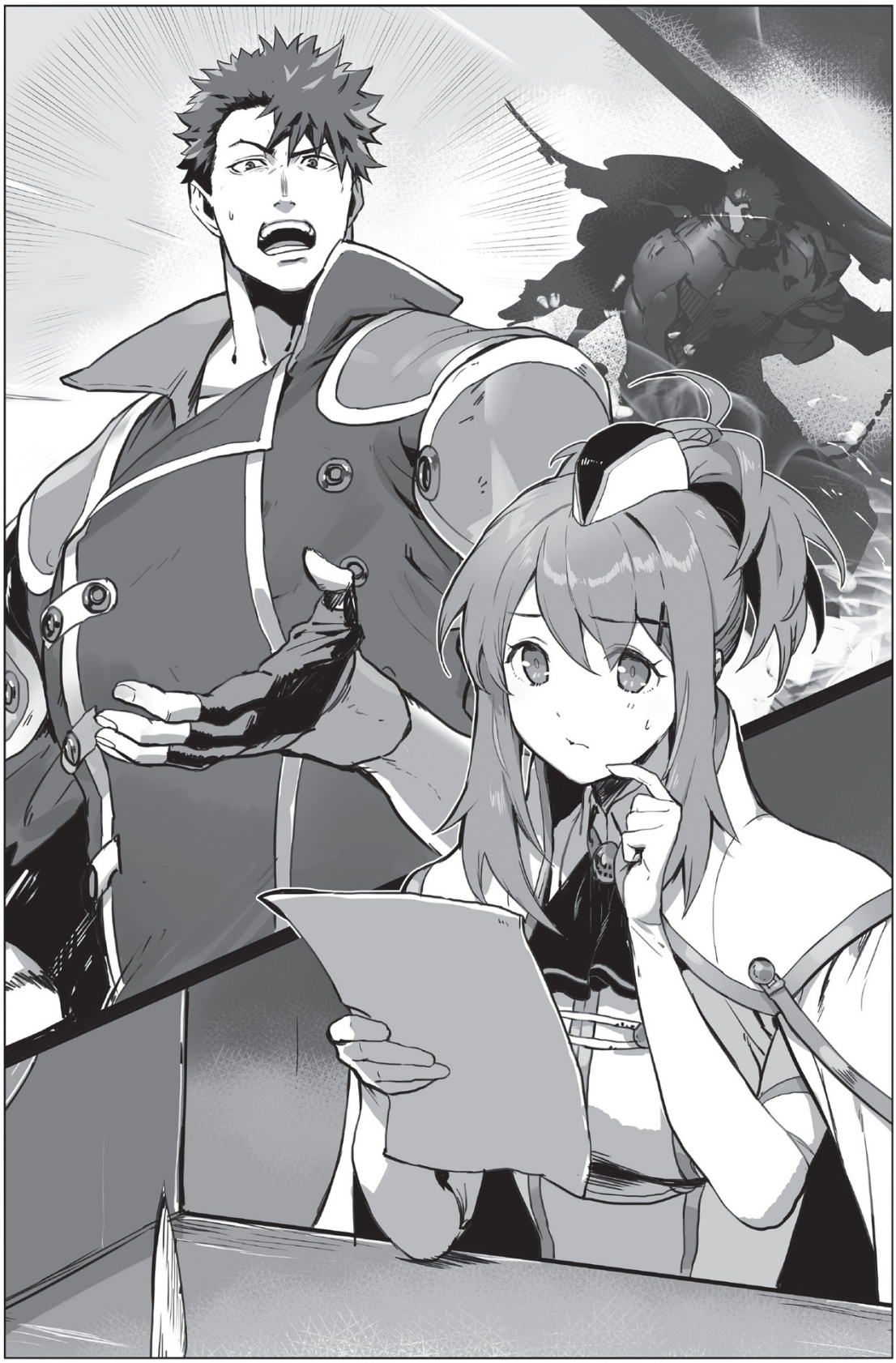
"There is, in fact, a report pertaining to you, Loren."

Under any normal circumstance, this information should never have reached Loren himself. It wasn't a nice feeling, knowing his past had been looked into. And it was surely especially verboten for a representative of the guild to be the one telling him about it.

Aren't you being kinda loose-lipped? he wondered. But he was less offended than he was anxious about what might happen to Ivy.

However, Ivy went on without paying any mind to his concerns. "According to this report, you were an exceptional mercenary who became known as the Cleaving Gale on the battlefield. It says so right here."

"That's a misunderstanding. In the first place, the kind of merc who gets a name like that is the kind of individual who can turn the tide of battle with their mere presence. That's the level of skill we're talking here. Where I am now, maybe I'd have some influence, but back in my mercenary days, that wasn't me."



Loren didn't instinctually think he had the strength to change the outcome of an entire war, but he had to admit that it largely depended on the war's scale, and he got the sneaking feeling it might just work out in his favor.

If he did manage something like that, they definitely wouldn't be calling him the Cleaving Gale, though. He'd end up with something far nastier.

"There are a few accounts of the wars you participated in."

"Even if you tell me about 'em, I won't remember what I did in what war."

Loren had lived a life of ceaseless battle, moving from place to place. From his perspective, whatever happened in a given battle were memories that ultimately faded with time. That's all it was, to him. Moreover, the battlefields had all been decided by the chief and his inner circle, so Loren only even had a vague idea of *where* he had fought at all.

That in itself was proof of how much combat Loren had seen. But now that he had established himself as an adventurer, he considered the topic rather pointless.

"But it doesn't really matter, does it? More importantly, can't you do something so we can take on that request?"

Not looking wholly convinced, Ivy rolled up the report and stuffed it back under the desk. She stored away the other documents and thought for a moment—or at least pretended to. Finally, she said, "It's not *completely* impossible…"

"So what do we have to do?"

If Ivy had shut him down again, Loren would have given up on the spot. He'd only asked for the quest since he was heading to the mountain in question regardless. If guild regulation prevented him from taking it, he wasn't really invested in bending the rules to accommodate himself.

"You can either join a silver-rank party that's taken the quest, *or* you can invite a silver-rank adventurer to join your own party and temporarily register them as your leader. Then it's all yours."

When it came to silver-rank parties, Loren only really knew one—a party he'd met up with not long ago, in fact.

But at present, Loren's party was pursuing a quest entirely for their own self-interests, and he didn't want to drag anyone else into their mess. That left the problem: Was there a silver-rank adventurer hanging around who they could temporarily add to their ranks? Loren had no idea.

"Personally speaking, I think your best option would be to climb up to silver yourself, Loren."

Then, instead of going out of his way to squeeze through a loophole, Loren could just take the quest as intended. At least, that was Ivy's point.

Loren pondered this as he returned to Lapis with the suggested options. This was a matter that would require some discussion.

"A silver-rank adventurer's cooperation?" Lapis repeated. She furrowed her brow.

After ending his conversation with Ivy, Loren returned and explained the conditions she had laid out for them. Lapis was presumably, like him, recalling the silver-rank adventurers they'd worked with before. Reluctant as she was to take them along on a job with a 40 percent chance of no return, she mentioned them.

"Why don't you get yourself a promotion, then, Mr. Loren?"

Loren's reply was immediate: "Please give me a break."

Lapis looked a tad discontented at his response, but said no more, apparently not wanting to force him into anything.

"There's no real need to take the quest, is there?" Loren asked.

"Well, it feels like a wasted opportunity to not take what we can get."

Lapis didn't look fully convinced. Now that Loren had sorted out his feelings and given it some thought, he'd realized that even if they did manage to snag the Fireflute Mountain investigation quest, the silver-rank adventurer's assistance wouldn't come for free. Considering what they'd need to pay them, the final profits would likely be insignificant. Of course, some profit was still better than none at all, but considering the hurdles they'd have to jump through to acquire this prize, it would be much simpler to just head off on their own.

"There's little we can do, then…" Lapis conceded. "And here I thought we could make some easy money."

She sounded terribly disappointed. Loren didn't quite follow. How was a dangerous job with a 40 percent disappearance rate "easy

money”? Those definitely weren’t the words that had occurred to him. Something was up.

He decided to ask her about it. But before he could open his mouth, someone sat down at their table without even asking permission.

“I heard ‘easy money.’ Explain.”

Blue eyes that gave no hint of emotion. Long blonde hair so immaculately straight, it could have been spun by a master goldsmith at the peak of their craft. Ears as sharp and pointed as daggers, fluid clothing designed for mobility, and a bow on her back that gave the impression of a forest hunter.

Her entrance was so sudden that her name was momentarily lost to Loren. But beside him, Lapis took one look at her chest and immediately recalled it.

“Why, if it isn’t Ms. Nym.”

“What are you staring at? Know that your answer may mean war. I am without mercy.”

Her words were ice-cold. Even though Loren wasn’t her target, a chill ran down his spine. But Lapis, who took the brunt of her frigid stare, lifted her eyes to Nym’s expressionless face and returned a warm smile.

“It’s been a while, Ms. Nym. You haven’t changed in the slightest.”

“Elves are long-lived. Humans cannot perceive the manner in which we change.”

Lapis isn't human, Loren retorted in his head. But of course, there was no way he could say this aloud.

Lapis's smile didn't fade, no matter how hard Nym glared. Nym finally succumbed to her stubbornness. She sighed, let it go, and turned to Loren. "Change of topic. I heard there was easy money somewhere. I want in."

But even though she'd said that, Loren still didn't know why Lapis considered the job so easy. On the other hand, Nym was an elven huntress who was registered as a silver-rank adventurer. Given their situation, she was offering them a lifeline—but Loren couldn't explain what he didn't understand himself. He nudged Lapis, who still wore that unnatural smile, with his elbow.

"It's only *relatively* easy," Lapis said. "That doesn't mean you can rake in the cash while skipping along and humming a merry tune. Do you still want to hear more, Ms. Nym?"

"Tell me. I need money."

Loren's eyes widened slightly.

Elves lived deep in the forests and lived off the blessings of nature. It was said they saw little value in money, a trait that extended to elves who ventured into human civilization. Their thought processes might change somewhat, but very few elves ever actively tried to get rich.

That said, there were certainly exceptions to the rule. But those unique cases were often driven by particular reasons and circumstances that had forced them into it.

"What happened?" Loren asked. This was more pressing to him than work or money. What if she had been backed into a corner where she really, you know, *needed* the funds?

Nym reached out and gently patted him on the head. "You're a good kid, Loren. You're worried about me."

"Mr. Loren has always been a good person. And mine."

"I'm not anyone's…" Loren put up a mild protest, though he didn't back away from Nym's patting.

Lapis's reaction made it difficult to tell if she really hadn't heard him, or was just pretending not to. In any case, her face eventually grew serious again. Once Nym retracted her hand, Lapis said, "I'm willing to tell you about it, but I confess I'm also curious as to what manner of circumstance would leave you seeking money, Ms. Nym."

They'd met Nym and her comrades a few times before. As far as Lapis could tell, not a single one of them seemed starved for cash. That said, it had been a minute since their last meeting, so perhaps something had come up. Yet even as she worked her imagination, Lapis couldn't picture any of the silver rankers doing anything drastic enough to leave them needing to raise a large sum in a hurry. They were levelheaded folks. The most careless of their number was Chuck, the thief, but even he seemed to know the meaning of moderation.

"You're worried too, Lapis. Thank you. But it's nothing you have to worry about."

A party might suddenly find themselves in need of money if they failed a quest. In some cases, they would have to pay sizable indemnities and fees for breach of contract. It was also possible they

had bought something incredibly expensive and failed to finance it properly. No one would want to be in either situation.

It was only natural to be concerned, given Nym's declaration. But Nym's next words were said with a smile, and they didn't seem to be a joke or a lie.



"Truth be told…Chuck finally fell."

"Pardon?"

If they really were in a terrible situation, a silver-rank adventurer would surely hesitate to share their woes with an iron. Nym, however, seemed to understand that the conversation wouldn't get anywhere if she held her tongue. She fidgeted, entangling her fingers over the table. Her head hung, and after a moment of silence, she mustered a bare whisper.

For a moment, Lapis failed to register what she said.

The sternness in Lapis's voice made Nym curl up, but after seeing that Lapis wasn't angry, she began whispering again. Her words flowed at a breakneck pace as she nervously explained the truth of the matter.

According to Nym, she and Chuck had enjoyed an intimate relationship for a while now, but he had finally openly announced his love and proposed marriage. A joyous occasion, then. Loren and Lapis both expressed their congratulations, but that wasn't the end of it. What followed was the true reason Nym had come to them.

"In my clan, it is customary for a married couple to exchange gifts with one another," she explained.

It was simple enough to refer to Nym as an elf, but no race was a monolith. There were quite a few elven clans, and each had its own set of rules and customs. Nym intended to honor her own. It wasn't like Nym and Chuck didn't each have some savings, but this was a

once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and she wanted to put in the effort to find a worthy gift.

That said, she was a bit lacking in the funds required to arrange what she wanted. So, she needed additional coin, and fast.

"You're buying something that expensive? What is it, exactly?"

"I can't say. It's a secret between husband and wife. A secret they share only when they're together."

As Nym hung her head, blushing red to the tips of her pointed ears, Loren found it rather difficult to pursue the matter any further. Lapis seemed to be much in the same boat. She frowned very slightly to hear Nym speak so fondly of her love, but she didn't make further comment.

"So, I need money. Right away, if possible."

"Just you? The way you tell it, doesn't Chuck need money too?"

Loren looked around but couldn't see the man in question, nor any of her other party members for that matter. *If they have the same thing in mind, it's more efficient to go out together,* Loren thought. As Nym explained it, however, the gift was meant to be kept secret from her partner until the wedding. As such, the fundraising and purchasing stages were probably also kept discrete and discreet.

"Ritz is probably helping out Chuck."

There were only four members in her party. If the leader, the warrior Ritz, was helping Chuck, that left only their elderly magician, Koltz. However, Koltz was considerably older than the rest of his party,

and it would be somewhat difficult for him to keep up with a nimble hunter.

Nym couldn't stand the thought of Koltz pushing himself to accompany her, only to get injured in the process—but she also wasn't confident enough to venture out alone. She had recalled Loren and Lapis, whom she'd worked with before, and had come to plead for assistance.

"I do think I'm strong enough that I won't get in your way," Nym said.

She was certainly a skilled fighter, compared to the average hunter—even though her talents couldn't compare to Gula and Lapis. Regardless, Loren didn't know enough about the job to say how difficult it would be, and so he entrusted the decision to Lapis.

"I did say it's decently easy, but I can't guarantee your safety. Do you still want to go?"

"I don't mind. That's just how our work is."

"You will be paid a fourth of the total reward. Do you have any objections?"

"None. But I would like a slight bonus."

This request was brazen, in a sense, but Nym did outrank them, and without her qualifications, the guild wouldn't even let them take the quest. Loren saw this as an understandable compromise.

Lapis seemed to agree with him there. She voiced no objections to Nym's conditions, but just nodded, then held a warm hand out to the elf, who took it and gave it a firm shake.

Thus, they struck while the iron was hot. As soon as they had confirmed Nym's participation, the party headed straight to Ivy's desk, where they completed the paperwork to take the quest to investigate Fireflute Mountain.

Ivy didn't see any issues, now that they had fulfilled the conditions presented by the guild. Nym was registered as the party leader, and the quest was confirmed.

"I'm the leader?" Nym pointed at herself curiously.

Lapis cut in, "It's a necessary measure to take the quest. Please understand."

Nym had only intended to help out with whatever quest they were on for a portion of the reward. Clearly, she hadn't even considered the possibility that she would be given a lead role. But she relaxed when she heard Lapis's explanation.

The request mainly involved searching the area around the mountain and checking to see if the supposed dragon was there or not. Notably, not a single prior report mentioned an actual encounter with the dragon. If they didn't find it, that would be perfectly fine—as long as they reported the absence.

"Is there really a dragon there?" Loren asked as they prepared to depart.

The 40 percent of parties who had disappeared were most likely dead—there was a very high chance of that. But if you looked at it the other way, the 60 percent that *had* returned had failed to find any trace of the beast.

If the reason these parties didn't return was precisely *because* they encountered the dragon, then everyone else's chances of meeting it were quite high, all things considered. But no one could say for certain that the dragon was indeed the cause of all the disappearances.

As for Fireflute Mountain itself, while there were rumors of a dragon, there was no word of any other monsters settling down within it. Although those past reports did note that a few varieties of beasts made their home *around* the mountain. Perhaps the parties had encountered those monsters along the way, or had gotten wrapped up in some sort of accident.

"As long as Ms. Emily is to be believed, that dragon most certainly exists," Lapis replied as she soothed the horse pulling the wagon. They'd gotten into the habit of renting vehicles, of late.

Loren shrugged as he tossed his bags into the back. Nearby, Nym, who had similarly bundled her things, was mumbling something with a somewhat conflicted expression.

Loren strained his ears in an effort to pick up what she was saying. It seemed that upon hearing that the simple job was an investigation of Fireflute Mountain, she had begun to regret her decision to join. Loren couldn't blame her. At the very least, the 40 percent missing statistic meant it clearly wasn't as easy as they'd made it seem.

"Ritz told me that if you say, 'I'm going to get married after this job,' that's a sure sign of oncoming death. I might not be Chuck's bride after all."

Nym's voice was somewhat hollow as she said this, and Loren's mouth bent into a sharp frown. But it wasn't like he could guarantee that she would return alive, so he couldn't find the words to console her.

"Don't jinx it," he settled on. "That's bad luck."

When all was said and done, Nym held to her word and didn't renege on the job. Loren found himself grateful for her earnestness as he thought back on his mercenary days.

She was right in that the ones who said things like "After this job, I'm gonna quit this killing business and get married back home," always seemed to be the most likely to die in the next battle. It was like a bad omen—one widely recognized among his comrades.

But if you spent enough time on the battlefield, you came to realize words like those just tended to leave a stronger impression. Thus, it only *felt* like those who said them were the ones usually dying. Plenty of men died, regardless of what they did or didn't say the day before. And the ones who didn't die lived on regardless of what anyone had to say about it.

"He's right," said Lapis. "And anyway, when it comes to the dragon—if only the dragon—we have an item that will allow us to avoid battle entirely."

"You have something that convenient?" Loren asked.

Though dragons were rare, a way to reliably avoid a confrontation with any you did encounter was definitely something

Loren wanted to keep on hand. *But it's got to be worth a fortune,* he thought as Lapis rummaged through her things.

She pulled out a scroll. This was evidently what would keep them safe from malicious draconic intent. Loren peered at it curiously, but no matter how he looked at it, it was clearly just a scroll. *Is it inscribed with a highly secret dragon-warding spell?*

"This thing right here," Lapis explained, "is actually a scroll from a certain ancient dragon."

Nym's eyes widened at the mention of such a legendary beast. An ordinary adventurer would likely go their entire life without seeing one, and the same could be said for even an adventurer of her caliber.

Nym's reaction was the expected one, but Loren and Gula didn't seem nearly as surprised as they took in the scroll Lapis hoisted up. Their comrade was presumably referring to Emily, the dragon who lived in demon territory. The scroll was most likely the map Emily had extracted from her treasure horde and used to direct Lapis to the ancient dragon that lived in human lands.

But that didn't explain how it would fend the dragon off.

"Is that expensive?" Nym asked.

Lapis shook her head. "Not at all," she explained. "But it *is* imbued with some of the ancient dragon's mana, so if we carry it with us, then at the very least, another dragon won't suddenly attack us out of nowhere."

Emily had known Loren's party might eventually seek out her brethren living in human lands, so she had given the scroll to Lapis as

a protective charm of sorts. If an ancient dragon perceived them to be intruders and attacked, they would be met with swift and instantaneous death. However, the mana in the scroll would indicate their acquaintance with another ancient dragon, which reduced their chances of being attacked. If they could then establish communication, they could potentially acquire the information they were after with little difficulty. This was what Lapis had in mind.

"Is it going to work out that simply, though?"

Sure, there was a high chance it would, but if it didn't, they would be fully exposed to a dragon's might.

As Loren sent Lapis some doubtful eyes, she calmly replied, "You realize that Ms. Emily personally entrusted it to me *and* personally imbued it with her mana. If this doesn't work, then nothing will."

"So if we can meet the dragon of Fireflute Mountain with that in hand, then we can say the job's done. It's a decently easy quest."

They knew some monsters lived around the mountain, but that was the same everywhere you went. There were always monsters hanging around, and this route was no more dangerous than any other. From what Ivy had told them before they left, the monsters in question were ogres and orcs—not weak, per se, but not particularly strong either. They would be easy enough to take care of.

Of course, Loren did worry he was being too optimistic. Worst-case scenario, they could still wind up dead.

"We're not gonna be swarmed by more than we can handle again, are we?" Gula asked, sounding quite skeptical.

But it was hard to think they would be overwhelmed by sheer numbers every time they ventured afield. Even so, Loren didn't want to think about it. Then again, be it bugs, undead, goblins, or humans, they really did keep finding themselves faced with great hordes of foes.

"I don't want to stumble across a whole legion of orcs."

The monsters known as orcs were incredibly ugly, by human standards. Loren didn't relish the thought of staring down a whole army of these beasts.

"If something like that happened, all the nearby women would be dragged off, and it would be an unbelievable mess."

The orcs shared with the goblins a reproductive impulse to impregnate females of other species. The orcs, however, took it a step further.

Where goblins would inflict this fate upon adventurers who they coincidentally came across, or would kidnap women from villages they stumbled upon by chance, orcs were constantly on the lookout for female adventurers and unguarded villages, and they would always choose to go on the offensive. They had a tendency to target women and women alone.

This behavior came completely naturally to them. Being so simultaneously thoughtless and aggressive, female adventurers always put them at the top of the list of monsters they absolutely despised.

As soon as the word *orc* was mentioned, Gula grinned and shared a tidbit. "Orcs were the one thing the ancient kingdom refused

to breed. If they tried, they coulda destroyed their kingdom, way before it fell, anyway."

Being inundated with a mass outbreak of orcs sounded like a terrible way for a country to go, but it didn't sound completely impossible—especially if the ancient kingdom had established facilities to breed them. At least, Loren was convinced. Yet it was neither Loren nor Lapis, but Nym who latched onto the topic.

"Gula? I'm surprised you know that."

"Huh? W-well, I'm a magician, you know. A magician ought to do her research on the ancient kingdom, right?"

As Nym stared at her, deeply impressed, Gula desperately strung together an excuse.

She'd merely tried to share a little trivia with the group, but it had been a careless thing to say that didn't take into account the presence of an outsider. Neither Loren nor Lapis lent Gula any aid, ignoring the glances the dark god shot them as they continued arranging their bags.

Clean up your own mess, their attitudes seemed to say*. A little trouble will do you good*.

Gula grew increasingly panicked as she did her best to throw Nym off her scent.

It wasn't long before the wagon was loaded. Lapis took her place on the cabman's perch, with Loren sitting beside her, and Gula and Nym clambered into the back with the luggage. Slowly, the horses started on their way down the road to Kaffa's southern gate.

Chapter 2:
From Journey to Understanding

THEY PASSED THROUGH Kaffa's gate around noon, heading due south in no particular hurry. Loren was gazing absently at Lapis as she manipulated the horse's reins when he suddenly recalled something he ought to bring up with her.

"Hey, Lapis," he said. "If we're talking two days on foot and one day by wagon, the one day by wagon covers more distance, right?"

"That's a difficult question," Lapis replied. It wasn't like she had much else to do. "I would imagine it's roughly the same, though perhaps the wagon route is just slightly longer."

"Then does that mean we'll pass through…you know."

"Know what?" Lapis cocked her head curiously. Loren hadn't given her much context to work off of. In her curiosity, her distracted movements subtly altered the wagon's course, but she swiftly corrected it. "What exactly do I know?"

"You know, Dia's place."

"Oh, that little head of an Elder, yes?"

A clatter and a tremor jostled the wagon. Loren glanced over his shoulder to see that Nym had toppled over, landing face up in the wagon.

Due to her attire, her bold and glorious fall meant that Loren could nearly see something he shouldn't have from where he sat. He

was filled with more dread than curiosity, especially as Nym could clearly see his face and the direction of his gaze. He rubbed the corners of his eyes to play it off.

"Loren." Nym lifted only her head to glare at him. "Please explain what you're doing."

"Got something in my eye," Loren assured her. "So what are you falling over for?"

Nym rolled sideways, planting her hands and feet on the wagon floor. "Did I just hear you say 'Elder'?"

"I did, but what of it?"

Her fine elven features were stiff. What was she so perplexed about? Lapis nudged her elbow into Loren's side. He glanced over to where she was still holding the reins, her eyes on the road, and she whispered so only he could hear.

"Her surprise is completely understandable. I mean, we're talking about an Elder here. An *Elder*. You've just gone a little numb, Mr. Loren, so it doesn't feel like a big deal to you. If an ordinary person heard that they were going to see an Elder, they would react exactly as Ms. Nym just did."

"You say that, but…" He meant to say: No one else is that surprised. But then, his party consisted of a demon and a dark god. They were far from "ordinary people." This realization shut his mouth.

"Ahem, Nym," he said, "I can't blame you for any anxiety, but we've met this Elder before. She's not the sort who'd attack us out of nowhere, so you don't have to worry about that."

"For some reason, I'm not feeling reassured."

"There's just a little something we wanna ask her. We'll stop by since it's on the way."

Dia was an Elder vampire they'd met on a job from some time ago. She'd said she didn't intend to move her base of operations, and had told Loren he could stop by if he ever needed anything.

But they hadn't been involved with anything that might require vampiric consultation since then, and no quests had brought them back her way, leaving them unable to take her up on that offer. If they were going to be in the neighborhood now, it was just common courtesy to pay their respects. Besides, Loren did actually have something to discuss with her.

"As far as I'm aware, Elders aren't the sort of creature you drop in on just because they're on your way," said Nym. It was excruciatingly clear from her air that she didn't want to go, if she could avoid it.

But Lapis chimed in, "It's a small detour, but it's been ages. This might be a good opportunity." It was as though she had taken no notice of Nym's trepidation. She urged the horse to pick up the pace.

They had a few more conversations here and there, but the journey itself was incredibly smooth. If Lapis and Gula let their respective demonic and malevolent auras leak out, any beast or monster of reasonably sharp instincts made the wise decision to stay the hell away. However, they were taking roads used by ordinary travelers, and they couldn't quite flaunt their true natures with

impunity. They both contained themselves as much as they could and played the part of totally average folk.

Nevertheless, some foolish creatures made their move. Those who knew better would surely have been astounded if they saw their oblivious fellows risk an attack.

Especially since this time, Loren's party was accompanied by an archer of superlative skill.

Compared to humans, Nym's eyes could see a good deal farther, and her sharp ears could pick up even the slightest noise. When you combined those with her mastery of the bow, not a single foe that entered her range could hope to escape it alive.

"Now that I'm seeing it up close, that's some ridiculous skill you've got there," said Loren.

A gaggle of goblins had hidden in the bushes, waiting for their wagon to approach. But it was as if Nym could see straight through all that vegetation, and each arrow she loosed reliably took a life. Loren was quite impressed.

The hidden goblins likely didn't even realize why they were dying, right up to the final moment. One panicked upon seeing its comrades struck dead; it tried to charge the wagon, only to fall victim to the next shot.

The goblin band fell before they got anywhere close—unable to press forward, unable to retreat. Their lives were extinguished one by one, and by the end, every last one of their bodies lay silent on the plains.

"The proof of kill's supposed to be their ears, right? Should we gather them?"

"No need. It won't add up to much. Waste of time."

Nym's eyes darted back and forth as she checked for any twitching signs of life. Finally, she tucked her bow away and removed the quiver from her hip. There had been a good number of goblins, and she'd gone through quite a few arrows, but she still had an ample stock in her baggage.

"Why don't you retrieve the arrows, then?"

"Arrows smeared in goblin blood pick up the scent. Don't want to use that."

Once Nym was low on arrows, she might consider harvesting them from her slain foes. As an elf, however, her sense of smell was also keener than a human's, and carrying around arrows that stank of goblin blood would doubtless be a trial.

"That's quite a waste. I'm starting to think we should at least collect the arrowheads," said Lapis.

The shafts and fletching could be replenished in any small forest, but the iron used for the metal points would be far harder to replace.

"I have plenty left. And even if I'm out of arrows, I can still fight," Nym explained, tapping the hilt of the dagger she carried. She was pretty slender, though, and Loren didn't really feel great about the prospect of tossing her into close combat. He was downright

anxious, in fact, and more than anything, he wished that she would just prioritize the weapon where she'd concentrated her skill.

If Nym *was* forced into close combat and wound up with permanent scars or something, Chuck would absolutely have some choice words for him later.

"You think there are any arrows at Dia's place? If there are, we can ask for a share."

"She's a high and mighty Elder. I bet she can have them whipped up just like that. Let's ask once we find her."

"I don't even want to understand what you two are talking about…"

Stopping by an Elder's abode just to replenish her arrow stock was far beyond what Nym was comfortable imagining. She couldn't even comprehend the words coming out of Loren and Lapis's mouths —as if this was a perfectly ordinary thing to do!

Nym turned to Gula in the hopes that the last remaining party member was in her boat, but Gula was just lounging about as if none of this had anything to do with her. Her head bobbed up and down as she slowly nodded off, and Nym shuddered. Great. This one wasn't normal either.

They continued down the road, spending a night camped by the wayside. Once day broke, they were back in the wagon again, though they strayed from the road a little farther south and proceeded toward some ruins that no one would think to enter.

Location-wise, they were just short of Fireflute Mountain. They hadn't gone any farther the last time they passed this way; Fireflute was presumably the mountain they had barely made out in the distance, but neither Loren nor Lapis had paid it much attention.

"It's been a while since we last came here," said Lapis.

At a glance, the ruins seemed to be those of an abandoned town whose residents had long since left. But Loren and Lapis knew that Dia's base lay beneath this husk of civilization.

Of course, neither of them knew how long a "while" was in Elder terms, but it wasn't like it had been years since their last meeting. Dia had said she wouldn't move her base for a "while," so they'd just assumed she was still there.

"There's an Elder in a place like this?" Nym muttered. She followed on their heels as they entered the ruins, her eyes flitting around warily.

It certainly didn't look like any humans lived nearby. Elders were, however, a variety of vampire. *Surely they're more at home in abandoned places than human cities,* thought Loren.

"As long as she hasn't moved, she should be around here somewhere… Do you think she'll pop out if I call for her?"

"An Elder that appears if you speak her name? Sounds like a horror story in the making," Gula mused with a wry smile from her perch atop a nearby pile of rubble.

Loren glanced at her. He had a question, actually. "Hey, those dark gods we've been hearing about around the guild these days—

between them and Elders, who do you reckon is stronger?”

One of them was called a kind of god, where the other was said to wield godlike power. From a human’s perspective, they were both so great, they defied the imagination, and so he was interested in what a dark god herself had to say on the matter. But he couldn’t divulge Gula’s identity to Nym, so he tried to make it sound like he was asking a knowledgeable magician.

Hardly any information on dark gods had been made public, but Loren and Lapis *had* submitted a report on Sloth after they met him. Their existence, at least, was the subject of at least a few rumors.

“You ask some tough questions…” Gula said. “In a pure contest of strength, the dark god might just win.”

“What do you mean ‘might just’?”

“Well, it’s said that Elders were born from the world itself. But the real point is, they just don’t die. Cutting their heads off is useless. Crushing their hearts is pointless. You could burn them or freeze them, but that’s absolutely worthless. In a sense, they’re like those black things that skitter around your kitchen—the ones you gotta get rid of with boiling—”

“Whose weakness is hot water?”

The moment a new voice cut the air, Gula’s body flew into the air as though she had been struck from behind. She collided directly with the ground, left incapacitated in a rather amusing pose. A figure stepped up to replace her, standing airily on the same rubble Gula had occupied.

"It's been quite some time, Loren and Lapis. As for the elf and the woman, I don't believe I know them. I presume this is our first meeting."

Long, silky blonde hair billowed behind her, and an arrogant smile graced a face that appeared to belong to a girl of tender years. This girl was dressed in an extravagant dress that was at complete odds with her desolate surroundings. As she casually stood atop the unstable rubble, she somewhat exaggeratedly flipped her hair aside.

"I came before you even needed to call my name. You of average years, long years—and you, the weird one—I am an Elder, born of the world itself. Therefore, I cannot go by my true name, but you may call me Dia!" the girl proclaimed grandiosely while puffing out her chest.

Loren glanced at her a moment before shifting his eyes to Gula, whom the girl had presumably kicked away. She'd been shot quite a significant distance and hit the ground headfirst. Almost as soon as the girl finished introducing herself, Gula fell flat to the ground like a withered tree.

Huh. Still not up? Loren prayed she'd live as he returned his focus to the girl standing boldly atop the rubble.

"And so, Loren. What brings you here today? It's been so long, I thought you'd forgotten all about little old me."

Now that Dia had popped up, they had no reason to hang out in the open. She guided them into her base. Loren had been wondering who exactly would visit a place like this, but the room she led them to was indubitably a reception parlor. Once they were seated on the sofa, Dia began to prepare tea herself.

"I can't just come bother you for any old thing. That's not our deal," he said shortly—maybe a bit coldly. After all, he had no interest in a life bound to constantly revolving around an Elder—you know, the most terrifying kind of vampire.

In response, Dia set a metal cup in front of him with a rather hefty thud. The cups were presumably metal, so they wouldn't shatter

if she treated them indelicately. The table she slammed this one down on was forged of a similar metal.

Unlike Loren, Lapis received the cup silently and inhaled the rising aroma of steam. “You procured tea leaves?”

“I had my master go procure them for me,” Dia responded as if it were nothing.

“You still haven’t forgiven her?”

Lapis smiled wryly at Dia’s deep nod. The Elder Dia had a guardian and master, another Elder whose name was Sierra. In the incident that led Lapis and Loren to meet Dia, Sierra had been pulling the strings behind the scenes. Once Dia found out about this, Sierra had gone to work—without compensation—in order to alleviate Dia’s ire.

“Don’t you think she’s done enough to deserve this?” Dia stated, clearly and decisively.

It wasn’t their relationship, so Loren and Lapis didn’t feel like weighing in any further. But for Sierra’s sake, Loren did hope she was eventually forgiven.

“That aside, shall we return to the original question?” asked Dia.

“The reason we’re here, you mean? We were in the neighborhood, so we came to see an acquaintance. Does that not satisfy you?” Loren asked, taking a sip of tea. But his tone had a probing quality.

He glanced at his party members to see that Lapis was watching him with great interest. Gula instantly downed her tea and demanded

a refill, earning a peeved look from Dia.

It seemed Gula was nursing a grudge over the manhandling on the rubble. Despite her sullen face, Dia obediently tilted the teapot, pouring tea into the cup that was held out to her. This behavior certainly did make Dia seem like the adult in this situation.

Only one person—or rather, elf—hadn't taken a sip. Nym carefully held the cup to her chest and stared into it, long and hard. She seemed overcome with a sense of dread in the presence of an Elder, and no matter how many times Loren insisted it was all right, she simply could not believe it. Loren figured it might be best to leave her be until they had finished their business.

"There's no need to satisfy me, is there?" Dia answered.

After refilling Gula's cup, she delicately swished the pot around before pouring some for herself. A light crimson liquid filled the vessel. Dia placed the pot back on the table everyone sat around, picked up her own cup, took a deep breath to enjoy its aroma, and brought the rim to her lips.

"I'm not saying you can't drop by without pressing business. I would welcome you, Lapis, and your comrades either way. However, if you *do* have business, I propose we finish it up so we can enjoy our tea in peace."

Once she finished, she took her first sip. For some reason, Dia's movements left Loren with the impression of an elderly woman, and he found himself blinking, startled. But that was more or less the case. Dia *looked* like a young girl, but she had undoubtedly lived for

several hundred years. If she moved with an air of aged refinement, that wasn't really odd.

He was also quite thankful for her proposal. He opened his mouth to take her up on the offer—only for Gula to clap a hand to her mouth, stagger back, and topple, falling backward along with the chair.

Loren tensed as he regarded Gula where she was sprawled over the floor. Her lips were bright red and swollen. It seemed like she had suffered some sort of burn. His gaze shot to the cup she had been drinking from.

The cup wasn't letting off any steam, and as he brushed his fingertip along it, the metal's temperature told him the liquid within wasn't especially hot. Certainly not hot enough to burn her lips so thoroughly.

But as his fingers approached the tea contained within, Dia reached across the table to stay his hand.

"I wouldn't recommend it. It would be rather troublesome if you burned your fingers. It will just be hot and painful."

"I don't see any steam, though."

"Perhaps I accidentally spilled a smidge of oil over the surface?" Dia said nonchalantly.

Loren retracted his hands from hers and looked back down at Gula, who must have struck her head in the fall. She wasn't even twitching.

It looked like her demanding lack of courtesy had earned her some resentment. He didn't know when Dia had done it, but she'd poured a thin layer of oil over the top of Gula's tea to contain the steam. This had produced tea of a considerable heat that nevertheless concealed its true temperature, and knowing Gula, she had glugged it down without a thought.

The result was self-evident.

If you put aside the deftness and skill of Dia's maneuvers, this was a pretty childish prank. Gula being Gula, she'd gotten off with just a few burns, but if Dia did that to a human, it would probably inflict lifelong scarring at the very least.

"Hold off on being that rough with me, okay? And the elf too. If I do something to offend you, I'm ready to give an honest apology."

"I have no idea what you're talking about; I was not raised to be rude to my precious guests."

"Mr. Loren, did I just hear you leave me off that list? Is there anything you'd like to say?!"

Loren thought he'd just been joking, but maybe that wasn't how he'd been heard. He saw Lapis reaching for Gula's cup and hurriedly grabbed her hand. He didn't know what she exactly planned to do with that cup and its contents, but he had swiftly realized there was nothing more dangerous than letting it reach her hands.

However, it seemed Lapis didn't seriously intend to get up to mischief, as she casually let herself be pulled back.

"You get along as well as ever," Dia said, releasing a warm laugh from the back of her throat—though there was a disorienting disparity between her laugh and her smile.

After retracting his own hand, Loren returned to the main point. "Truth is, there's something I wanted to know. If you've got any insight, it'd really help if you could share it."

"Very well. I promise to answer to the best of my abilities."

With this guarantee, Loren took a sip of tea to wet his throat and lips before revealing the reason he'd come to Dia: "Do you know of any way to restore the soul of someone who's been made into one of the undead? A way to make them human again?"

"Hmm…?" Dia stared intently at Loren's grave expression as she took a sip from her own cup.

Although Loren didn't go into detail, Lapis instantly knew he was referring to Scena. They'd obtained intel on an ancient ruin that seemed to be capable of creating a vessel to house Scena's soul. They couldn't use it just yet, but that wasn't the only issue. Scena's soul had already become that of an undead monster, and even if she was returned to a living body, there was a chance that either the body or soul—or even both—would be destroyed in the process.

Loren was looking for a way to resolve this dissonance, but he was, in the end, just a swordsman. He wasn't at all confident that he would come up with any brilliant solutions when it came to magic.

So what could he do? Though it was hard to imagine it when you looked at Dia, vampires were often considered a variety of

undead, and so he hoped to seek her opinion.

If Nym hadn't been on hand, he would have been able to ask more directly, but it would have raised questions if he asked her to leave. Instead, Loren chose his words carefully as he posed the question.

To Loren's surprise, Dia responded rather easily: "To return an undead soul to its original form… There is a way, of course."

Seeing as Elders were among the most powerful variety of undead and were known for their incredible wisdom, he'd thought she *might* be able to help with Scena's predicament. However, he hadn't expected her to stumble upon an answer that quickly.

"There are a few ways, in fact. The first is simple—after using a *Consecration* blessing, just cast *Resurrection*."

"That's ridiculous…" Lapis protested.

Loren sent her a questioning look, and with a tight smile on her face, Lapis explained, "Depending on how you use it, *Consecration* can be a very simple blessing. To put it simply, it makes things holy. Invoke it on water, and you will have holy water. Any priest worth their salt can do it."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The act of using *Consecration* to purify an undead soul. It's not impossible, but to exercise it to that effect, you would need multiple high-ranking priests of multiple faiths to conduct a ritual for several days. On top of that, once purified, it wouldn't be long before that cleansed soul ascended to the heavens."

And if that happened, they wouldn't be able to use the facilities in the ruins. Sure, Loren wanted Scena's soul to be human once more, but once she had passed on, there would be nothing to implant into the vessel.

"Additionally, the *Resurrection* blessing would be somewhat complicated. There are only a handful of recorded instances of it even succeeding, and those required nearly a hundred powerful priests who held a ceremony to gather power for ten days and ten nights. Of all the great blessings, it reigns supreme."

Death was absolute. This was an eternal law, and not even the gods could overturn it with impunity. A mere human could only even attempt to undertake this aim through a long and arduous process. And of course, what Lapis described was far beyond what Loren was capable of accomplishing. Dia's method was nothing but armchair speculation.

"Yes, it's a pipe dream, though not completely outside the realm of possibility," Dia conceded. "Or at least, I would say so until someone actually put it to the test."

In short, no one had actually ever attempted this one-two punch before, and she had not given the slightest thought to practicality.

"Restoring an undead soul is already a lofty goal. The fact that it is not utterly impossible could perhaps be called a silver lining?" Then Dia smiled mischievously. "Now, what I say next is in the realm of pure supposition… But do you want to hear more suggestions?"

What good will it do us if they're all gonna be hypothetical? Loren thought with a frown.

"Well, we're here anyway. How about we hear 'em out?"

Dia seemed to have been convinced Loren would end the conversation the moment he learned the endeavor was largely pointless. She looked a little surprised by his response.

"If you want to hear them, I will tell you, of course. I'm sure you can determine their feasibility on your own."

"Yeah. And I'm not gonna be pissed if none of it seems useful."

"Then on to method number two: Prepare a soul with ample mana, but a faint sense of self."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Dia was being strangely specific, but Loren still had no clue what she was talking about. He momentarily glanced at Lapis to see if she was following, but though she returned his look, her eyes immediately returned to Dia, leaving him in the dark as to whatever was going on in her head.

"Think of it as a way to cheat. You'd take the soul and use it to coat the surface of the undead soul, as it were. To an outside observer, it would look no different from an ordinary soul."

"I think I understand what you're getting at here. But if you did that, what would happen to the soul you used as coating?"

"It would die, of course. To be more precise, it would be used up and cease to be."

Aha. Loren finally grasped what Dia was trying to say. In short, she was alluding to the exact situation Loren and Scena currently

found themselves in. If Loren were to lose his sense of self, the rights to his soul would shift to Scena, who dwelt within him.

Scena's own soul had become undead, but it lived within Loren's human soul. As long as she was protected by him, she could pass as a run-of-the-mill entity.

The problem was that you wouldn't just need someone to die to pull this off—you would need to destroy their soul in a very specific way. It wasn't completely impossible, but it would yet again be quite difficult to implement. Loren wondered if there even *was* a way to destroy someone's sense of self while leaving their soul relatively intact.

Dia moved on to the third possibility. "This one would be the easiest. But if you're looking for a true resolution, you might not regard it as one at all."

"Let's hear it anyways."

"It would be rather simple too. The undead soul would concede all of its power to another being—or another soul could wrest the power from the undead one."

What about that is easy? Loren wondered with a scowl.

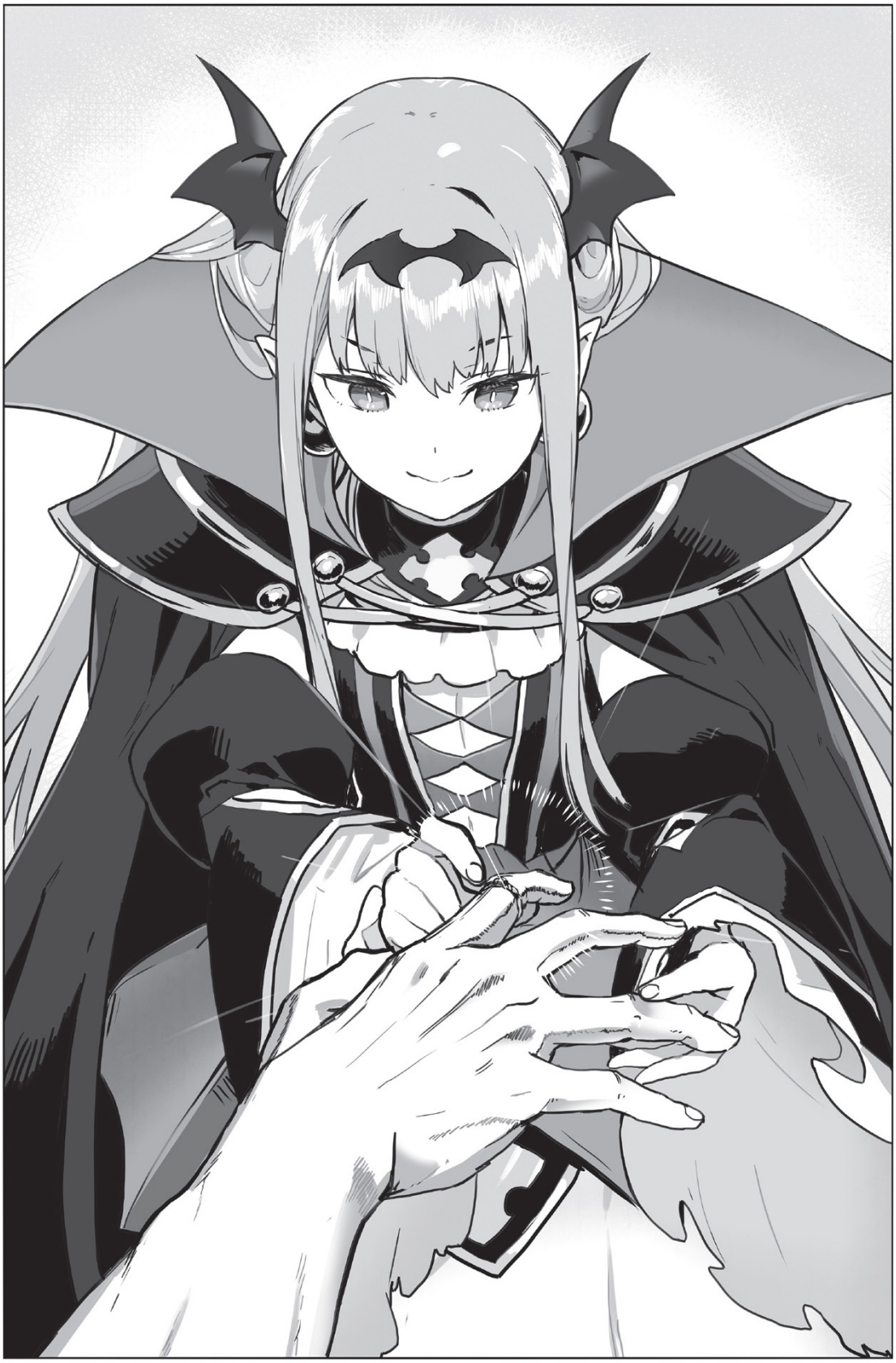
Dia went on like it was nothing. "I happen to know the spell that would accomplish this feat. I can even cast it." She produced a ring from a breast pocket. It was silver and inlaid with a red gemstone in a simple design. It didn't look particularly expensive.

Dia casually picked up Loren's right hand and slid it onto his index finger.

Loren usually wore gloves, but having been invited into Dia's home to be treated to tea, he had unfortunately taken them off. Her movements were so deft and natural that even Lapis couldn't intervene, or even warn him. It was done before Loren could pull back, and once the ring had been slotted all the way to the base of his finger, it stuck fast, as though that was where it had always belonged.

"Oh. A perfect fit," said Dia.

"Hold on a second!" Loren hastily tugged at the ring, but it would not budge from where it had been placed. It didn't impede his movements or complicate his grasp, but he couldn't just roll over whenever some unknown object was stuck onto him just because someone felt like it.



Dia's next words silenced him. "That ring is enchanted—specifically with the spell in question."

Loren's eyes locked onto the ring. Scena—who had been listening—shared her eyes to let him examine it with a Lifeless King's particular insights. With her abilities, he made out the detailed spellwork carved within the red gemstone.

"To use it, pass mana into the spell sequence and declare either *Give* or *Take*. The sequence will do the rest. If you engage the spell, the soul whose power is taken will be transformed back into an ordinary human."

"Then what about whoever takes those powers?"

If you thought about it logically, you'd be granting someone the powers of an undead being. You'd just be switching which of the two people in the relationship carried that burden.

But contrary to Loren's expectations, Dia folded her arms and assumed an expression of deep thought. "I don't know."

"You what?"

"Can you blame me? There is no precedent for such a power transfer."

Well, that would complicate things. There likely weren't too many lunatics out there looking to assume the powers of low-grade zombies or animated skeletons, and it was hard to think anyone would ever be able to do something like that to a vampire or Lifeless King. It was likewise hard to imagine a high-ranking, intelligent undead being

would go out of their way to transfer their powers to a living human. Thus, there was understandably no precedent.

Suddenly, Loren grew curious. "Then why was this made?" he asked.

The way she put it, this was a spell that had never really been cast, and even Dia didn't know what to expect. This implied that the spell had never been cast in the history of the world and that the ring on his finger was perhaps the first-ever artifact capable of doing so. He struggled to understand why she'd given it to him—but he had no idea why the spell had been designed in the first place.

"To be honest…I thought I'd try it on my master."

"Oh. Huh…"

As far as Loren could tell, Dia was serious.

When they'd met Dia, she had been a young Elder under the protection and care of her fellows. She had hired Loren and Lapis as she embarked on the trial that would allow her to stand on her own as an adult.

The trial had been interrupted by her master, the Elder Sierra, and they had endured their share of troubles. Some time had passed since then, but even now, Dia evidently nursed a deep grudge.

"So you weren't planning to forgive her, even after making her serve a stint as your pack mule?"

"Doesn't this happen to humans too? You say you forgive someone, but now and then, you're hit with a sudden surge of anger and do things you might regret."

"It…might?"

Loren's eyes shifted to Nym, who was sipping her tea while refraining from participating in the conversation. When she noticed she was about to be dragged in, she tensed in her seat. She shook her head, looking troubled. "Loren, I am an elf. Do not ask me about human psychology."

While Nym seemed to believe it would make more sense for him to look to Lapis or Gula, she didn't know that 1) Lapis was a demon and 2) Gula—who, to be fair, had perhaps been human at one point—was a dark god.

In short, neither of them had any relevant opinions about what was normal for humans.

"And so I went and made it," said Dia. "Once I was done, I started wondering what would actually happen if you stole an Elder's powers. And then I realized that the spell wouldn't work at all if the target resisted too strongly. In any case, I realized it would be more trouble than it was worth."

"So it's garbage."

"To me. But to you…it might be useful." Dia gave him a small smile, her voice taking on a profound tone.

Loren had no rebuttal.

Sure, there was no knowing what would happen. But if he wanted a way to make Scena human again, the ring's power would presumably make it possible to mend her soul and ready her for transplantation into a new body.

The consequence: the Lifeless King's power would remain within Loren, and no one could say what effect it might have on him. However, he hadn't yet faced any real problems with having a Lifeless King living inside of him, so he didn't see this as such a bad end.

"I guess becoming undead might not be the worst thing if all it does is change my looks a bit and expand my lifespan,"

"Mr. Loren, I'd actually be quite all right with this outcome. You could probably pull off the look," Lapis said with a straight face.

Loren didn't know how to reply to that. He placed a hand on his chin and thought.

Lapis went on, "So long as you aren't one of the ones that smell. If possible, I'd prefer you to stay whole—or if needs must, just the bones."

"Personally speaking, I don't want to rot *or* be bones…"

"Loren? Are you seriously considering this?" Nym asked, perplexed.

This brought him back to his senses. With a wry smile, he shook his head. "Course not. I'm just a little moved. Didn't you hear Lapis say she'd be fine with me even if I were just a skeleton?" he asked to change the subject.

Lapis—rather dissatisfied that she had been used as a diversion—poked him in the side.

I'm not kidding. That made me kinda happy, he thought, though perhaps it was somewhat frivolous to phrase it that way.

Dia let out a laugh from the back of her throat. “Such close companions. How I envy you.”

“Well, thanks for that.”

“In any case, that is about all I can offer in the way of answers to your foolish question. Are you satisfied?”

“I’m thankful I got to hear an Elder’s wisdom, even if the question was kinda dumb,” Loren joked, even as he knew he owed her a far more sincere show of gratitude.

Putting aside whether her thoughts would ultimately be useful or not, he had received the wisdom of an Elder who’d lived for hundreds of years, and he hadn’t even paid her for it. However, if he acted too grateful, Nym might pick up some of the truth of the situation. He needed to pass off the discussion as nothing more than a hypothetical that had crossed his mind.

“Don’t concern yourself with it,” said Dia. “Now you should not feel obligated to answer, but in exchange…there’s one thing I’d like to ask you in return.”

This statement instantly put Nym on guard, but Loren smiled calmly. It would’ve been incredibly unfair if he gained knowledge without any kind of compensation. He also knew Dia well enough that he wasn’t primed to be wary of any topic she brought up in casual conversation.

“It’s nothing too important, I assure you,” said Dia. “You came here because you had other business in the area. I just wanted to know a little more about that.”

Her innocent smile suggested she was asking out of pure curiosity. Loren didn't see any real need to keep their trip a secret, so he explained what had led up to this quest, as well as their ultimate goal at their destination.

"You're looking to meet the ancient dragon of Fireflute Mountain? That's quite brave for a human. Most people are burnt to ash before they even see him," Dia said once he'd finished, as she gazed tiredly at his face.

Loren wholeheartedly agreed with her on that one. He wouldn't even entertain this plan if Lapis hadn't had the map imbued with an ancient dragon's mana.

"Well, if you have a referral from another dragon of equal power, you won't be brushed off. But it *is* a bit concerning."

Contrary to her words, a smile was spreading across Dia's lips, and she stole glance after glance in Loren's direction. Somewhere in the back of his head, his survival instinct was writhing, sending a prickling sensation down the back of his neck. What exactly was it trying to say? He rubbed his neck as he mulled it over.

Then, looking as though she had just come up with a brilliant idea, Dia jovially clapped her hands together. "Very well. In that case, why don't I accompany you to Fireflute Mountain?"

"Excuse me?" The prickling grew even stronger. Loren glanced over to see Lapis staring blankly, while Gula was still flat on the floor. Nym looked like she had just borne witness to the end of the world, her handsome face petrified in shock.

"You're dealing with a powerful dragon who's lived since ages long past, aren't you? Then no matter how skilled an adventurer you may be, and regardless of whatever safety measures you may have in place, you undoubtedly face an entity beyond what any mortal ought to confront."

"Well, yeah. It's not like I'm looking him up for the fun of it."

Loren understood this dragon-hunting was necessary, but that didn't mean he was enthusiastic about it. He figured it would probably be all right, but on the off chance something did happen, he had to give real thought to just how powerful a foe he was dealing with.

When Dia heard him say this, she nodded several times. She was convinced. Loren, meanwhile, struggled to keep up as she pointed a finger at his chest, leaned in, and declared, "That's where I come in. I'm proposing that I stand between you and act as an intermediary. In short, you should take me along as insurance."

Loren considered this for a moment. They'd taken up this mission only because they had good prospects thanks to Lapis's map, but adding an extra safety measure would put him more at ease.

Of course, that safety measure was an Elder, which did make him anxious in itself—but Dia wasn't a complete stranger, and they had certainly done her a solid once before. It made sense that Dia felt relatively indebted to them.

"An Elder's protection is more than I could ever ask for, but…"

"Isn't it? Isn't it?"

"What are you scheming?"

Sure, Loren and Lapis had helped Dia gain her independence, and Dia might feel she owed them, but he doubted she would protect them pro bono just for that. In the first place, their relationship had started with a quest where Dia had been their client. It had been a proper job for which they had received proper pay, and though the job had gotten kind of complicated along the way, they hadn't done anything that he thought warranted some kind of special treatment.

Which meant Dia's current offer had to do with something else. Loren suspected something was up.

Dia held her silence for a moment. Then finally, her shoulders quivered and she let out a low laugh. "You are a skeptical man, Loren. But I imagine that if you weren't, it would be difficult to survive in the mercenary or adventurer trades."

"If you've got something nasty in mind, you'd better spit it out now."

"Tee hee hee… Very well. The truth, then."

Dia giggled, her face twisting with a mischievous slant as all eyes gathered on her. Just what scheme would escape this Elder's lips? They braced themselves for it.

After an ample pause, Dia pronounced: "Being an Elder is quite boring."

"I'm sorry, come again?"

Loren thought he must have misheard her, but Dia only repeated herself with clear, deliberate enunciation: "Being an Elder is quite boring."

"And what about it?"

"No, you see, I have far too much of both power and time, and nothing to do with either. If I devote myself to research, I can while away a few months or years, but I have nothing to work on right now. To be blunt, I'm going to die from boredom."

Given his limited lifespan as a human, Loren couldn't sympathize even a little bit. But he did get the gist of what she was saying.

A human life wasn't long, and so humans devoted time and effort to accomplish various things in the limited scope allotted to them. Of course, many among them wasted a good deal of time deciding what exactly they wanted to pursue. Loren himself had his hands full with simply living.

But if you thought about it, Dia was an entity with a lifespan so long that its end point wasn't even in sight—if there even was one. The power vested within her was massive, and if she wanted to do something, she could presumably get it done within moments of thinking it.

Given that, if Dia wanted to devote her infinite time to accomplishing something meaningful, it would have to be so grand that a human couldn't even imagine it. Dia was the youngest Elder, but she had yet to figure out what it was she wanted to *do*.

"I do have these vague inclinations that perhaps I should research this or that, but it's still so unclear. I don't know how long it will take for my thoughts to solidify."

"So it's like you're floating around with all this time passing you by and nothing to show for it. You're bored out of your mind. Is that

it?”

“I am blessed with an absolute surplus of time. If I devote it to experiencing new things, perhaps I might find some clarity.”

“And that’s why you want to tag along with us?”

“I don’t think it’s a bad deal. What do you say?”

Loren considered it again. If they had been headed to a human settlement, an Elder tagalong would bring all sorts of problems. However, their destination was the home of nothing but a single ancient dragon, and Dia’s being an Elder wouldn’t really be a problem in that case.

“It’s not so bad, is it? I can’t think of any particular disadvantages,” Lapis added, which just shored up his reasoning. It helped to know it wasn’t just him too. If Lapis didn’t see anything amiss, he doubted there were any real issues.

“How about you, Gula?”

“If you’re asking for my perspective, uh, I don’t think it’s gonna go great for me personally, but whatever,” Gula said as she sat up from the floor.

Gula’s behavior toward Dia was the problem, and Dia was merely smacking her hand a bit harshly. That couldn’t be called a problem inherent to their Elder friend.

“Nym—wait, you all right?”

When they turned to her, they found Nym was frozen with a pale face. Loren quickly stood from his seat, rushing over to her and

placing a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him stiffly. Her voice calm but quavering, she replied, "Loren, is it always like this?"

Her vibe made pretty clear what she was referring to. But as she hadn't spelled it out, he struggled to respond. He hesitated, but said, "Well, yes. It's just about always like this."

There was resignation in his voice.

"I see. You have it…rough." Nym's face was still pale, but for some reason, she looked at him with pitying eyes.

Loren didn't feel he'd done anything to deserve that look, but perhaps this was just how any normal adventurer would see his situation.

"I know it isn't my place to speak, but you should try joining my party on one of the jobs Ritz or Chuck takes on. I think you ought to take it easy for once."

"It's not like I'm accepting these troublesome jobs because I want to…" Loren grumbled.

"Taking an Elder along to meet an ancient dragon?" Nym asked with a perfectly flat face. "Even a silver wouldn't be qualified for a quest like that."

"But that wasn't what the job was, originally. It just happened."

The original quest had just been to investigate Fireflute Mountain. It hadn't said anything about Elders or ancient dragons. If you threw in those factors, then as Nym said, even silvers would be barred from taking it. The adventurers' guild would have to call upon

the sorts of high-ranking adventurers that most people considered to be the stuff of legends.

If anyone heard an iron-rank adventurer had been wrapped up in this kind of incident, they'd look at them with pity. And of course, if Loren stumbled across just such a poor sap like that, he'd feel pity too. Unfortunately, he was that poor sap, and it was wholly unproductive to pity himself.

"Forget about me. If we don't got any objections, I'm fine with you coming along," he said to Dia.

"I see, I see. Then rest easy. An ancient dragon is a formidable foe, but an Elder is nothing to scoff at either."

With that, Dia gave a merry laugh, though her expression suggested a somewhat different emotion. *What a truly brilliant way to kill time,* it seemed to say.

Still, there would be quite a few benefits to bringing her along, and as far as Loren saw it, being used as a way to kill time wasn't such a bad thing.

Chapter 3:
Aberrations to Chase Down

FIREFLUTE MOUNTAIN wasn't far from Dia's base; as soon as they were back above ground, Dia explained this with such delight that Loren wondered what was going on with her.

He hadn't noticed it until she brought it up, but when he gazed in the direction she pointed her finger, he could certainly make out a rocky mountain—not exactly close, but not a great distance away either. After staring for a while, Loren muttered, "It's not smoking at all."

Considering it was called "Fireflute Mountain"—and that a dragon lived there—Loren had been envisioning a volcano billowing with a pillar of black smoke. However, at least when seen from afar, the mountain in his line of sight was a steep, barren rock face, although a forest spread out from its base. It emitted no smoke, neither black nor white.

To summarize, it was exactly the sort of mountain that had been described to him when they first took the request. *No wonder I didn't notice it the last time I was here,* Loren thought.

Dia lowered her pointer finger and scratched her head. "Indeed. It is a very uninteresting mountain," she said as she walked off, taking the lead. She approached the parked wagon and hopped aboard, taking up a position right behind the cabman's perch.

Dia hadn't changed outfits since leaving her base. The dress wasn't extravagant or anything, but it clearly wasn't suitable for a jaunt in the outdoors. Loren was impressed that she could move so nimbly as he sat beside Lapis, who took hold of the reins. Gula and Nym settled back into their seats in the wagon.

Nym, however, sat as far away as she could out of pure fear of the entity that was an Elder. Gula, meanwhile, kept her distance out of a personal sense of critical danger. There was no telling what might befall her if she were to get any closer.

You're the instigator, Loren thought as Lapis gave the reins a light tug to set the horse in motion.

"It's close enough to be visible," said Dia. "We should be there by sunset."

"So long as nothing happens."

After settling in at Dia's abode, they'd spent some time resting and chatting, among other things. Her base was slightly removed from the main thoroughfare, but if they returned to the road before setting off for the foot of Fireflute Mountain, Loren estimated they would indeed reach it at around sunset.

It was also possible to head straight to the mountain without returning to the road, but in that case, Loren suspected they would need to maneuver the wagon over potentially treacherous terrain, which could cost them more time.

Suddenly, Loren felt a gaze on his back. He turned to see Dia giving him a scolding glare, and Gula and Nym looked no happier.

"What's wrong?"

"Something always happens when you say stuff like that," said Gula.

"Loren, that was careless. If you say, 'So long as nothing happens,' you're guaranteed that something will. Be mindful of your words."

"Though for my part, I think it would be more interesting if something *did* happen."

Shrinking under the gaze of the three women, Loren turned himself forward and scrunched up. Lapis watched him with a giggle.

Despite this little mishap, they reached the road easily enough and set course for the southern mountain. Nym and Gula were on guard for whatever was inevitably going to befall them, but contrary to their warnings, the journey once again went without a hitch.

Truth be told, Loren had his own misgivings. But the journey was so unremarkable that it was almost a letdown, and eventually, they had reached the base of Fireflute Mountain.

"So nothing happened after all." Nym and Gula each stared into the distance, innocent looks on their faces as they avoided Loren's glare.

Dia, on the other hand, returned his stare with a look of discontent. "Isn't that strange? That line definitely should have led to *something*."

"Hey, don't ask me. It's good that nothing came of it… Wait, I guess it's only good if you haven't come along for the excitement."

"Oh, well, the experience of rattling around in a wagon under the light of the sun did do a little to take the edge off the tedium." It was hard to imagine these words coming from the mouth of such a powerful undead entity, but Dia said them with a smile. "And it's far healthier than holing up in an underground base. Perhaps I should take more constitutionals."

"I can't imagine a world where powerful vampires were just wandering around. Don't be rash."

The average human would be plunged into the very depths of terror if they ran across a vampire strutting about in the middle of the day. An Elder was the worst version of this worst-case scenario, and he could easily picture normal folks reacting to the encounter like it was the end of the world.

There were apparently some ten or so Elders apart from Dia, but Loren hadn't heard anything about them aimlessly wandering around to kill time. In short, the other Elders all had their own reasons and methods by which to while away the years, and they didn't venture out without good reason. He wanted Dia to take a page out of their books.

"I doubt you'll find any Elder as harmless as me," she said, sounding slightly dejected as she looked at Loren with hopeful eyes, but if he gave her the slightest bit of approval, he just knew she really would start taking more field trips. He steeled himself and only glared.

After gazing intently at Loren for a while, Dia realized he wasn't going to budge. Her expression grew frustrated as she turned away, sharply clicking her tongue.

Let's hope that discourages that *impulse,* Loren thought, though he still felt a tad anxious.

"Pardon me for intruding on your conversation."

Something was slightly off with Lapis as she interjected. It wasn't that she was just joining the conversation for the fun of it, or leaping in to make a joke of her own. Something in her tone stoked anxiety in all who heard it.

Loren turned toward her and found that her eyes were focused straight ahead. As for what she was looking at—Loren himself could not see. The road simply continued on and on; as they approached the mountain, the vegetation was growing thicker, but that was it.

"What's wrong, Lapis?"

"There's a strange scent on the breeze." Lapis glanced back. "Ms. Dia, are you knowledgeable about the local landscape?"

Dia leaned forward and nodded. "It *is* right next to my home, after all. You can consider me an expert."

"Then are you aware of what lies farther down this road?"

Lapis pointed ahead, and Dia closed her eyes momentarily in thought. She soon opened them and nodded, having reached her answer.

"Just a farming village, as I recall," said Dia. "The base of Fireflute Mountain is dotted with numerous agricultural settlements, and we happen to be approaching one of them."

The moment he heard there was a village up ahead, Loren had a terrible premonition. *Has my life really gotten so bad that a farming*

village is a genuine cause for concern? he wondered, his eyes lifting toward the sky.

The sun had begun to set, but the sky was still blue, and the weather was fine as could be. And yet, Lapis claimed she smelled something off that was coming from the direction in which they were headed.

Concluding that staring at the sky would do little, Loren pointed at the sword slung across his back. He'd loosened the strap, since the sword was a hindrance when he sat at the front. "You think it's time to put this thing to work?"

Lapis glanced at it and cocked her head. "I'm not so sure. I think perhaps not quite yet."

"You sure?"

Loren was certain they were headed toward the village and the source of the smell, and that soon enough, they'd be facing an all-out battle. But Lapis seemed to see it differently.

"It's certainly a strange smell, but it doesn't smell…new."

"You mean…"

"We should see when we get there," she interrupted as she snapped the reins, encouraging the horses to pick up the pace.

The roads were maintained, to a degree, but they were not completely level. There were bumps and dips, and once they really got going, the wagon shook far more vigorously. To prevent themselves from biting their tongues, the party gritted their teeth.

Not long after Lapis caught the strange scent, they arrived at the farming village Dia had spoken of.

Lapis pulled the reins to slow the horse. As she took in the sights that awaited them, she understood what exactly had seemed so off. “It hasn’t been abandoned, has it?”

There had certainly been a village there, once upon a time. However, that time was now firmly in the past, and only traces remained to hint at what once had been. It had been a farming village, and what seemed to be fields stretched out around it. But they were now so overgrown with weeds that it was difficult to imagine anyone had tended to them any time recently. The wall that surrounded the village had been destroyed in so many places that it hardly served its intended function, and the buildings within it were also in ruins. It did not look like anyone lived there.

The wagon entered through a busted portion of the wall, at which point they beheld an even worse situation within.

The walls of the destroyed houses were marred with some sort of black liquid that had been splattered over them. On top of that, there were scorch marks everywhere you looked. The ground was littered with a flurry of footsteps, indicating that the village’s residents had raced every which way and in quite a hurry.

As the wagon stopped, Loren peeked into a random house. The floor was littered with broken furnishings, along with the remnants of what had presumably been food. This once-food had dried out and begun to rot. Whatever had happened here, it had not happened recently.

"I'm getting the sense they were attacked," Lapis said as she pointed at a wall where a deep gash had been left by some manner of blade.

"Bandits, maybe?" Nym suggested.

It did seem to be the most likely scenario.

But Gula shook her head. "With bandits, you'd typically find a body or two lying around. We've got all these signs of an attack, so how come we aren't seeing any bodies?"

"Maybe they were all led off?"

"Don't look that way to me. This black splatter here—this is blood, right? Any wound that spills that much blood is definitely gonna be fatal. Someone died here."

It wasn't uncommon for bandits to attack and kidnap the residents of a village. The men would be used for labor, while the women would be used to satisfy various cravings.

Moreover, a certain unfavorable breed of human always harbored a certain desire: in short, money. Bandits often set upon their victims in search of it. But according to Gula, the blood on the walls indicated fatal bleeding, so the absence of bodies was strange. For starters, a bandit would never saddle themselves with literal deadweight. A corpse could make them no money, and banditry wasn't the sort of leisurely trade where one could get away with carting around worthless goods.

"Let's look into it some more. We might figure something out."

The sun was still up. If they didn't finish their investigation while it was still light out, they would be unable to make much progress in the dark of night.

Loren hurried them on, and no one raised any complaints. They quickly got to work, scattering to the various corners of the village.

Though they spent a good long while searching through the village, only one thing was clear: there wasn't a soul to be found.

The place was absolutely littered with the signs of an attack; presumably, quite a few people had been injured or killed. Yet there were no corpses. Whatever had happened, it had happened days, even weeks before they arrived.

"What do we do, Mr. Loren?" Lapis asked, which was a rather vague question.

Loren considered it. Something had certainly happened here—that was self-evident. But there were no leads telling them exactly what it was. Had there been bodies or survivors, perhaps he could have reasoned it out, but since there was nothing to see, he didn't know where to start.

"I don't consider myself an idiot… But I'm not especially good at this sort of thing," Loren said as he began entertaining the notion of pretending they hadn't seen anything at all.

Even if they figured out what had happened here, that wouldn't restore the decimated village. If someone had survived, they could have lent them aid in another fight under the banner of revenge. But there was no one here in need of vengeance.

It wasn't really that rare for a remote village to be annihilated for some reason or another. Eventually, the nation in which it was located would notice the loss and establish a new village somewhere else.

"Come to think of it, you've usually got a few soldiers on hand to guard a village, right?"

"Indeed. A village of this size would typically host a handful of soldiers sent by their patron nation."

"And they're gone too… You think they ran?"

It would have depended on the scale of the attack, but from the looks of it, Loren assumed that the attackers had been so numerous that a handful of soldiers couldn't have put up meaningful resistance. Thus, the soldiers had either made a brave last stand or run as fast as their legs could carry them.

"If the soldiers fled, news of the attack should have made it to their higher-ups. A retaliatory force would have been sent to recapture the village," said Lapis.

"And if that hasn't happened, it means they're still figuring out a response, or the soldiers didn't escape alive… Both are gonna be a pain."

"It's not like a farming village just gets built in the middle of nowhere for no reason, right?" Gula said. "There should be a similarly sized settlement somewhere close by."

At this, Loren and Lapis turned to Dia. She was obviously the most knowledgeable about the surrounding terrain.

"There are a few such settlements. Do you wish to drop by before the sun sets?"

"We should. If any of the villages haven't yet been hit, we need to warn them."

Whether they chose to send a messenger to the authorities or to flee from these lands, the villagers would first need information that a crisis was at hand before they could do anything about it.

We've got to be the ones to tell them, Loren thought. His words were met with no objections, and soon they left the ruined village, following Dia's directions to the nearest neighboring settlement.

However, the situation took a turn for the worse—and it turned far too soon. As they approached their next destination, they found themselves staring down the same exact situation they'd left in the village before it.

"Nothing good here, Loren," said Gula.

They'd stopped the wagon at the village's edge, and she'd been sent ahead to have a look around. Her report, once she returned, was short and to the point.

According to Gula, this village also had neither survivors nor corpses. Every piece of furniture she'd found had been destroyed, and there were signs of struggle, but that was it.

"This time, the food supplies were all snatched up too. Every last scrap. But money and valuables were left as is."

"That's a bit strange so far as bandits go."

A bandit who made off with every last morsel of food certainly wouldn't leave anything valuable on the table, especially not cold hard money.

Perhaps the village had put up such a great resistance that they'd given up on it? Loren pondered this for a moment. If that was the case, perhaps a survivor had carried off the dead and the injured, abandoning the village as they went to seek aid from the government. That would somewhat explain the current scene.

"But in that case, they wouldn't leave the money…"

Traveling meant expenses, and they'd also need to survive once they'd reported the tragedy. He couldn't see a survivor leaving riches behind either.

"Loren, there's another most curious thing," Dia said, interrupting his stream of answerless questions.

What more could there be? he wondered, looking at her.

Dia stared straight at Fireflute Mountain, which was extremely visible from the village, and said, "I've come quite close, and yet we've seen no response. This is most curious indeed. I thought he'd at least poke his head out to see what's causing a stir."

Loren didn't know which was stronger—an Elder or an ancient dragon. They were both undoubtedly incredibly powerful, and if one approached the other, it would certainly be strange if the other didn't even seem to notice.

Perhaps this meant the ancient dragon was actually the stronger one—so much so that an Elder's movements didn't even register to it.

However, Dia's attitude seemed to suggest that this wasn't ordinarily the case.

"Can you sense anything about the dragon from here?"

"That's the thing. I don't feel the presence of anything especially powerful in that mountain. This is the first time I've gotten so close, mind you. But since I don't sense anything…perhaps there is no ancient dragon in that mountain after all."

"That can't be," Lapis insisted. "I mean, it was another ancient dragon who told us to come here."

But Dia calmly replied, "When was the last time that ancient dragon even saw the face of her brethren? While the ancient dragons may be great, unlike we Elders, they carry the burden of a lifespan."

Lapis had to shut her mouth at that. Emily, the ancient dragon they'd met in demon territory, hadn't exactly told them how many months, years, or whatever had passed since she last met those of her brethren who lived in the lands of humans.

Perhaps, for one reason or another, the dragon had perished before they even got there. That wouldn't be so strange, now that Loren thought about it.

What if they'd been faced with an especially powerful foe, or a similar external threat? Or what if the ancient dragon had simply met the end of their natural life? There was no way to know, and neither possibility could be dismissed out of hand.

"If it died of old age, that'd be convenient for us," Nym said as she scanned the area. "We could report to the guild that the dragon of

Fireflute Mountain is gone. We might even be able to claim a dragon corpse. This would be incredibly lucrative."

According to Nym, there wasn't a single part of a dragon's body that would be discarded—not the flesh, the hide, the scales and teeth, or bones. They were all expensive materials and ingredients that could fetch exorbitant sums if they ever hit the marketplace.

Better yet, if you found yourself in possession of an ancient dragon, you could expect some of those pieces to sell for astronomical sums, enough to potentially live the rest of your life in perfect comfort.

"Even the scales and fangs alone are quite expensive. It will be a stroke of unimaginable luck if we can obtain some."

"*If* we can."

Loren's initial goal had been obtaining a modicum of information about an ancient dragon. If that was no longer possible, his attention naturally shifted to other profits they might gain. But those would only manifest if the ancient dragon really was dead. At present, he had no way of knowing either way.

"A long-lived dragon is able to conceal their presence and power. I cannot say for certain that he has died…" Dia said. "But it is indeed peculiar that he hasn't emerged."

"If he understands you mean no harm, maybe he doesn't feel the need to."

Sure, Elders were powerful, but if the one wandering through your territory didn't seem hostile, perhaps something as strong as an

ancient dragon felt no need to cower in fear *or* raise his guard. That was how Loren saw it.

Dia nodded gravely. "I considered that. That's why I've been trying to intimidate him for a while now."

"Quit trying to make the situation worse." Loren lowered a chop on Dia's pate. *What do you think you're doing?!*

There was a loud thud, and Dia crouched, holding her head.

The scene made Nym stare at Loren with a shocked expression. "Incredible. You got a clean hit on an Elder."

"That's because this Elder knows how to play along! That's how you ought to understand it, elf," Dia sniffed as she held her head with teary eyes.

Nym quickly ducked into Loren's shadow.

Sure, use me as a shield. If Dia got serious, my body wouldn't protect you from jack shit, Loren thought.

"So what do we do, Mr. Loren?" Lapis asked again.

"Right…" Loren lifted his eyes to the sky and confirmed the position of the sun.

It was still quite high, but they didn't have enough daylight to reach Fireflute Mountain and start the ascent. There was no telling what awaited them on that mountain, so it would be better to wait until sunrise to climb. He wanted to avoid camping on the slopes unless absolutely necessary.

Which meant that instead they'd have to camp here and set off in the next morning. With that in mind, Loren took a look around.

Nearby was a road and a stretch of open plain, which soon receded into a forest of densely packed trees.

Though they'd managed to come across a village, they would have to forsake it and camp in the grassland or the woods. It felt like a waste, but he wasn't going to let that make him hang around in a place where the villagers had all died or disappeared for some unknown reason.

"As a compromise, how about we camp a safe distance from the village?"

The surrounding area was open and clear, just like where they had parked the wagon. Loren proposed setting up camp in said open place to his comrades; it would at least be better than staying inside the village, and he felt it would be a pain to range too far away.

"I mean, who's going to think to attack a village that's already been utterly ransacked?" said Lapis. To her, this place was basically safer than anywhere else.

No one raised any objections.

Strange happenings usually take place at night. Loren wasn't too knowledgeable on such things, but that was the impression he got. Indeed, things never really got too bizarre while the sun was high in the sky. He was certain they preferred to crop up when it was dark and everyone was asleep.

But as if to sneer at his presumption, the strangeness reared its head as soon as they'd decided on a campsite and started to make their preparations.

"It's getting a little noisy."

The wagon had been tethered in an open space near the village. The party was unloading and opening bags to take out what was needed. Lapis was the first of them to notice something amiss. She set down her load for a second, returned to the wagon, and directed her eyes to the tree line.

Can she see something? Loren and Gula thought as they wrapped up work and narrowed their eyes beside her.

"Something's coming this way," Dia said in her carefree tones.

"How many somethings?" Loren swiftly asked. He had a terrible feeling about this.

Dia gazed at the trees for a moment before tilting her head. "Around a hundred?"

"Hey, now…"

Regardless of what they were dealing with, a hundred of anything was too many.

Loren immediately reached for his sword as Scena lent him her sight. Suddenly blessed with a Lifeless King's powers, Loren was now able to perceive things that a human ordinarily could not. A considerable distance past the edge of the forest, a great many lives were moving toward their campsite. And at quite a speed too.

No individual life-form gave off a particularly strong presence, but with such numbers approaching and all at once, even Loren could feel his face stiffen.

"On your guard! They're coming right at us!" he barked out in warning.

Not missing a beat, Nym hopped aboard the wagon, swiftly preparing an arrow and loosing it. The bolt flew through the slim gaps in the trees, and a moment later, the faint, distant scream of an animal cut the air.

Loren was astounded; her arrow had slipped past all obstacles and reliably struck a foe from an incredible distance. Nym nocked her next shot as she finally identified what they were dealing with.

"It's orcs, Loren."

"Orcs?!"

As she revealed the nature of their foes, Nym fired another arrow.

Like the last one, this bolt weaved its way through the trees, resulting in a porcine scream. It came from closer this time, and the sound confirmed that they really were facing an army of orcs.

"A hundred orcs! What kind of population boom is this?!" grumbled Lapis, whose face was just as stiff as Loren's.

"They must have found themselves a healthy crop of mothers," Dia idly replied in the same tone she used for an everyday chat.

Everyone's eyes fell on her, and Dia cocked her head. It was like she was only just realizing that she might have said something odd.

"Orcs and goblins mature with incredible speed, you know," she explained. "Assuming natural birth rate and maturation, it takes ten days for them to gestate and be born, and in another seven, the

child's body can hardly be differentiated from the adults of the species. After a month, that child can breed as any other. The only reason orcs and goblins don't generally see explosive population growth is the difficulties they face securing female specimens."

And of course, even during her lecture, the army of orcs continued to close in. Nym hardly lent an ear as she desperately loosed shots from atop the wagon, steadily chipping away at the enemy forces.

"Their race rarely produces female offspring, and individually, they are not particularly strong. As they cannot often secure females to be mothers, it takes them a surprisingly long time to breed," Dia went on.

"A hundred orcs is a pretty surprising number, thank you very much!"

Another orc cried out as Nym's arrow struck it down.

The trees did slow the foe's advance to some degree, and no enemies had yet breached the tree line, but it was only a matter of time. Additionally, the moment Nym nocked her next arrow, a frown crossed her face.

It seemed her supply of arrows had begun to run thin.

"Yes, that's why I assume they must have secured a fresh batch of mothers. If they obtain a large number all at once, they will breed without stopping until the females are completely ruined after having produced an incredible number of orcs. No wonder they multiply so."

"Where exactly are they getting those mothers from?"

"Well…from here, I'd imagine." Dia pointed at the destroyed remnants of the village—where not a single villager remained. "Orcs will eat anything that fits in their mouths—they'll even cannibalize the corpses of their own kin. I'd wager the corpses of villagers and soldiers were nothing more than food to them. And from young to old, I'll bet there were quite a few women in these villages."

Loren stared at the devastated village, a chill running down his spine. Each and every small house must have sheltered a whole family. To put it roughly, there had been at least as many women as there were houses.

It was impossible to tell how many had survived to be dragged off by the orcs, but the orcs, who craved females, went out of their way not to kill women. They had likely stolen a significant number.

And this was not the only village that had been annihilated.

They'd seen at least one other ruined settlement, and if that one had suffered the same fate, then the number of abducted villagers had to be at least several dozen.

"On a sidenote, did you know that orc children often come in litters of two or more?" Dia said, still going for some kind of medal in terrible orc trivia.

"I didn't ask!" Loren snarled as he raised his greatsword.

A moment later, he took a powerful swing at the first thing to break through the trees. A bipedal pig-faced creature let out just the sort of scream one would expect from a thing that had just had its torso cleaved in two, its blood splattering the surroundings.

"Eep?!"

That can't be one of my party members, can it? Just because of an orc? Loren thought it unlikely. To his surprise, however, the one who had cried out and hid behind him was, of all people, Lapis.

That's odd, he thought. But the reason became clear as soon as he looked back to the severed orc corpse.

For what it was worth, orcs possessed some intellect, and they usually wore clothing and armor, or even rags, if that was all they had. But though the bisected orc held a weapon, it had no clothes to speak of. It'd charged at them buck naked.

Naturally, everything was on full display, and dangling from its loins was something rather large by human standards. Apparently, this was what Lapis had objected to.

"Lapis, girl, really? Is this your first time you're seein' an orc's thingy?"

"The only difference is the size. They are fundamentally identical to human anatomy. What is there to be surprised about?"

"Honestly, after traveling together for so long, you must have seen Loren's at least once…"

"Hey, Dia. Stop."

As the rest of the party shot or tore through the orcs bursting through the trees, and as each new body fell, Lapis shriveled up more and more. She seemed to have absolutely no intentions of leaving her hiding spot behind Loren's back. Although Loren couldn't do much

about this, he couldn’t just let Dia run her mouth about that kind of thing.



Sure, Loren had been rendered unconscious for long periods of time more than once, and each time it had been Lapis who nursed him back to health.

Maybe Lapis had gotten an eyeful of what Dia alluded to during one of those nursing sessions, but Loren was trying his best not to think about it. If it was brought too far into the spotlight, he just knew he'd be so mortified he might just stop breathing.

Dia went on, "I mean, the difference in size is entirely due to species, and—"

"If you don't stop right now, I'm hammering this sword into your head. And let me be clear that this is no average blade."

Sealing Dia's lips took priority over dealing with the attacking orcs, so Loren headed for her first, only to turn and stab at an orc that passed directly past him. With a light twist, he wrenched the wound wide open, which made the orc fall dead instantly. Without sparing the corpse a second glance, he cut through another one vertically, frustratedly clicking his tongue.

He could take care of most of these pests in just one strike, but the numbers were turning into a real pain.

I can't silence Dia like this, he thought as he sliced through another. He could only focus his eyes on the Elder vampire; the blade wasn't getting anywhere near her. Dia punched and kicked any foe who approached, and once they were no longer moving, she used what was presumably her own energy-drain power to drink in their life force. As soon as she had a moment of rest, she raised her hands to signal surrender to Loren.

Evidently, she'd realized that any more teasing on this subject didn't just put herself in danger. It also raised the risk to Loren, as well as to Lapis behind him.

"No need for hostility between comrades," Dia said. "What if you slip up in the heat of battle?"

"You started it."

"More importantly, the enemies. I think we ought to launch a counterattack."

"I'll remember this…" Loren cursed. But indeed, the number of orcs encircling the camp was only growing. One misstep could result in a painful downfall.

An ordinary iron-rank adventurer party would inevitably be annihilated the moment they let themselves be surrounded, but Loren and his party were unfazed.

Each time Loren swung his greatsword, at least one orc was reduced to lifeless flesh, and the orcs surrounding Gula would suddenly be absent heads or torsos, whereupon they would fall and disappear before their bodies hit the ground.

Nym continued sniping approaching orcs from atop the wagon, and she always aimed for the closest ones. But knowing her arrow stock was running thin, Dia moved to assist her. With arm and leg strength entirely disproportionate to her frail physique, she knocked down orc after orc.

"Gula? How are you doing that?" Nym asked, clearly wondering how Gula could simply erase orcs without even casting a spell.

That's just what happens when she uses her authority, Loren thought with a wry smile.

Meanwhile, Gula boldly replied, "It's my trump card!"

"I see. Then I shouldn't delve into the details."

Loren questioned the wisdom of letting that out so easily, but he was grateful Nym didn't pursue the matter and refrained from retorting.

At some point the orcs would realize they had lost a staggering number of their own in a devastatingly short period, and at that point intelligence wouldn't matter. It would be just a matter of time before they lost their nerve and fled.

And yet, strangely enough, no matter how many orcs were cut through, smacked around, or devoured by unseen fangs, the monsters showed no interest in retreating.

If that wasn't bad enough, their bloodshot eyes didn't seem to register Loren at all, and they stared fixedly at only his comrades.

"You little—are you Claes's buddies or something?!" Loren instinctively snarled at the orcs, who didn't even seem to realize he existed.

Lapis's retort was remarkably levelheaded. "Now, now, Mr. Loren, don't you think that's rather cruel?"

One often lost their ability to think rationally while on the battlefield—Loren knew this all too well. He had fallen into such a state numerous times, and each time, he'd been amazed that he

managed to survive it. By the look of things, the orcs had fallen victim to that manic excitement.

If you knew your forces had the upper hand, you could fight for a very long time. But there was always a limit to such things. Once an army faced the fact that it was overpowered, that heat quickly died.

"Why are they such a pain?!"

If they failed to block, he sliced through flesh and bone. If they succeeded, he severed the weapons too. Loren's greatsword would break straight through everything he faced, yet he felt nauseous. The field brimmed with the scent of blood, and the ground was piled high with the orc bodies from which the stench spilled.

Using the back of his hand to wipe off the blood that had splattered his face, Loren glanced back and saw that Nym was hiding alongside Lapis, who had never once given up her spot.

"What's wrong?"

"Out of arrows."

There wasn't much emotion in Nym's voice, but he detected a hint of irritation. For what it was worth, she'd drawn her dagger to protect herself.

Against a human, she could use her superior speed to stab and tear through a vital point, but the problem here was orcs. Not only was their skin exceptionally tough, but their organs were also guarded by hefty layers of fat. A dagger would only do surface damage, making it difficult to inflict a lethal wound.

"It must be quite bothersome to be unable to fight once your arrows run out," Dia mused as she continued to overwhelm orcs with her bare hands. She wasn't going as far as to ridicule Nym, but she did come off as rather mocking.

Nym looked miffed, but not only was Dia correct, she was also an Elder to Nym's mere elf. The difference in power was more than clear.

"Well, I suppose there is a rather unusual number of orcs," Dia conceded. "If I don't put you to work, I'll be the only one worn out by the end of this."

"That's…"

"Yes, I understand. I can at least fashion some arrows for you."

At this, Dia lightly swept the feet out from under an approaching orc. She moved nimbly, seeming to put no strength into the motion—and yet, the orc's leg was torn off at the knee as though it had been made of clay.

As the monster lost balance and fell, Dia plunged her fingers into its neck and lifted it up. She chanted a spell under her breath. The orc's body disintegrated, and in its place, ten pure-white arrows lay clutched between Dia's fingers.

"Here, will these do?" She slowly walked over to Loren and handed them to Nym.

Nym stared in shock as she took them. She could tell by touch alone that they were perfectly straight, made of something hard and smooth. The protruding fletching was fashioned of the same material

and were merely extensions of the shaft. These clearly weren't the sort of arrows you could pick up at the market.

In any case, she wanted to try them out. Returning her dagger to its sheath, Nym unfastened the bow at her back, nocked an arrow, and loosed it at an orc from behind Loren's back.

"Huh?!"

The voice of surprise came from Nym—the very person who had shot the arrow. It had flown straight at her target and stuck into the orc's head. But unlike her previous arrows, it didn't stop there. It pierced straight through the monster's skull and came out the other side.

If that had been all, you could have called it a fine arrow indeed. However, in the next instant, the orc stabbed by the white arrow vanished. Where the orc had been standing, ten more silver arrows littered the ground.

"Be careful you don't hit anything with those by accident," Dia explained, stifling her laughter as Nym stared blankly, not quite knowing what had happened. "*That* is the product of alchemy. Its baseline prowess has been amplified, but on top of that, the moment the arrowhead pierces its target, the alchemy sealed within it is invoked. Its targets will be transmuted into similar arrows. As long as you don't miss, you will never run out of ammunition—but if you hit what you don't intend to, there is no way to halt the process."

"How's that supposed to work?" Loren had to ask—he even rested his orc-slaying hands to ask it.

Dia triumphantly explained, “Starting from the point of piercing, the arrowhead consumes the mana, flesh, and blood of the sacrifice to fabricate arrows. The price is properly paid in blood offering—no cheating here. So really, it’s a relatively simple spell.”

“If the blood, flesh, and mana are used up…”

“The bone goes into making the arrows themselves. It is not an especially dear material, is it?”

Nym scowled slightly to hear that the arrows in her hands were made of orc bones, but quickly regained her composure and readied the next shot. Orcs were generally considered filthy creatures, but their bones were buried deep within their bodies. It was still creepy, but she could deal.

From there, they steadily winnowed the orcs until their foes’ morale finally ran out. The sight of their comrades being killed so easily and mercilessly seemed to knock the beasts out of their maddened state, and bit by bit, orcs began to break off and flee.

Once it came to that, it wasn’t long before the whole contingent fell apart. Fear was contagious, and the terror raced through the eyes of the orcs as they stared at the party. Before long, the entire army had taken flight.

“Let’s hunt them down!” Loren shouted.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” said Dia. “Night will soon be upon us. They can take you by surprise if you underestimate them.”

If these orcs had attacked and laid waste to the villages, then Loren’s party might find survivors who could still be rescued at their

base. But Dia shot him down. He was about to argue back, but when he looked up, he saw that the sky was indeed growing dark.

"But you know, isn't it boring for you if we just let 'em get away?"



"That will not be an issue. Just leave everything to me," Dia answered.

She approached one of the many orc corpses that littered the area and squatted beside it. Brandishing a hand over the cadaver, she muttered something. Then the dead orc haltingly staggered to its feet, its body still haggard and broken.

"Necromancy?" Lapis asked. She peeked over Loren's shoulder with keen interest as she watched Dia at work.

The orcs are gone now. Do you really need to keep hiding? thought Loren. But Lapis remained glued to his back, and it didn't seem like she intended to leave any time soon. Arguing about it would likely be a waste of time, so he resigned himself to his fate.

"The ones Loren sliced and Gula crushed are no good. But the ones I smacked can be recycled as zombies."

The parts Dia had struck had been destroyed, and the impact had sent some of them crashing into trees, leaving them broken and battered. But these were trivial issues for a corpse. Dia's revived orc was terribly slow and lurched in bizarre ways, but it ploddingly started off in a certain direction.

"Hey, where are you sending it?"

"That goes without saying. I'm sending it home." As she answered, Dia was already reviving another orc. This one dragged its torn innards along as it headed off in the same direction as the last.

Loren furrowed his brow at the uncanny sight, but Dia was entirely unbothered and had already gone on to the next one. Once

again, she employed her necromancy.

"What are you trying to do?"

"The orcs may be unintelligent creatures, but they must at least remember the location of their den. We merely need to make zombies out of their fallen and send them off."

The orc that lurched up this time was missing a head. If it had no brain, Loren felt that intelligence was no longer in play. However, zombified corpses were manipulated by the ghosts that possessed them, and the state of their bodies was largely irrelevant to their needs.

"The orcs I reanimate as zombies are under my command. I have a complete understanding of how they move and where they go."

"You Elders come with some real convenient abilities."

Vampires are already strong, as undead go. I should have expected something like this from an Elder, Loren thought.

Dia looked at him suspiciously as she raised another zombie. "Is that mockery I hear? It sounds like a joke coming from you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, if you don't know, then so be it."

Dia brushed off Loren's question and got back to work.

Loren cocked his head, wondering what she was implying. Suddenly, he heard Scena's voice in his head.

‹Umm, Mister… I might be a failed experiment, but…I am a uniquely powerful form of undead myself…›

Though Scena's voice was timid, there was an implication there. Loren wondered if she was capable of doing the same thing as Dia.

‹I can. Do you want me to?›

If we can cut down on some work for Dia, I think that would be quite helpful, Loren thought and requested a share of Scena's power.

At his behest, Scena appeared for a moment in his line of sight, a half-transparent visage. *‹I'll do my best,›* she told him before invoking her undead abilities.

"Hey, what's…goin' on here?" Gula stammered, understandably flustered.

Dia had selected only relatively intact corpses to use for her zombies, but Scena was indiscriminate. What seemed like every corpse in the general vicinity staggered upright, making for an uncanny tableau. An orc that was nothing but a torso crawled forward with its arms, dragging whatever had spilled out of its cross section in its wake as it disappeared beyond the trees. This was followed by the lower half of a body—two legs that teetered unsteadily as they went, as if in pursuit of their upper half. The left and right halves of an orc that had been vertically split down the middle supported one another as they slowly made off.

Talk about absurd. To top it off, an orc that had been reduced to a decapitated head began rolling its way through the woods.

This had gone beyond shock and terror. Now it was just a farce.

In this way, full of Scena's power and regardless of the damage their bodies had suffered, the orc corpses set off to where they had

once lived.

"That's quite a nasty horde you've got there," said Dia.

"Weren't those zombies your work?" Nym asked her.

"Ah, yes, little elf, I suppose they must have been my handiwork. I simply never imagined they would come out so misshapen."

Dia nonchalantly covered for Scena's existence as she saw off the corpses, which had by then mostly disappeared. Using another spell—a necromantic one, it seemed—she wiped away all remaining traces of scattered blood.

"Let us rest for tonight. Once the sun rises, we may give chase again. If all goes well, a good number of our quarry will fall in clashes with our little horde, and we'll have that much less work to do."

Dia yawned and rubbed her eyes and patted Loren on the hip for a job well-done.

"I took care of the blood, so would you prepare a bed for me? Staying up late will be terrible for my skin."

"Aren't you generally nocturnal?" Loren asked. It seemed pretty weird for an undead being to complain about a late night.

"Vampires might be, and Trues too, but Elders are a different matter. Don't worry about it—and get me a bed already."

"Got it, got it."

No point in thinking about it too hard, he concluded as he watched Dia yawn again. Sheathing his greatsword, he got back to work setting up the tent.

Chapter 4:
Pursuit to Advance

THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT, Loren and his comrades took turns keeping watch in pairs: Gula and Dia, then Loren and Lapis, each shift ensuring the other got enough shut-eye. As the morning sun rose, they got to work.

Loren couldn't help but feel a slight discomfort, knowing that a vampire was starting their day as it dawned. However, bearing witness to the event with his own eyes, he had no choice but to accept it.

"Is there something on my face?" Dia asked with a puzzled expression when she noticed his scrutiny. Loren replied briefly that it was nothing and turned away.

The orc zombies Scena had sent off had given them valuable intel on the location of the base of the orcs who had attacked them yesterday. Even if they hadn't been able to directly trace the zombies, the clear tracks of blood and guts they left in their wake as they advanced made it relatively easy to follow them.

"I thought we took out the bulk of them yesterday, but it seems there's still quite a few remaining," noted Dia.

For now, they were going with the story that she'd made all their undead minions. Thus, all the information said minions gathered had to be relayed to the rest of the group through Dia. Loren had been initially unsure as to how he'd convey Scena's insights to her, but his concerns had proved unnecessary. In short, Dia, being the highest-

ranking form of vampire and a powerful undead in her own right, could easily intercept the magical connection between Scena's zombies and Scena herself, thereby obtaining whatever information they had to offer.

"It seems there's a cave somewhere around the central slope of Fireflute Mountain. That seems to be the orcs' lair."

"Any survivors?" Nym asked shortly.

Dia shook her head. "I don't know. The zombies can't distinguish between orcs and humans. All I can tell is that a large number of living beings are gathered there."

"I want to help the survivors," Nym insisted.

Loren also wanted to help, if possible, but his top priority was still the party's safety. If it got to a point where that safety was jeopardized, he feared they might have to give up on any rescues.

But saying that could upset Nym. He thought it best to remain silent until they had to cross that bridge. When Nym glanced at him, seemingly seeking some response, Loren thought for a moment and went with something inoffensive.

"If we can, yeah."

"Of course. That's good enough."

After this exchange, the party packed up their campsite, loaded their belongings onto the wagon, and equipped only the essentials. The wagon would be left within the ruins of the village.

Leaving it unguarded in the abandoned village did make Loren anxious, but Gula and Dia took care of it.

"I cast a protective barrier and left a spell to ward off monsters," said Dia. "It should be fine."

"I left a little something to fight off any would-be attackers," Gula added. "A handful of monsters will be easy pickings for it."

"Should I leave something too?" Lapis offered, though Loren softly turned her down.

The work of an Elder and a dark god was already overkill. Adding a demon's contributions into the mix was just asking for trouble. Worst-case scenario, they'd end up wishing they'd just left the wagon to its fate.

The village wasn't far from Fireflute Mountain, but the ascent was steep, and there was no proper trail. Evidently humans and animals rarely ventured onto the slopes. This posed a significant challenge to the party now that they had to climb it themselves.

Nevertheless, they found a relatively safe route and began the climb. There was only one member of their party who couldn't climb and had to cling to Loren's back instead.

"Don't you have a change of clothes or something?" Loren sent a tired look back to Dia, outfitted in her unwieldy dress and clinging to him with a hint of delight.

It might not be *impossible* to climb the undergrowth and bracken-covered slope in a dress, but it was inevitable that the dress would be sullied and torn. Dia had immediately given up on climbing and resorted to clambering onto Loren as a means of keeping up with the group.

"As an Elder, I will not stoop to donning plebeian garb."

"Weren't you dressed a little more appropriately last time I saw you?"

"At the time, I wasn't a full-fledged Elder. Now I am."

"How convenient…"

Loren was irritated, but having the petite Dia on his back wasn't really a burden. His only concern was that she might get in the way if he had to draw his sword…but even that wouldn't be much of an issue. He concluded it was fine to let Dia do as she pleased.

He did notice Lapis giving them a resentful look and quickly pretended not to have seen.

The party proceeded for a while, Dia humming a tune on Loren's back, until she tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. "Zombie ahead."

As he focused, Loren spotted a half-destroyed orc corpse half-collapsed against one of the trees on the mountainside, motionless.

Pretty gross, he thought as he approached. Hidden among the undergrowth beneath the zombie's feet was another orc corpse. Loren came to a halt.

Peering over his shoulder, Dia looked down at the body and quickly ascertained its identity. "They're smart enough to be on patrol. It must have encountered the zombie and gotten into a scuffle."

"Must've taken out this zombie in the process, then."

"It appears so. The one on the ground has seen a little damage, but it seems to be in better condition than its predecessor. Shall we

use it as our next guide?" Dia suggested as she brandished her hand. The zombie leaned against the tree crumpled, and as if to take its place, the fallen one gradually rose.

It seemed it had died from a bite to the throat. Its body was largely undamaged, and not much time had passed since its demise. Its appearance wasn't especially horrid either.

But, as per usual, it was naked. Lapis had grown used to this to a degree, but she still couldn't abide a direct eyeful. She averted her gaze and ducked behind Loren.

"How innocent," cooed Dia.

"Please don't," begged Lapis.

While that exchange went on behind him, Loren got back to the climb, trailing after the trudging zombie. They pressed on for a while after that, until they came across a rather peculiar scene at what was likely somewhere around the midpoint of the slope.

They peered from the cover of a nearby copse of largish trees and saw a cave-like opening gaping on the mountainside. In front of it, a tangle of naked orcs struggled with each other. That in itself was nothing more than a disturbing sight, the kind that made you avert your gaze and move on. However, some of the orcs had sustained highly visible fatal injuries that made their aliveness quotient abundantly clear.

It was clear that this was a battle between the orc zombies created by Scena and the orcs that presently inhabited Fireflute Mountain.

"The zombies are really holding their own."

The living orcs were also completely naked, to a one. But unlike the zombies, they had weapons in hand. The zombies, whose bodies had been falling apart to start with, were unarmed. They mainly attacked by grabbing onto their foes and chomping down.

While the zombies were resilient enough to withstand a little battering, the living orcs maintained the advantage of weaponry. By the time Loren's party arrived on the scene, a considerable number of the zombies were already flat on the ground.

However, orcs were uniformly sturdy and were decently powerful as monsters went. Now that they had become zombies that could fight without consideration for their bodies' natural limits, or the damage they might incur, the living orcs were still suffering under the brunt of their attack. Loren reasoned that if his party pitched in now, the tide would turn in favor of the zombies. He reached for his sword, only for Dia to stop him.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Do you intend to charge in? I would advise against it."

"This is our chance to take out the orcs guarding the entrance."

This mountainside cave was likely the orc den, and Loren knew that the ones fighting outside were likely not the full fighting force. But this was still a goodly number of the creatures, and he figured wiping them out now would save some effort further down the line.

Dia leaned in and whispered, bringing her lips close to Loren's ear, "Rather than cutting your way through, can you not simply crush

them?”

She snapped the fingers of her right hand.

With that single gesture, the corpses of the lifeless orcs and zombies on the ground were once more filled with an unnatural will. They shambled together and gathered in one place. Loren and his comrades were rendered speechless by the eerie sight. The flesh and muscles of the orcs and zombies swelled grotesquely and crushed together. Trickles of blood oozed out of the compacted flesh, and the sound of crunching bone filled the air as the bodies coalesced into a single mass—that of a looming humanoid figure.

“A flesh golem. It’s the product of alchemy—not an undead.” Dia sounded a little proud of herself.

“It’s disgusting,” Lapis said vehemently. *“Nauseating.”*

The Elder seemed pretty dejected by this response, but Loren had to side with Lapis on this one. After all, orc and zombified orc alike had been bound together as one, their fleshy forms twisted into a rudimentary clay that shaped an oozing abomination. Though he wasn’t as blunt as Lapis, he had no doubt that anyone with a sliver of sense would be sickened by the sight of the flesh golem in all its glory.

On top of that, the flesh golem had begun grabbing startled orcs and shoving them into the writhing mass of its own body. At this point, even Loren—who thought he was used to such things—felt something bubbling up in his gut.

“W-well, this should solve our orc problem.”

Loren's expression seemed to make Dia realize that her creation was an abomination by her comrades' standards. She swiftly tried to change the topic. But no matter how she tried, with the monster shambling right before them, it would do little to lift the mood.

"Can you call that taken care of?" Loren asked.

Sure, the flesh golem was essentially one-sidedly stomping the orcs. However, though the entrance to the orcs' den was vast and spacious, the golem had absorbed too many corpses. At this rate, it would be unable to fit into the mountain passages. If it couldn't enter, it would be no use in the fight with the bulk of the orcish forces. Or so Loren assumed—but what he saw next overturned these foolish assumptions.

The flesh golem twisted its massive frame, compressing and squirming as it crammed itself into the entranceway.

"It's really just a mass of flesh. Simple enough to reshape."

Dia claimed that it *did* have a skeleton, for what it was worth, but even that could be momentarily destroyed and reconstructed as necessary. What's more, it had no particular need to maintain human form and so could enter any space, large or small.

"Once it's taken care of the orcs, I need only destroy the golem and the problem is resolved. How's that? Aren't I amazing?" Dia declared.

Loren sincerely thought it was incredible, but his admiration dissipated with a murmur from Lapis. "If there are any survivors inside, will that golem accurately identify them and keep them alive?"

"Huh?"

Dia froze in her arrogant pose. That alone answered the question.

"What do we do about this, Mr. Loren?"

"Why're you asking me?"

The flesh golem's body sealed the entrance of the cave as it squeezed its way inside. Even if they wanted to stop it, there wasn't much they could do at this point. And as they could do nothing, they could only watch and pray—pray that there were no survivors to start with, or that at least a few of them made it through this ordeal. Loren's resigned eyes turned to the sky.

They watched helplessly as Dia's flesh golem worked its body into the cave until it had sealed the entrance so tightly that even light couldn't pass through.

Emerging from his hiding spot, Loren cautiously approached to take a closer look, but the entrance was entirely filled with a wall of flesh, making it impossible to discern whatever was going on inside.

Since the entrance was perfectly sealed, no sounds leaked out either. Loren wondered what to do about this as he looked down at Dia, who'd followed on his heels. Dia shook her head as if to say there was nothing that *could* be done.

"Until it finishes executing its orders, it is unstoppable."

"How about we slice and dice our way through it?"

"If you're ready to drown in blood and fat, I won't stop you."

If they were to cut through the fleshy wall that filled the fairly spacious cave from wall to wall, then they really would need to prepare to face the fate Dia warned of. Loren was willing to wade through blood and fat if it was absolutely necessary, but if not, he had no intention of doing so. As he stared listlessly at the entrance, he noticed the wall of flesh was slowly being drawn inward.

"What's happening?" asked Gula, who had also noticed the trajectory of the fleshy mass. She cocked her head curiously, and Dia mimicked the same motion…until she clapped her hands together.

"Oh, the cave must be quite deep. The golem doesn't have enough volume to fill it, so the farther it proceeds, the more space will open behind it."

"Unfortunately, it doesn't seem like we'll be able to press forward alongside it," Lapis said with a sigh as she poked her head into the entrance to have a look.

The walls of the cave had been left slippery with blood and fat after the golem passed through. A misplaced foot would inevitably lead to a slip, and if they touched the walls, their hands would come away filthy. The state of it left them less than eager to enter.

Loren realized that they would need to enter regardless once the flesh golem disintegrated. He could feel his motivation dropping as he watched the gradually receding flesh wall with tired eyes. But soon after, he squinted. The wall's movements had become strange.

Until this moment, it had been steadily inching forward. But once it reached a certain depth, it came to a halt.

"Hey, it stopped."

"Has it reached the end, perhaps?" Dia wondered with a tilt of her head. The wall hadn't gone that far in, and it was still clearly visible from the entrance. Loren thought it didn't look far enough away for it to have reached the innermost chamber—but suddenly, the flesh wall began to return, retracing its steps toward them.

"Run! That thing's coming back!"

Now, Loren did not assume the flesh golem was so lacking in sense that it couldn't distinguish friend from foe, but it was moving at such a speed that it seemed set on engulfing the lot of them. He yelled a warning as he fled the entrance.

Behind him, he heard Dia mutter, *"Collapse."*

With that one word, the flesh golem crumbled as though it had never posed a threat at all. As the flesh and blood fell away, the remains spread in a pool at their feet. Loren expected a terrible mess, but the crumbled golem parts instantly dried up into powdery clumps. After a moment, these clumps collapsed into dust.

It had completely disintegrated, leaving no trace, not even a smell. Dia walked up to it before anyone could stop her and stooped to pinch some of the fine powder, inspecting the grains on her fingertips.

"Generally speaking, golems are incapable of feeling anything," she explained to no one in particular. Patting off the dust, she went on, "But flesh golems and bone golems—the ones originally made of living things—do occasionally retain some vestige of emotions."

"What are you trying to say?"

Dia's eyes turned to the depths of the cave. "This golem cowered and fled because it was afraid of something."

The depths of the dark cave were a complete mystery to ordinary eyes. An Elder like Dia, however, could see just as well down there as she could under the light of day. Loren, too, enjoyed a similar degree of discernment through Scena's vision, although his natural senses had no way of penetrating this lightless space.

Like her, he gazed into the depths, but all he could make out was a straight passage that continued farther in. He certainly didn't see anything that could strike fear into the heart of a golem.

"It must be quite something if even a golem is afraid of it," noted Lapis. She had followed Loren's lead and peered into the depths, as she could also see through the darkness with her demonic eyes. Gula was similarly endowed.

Nym was the only one who had a troubled look. She was peering in like the others but didn't seem to be faring as well. "Do you see anything, Loren?" she asked.

"Nah, not a thing. No way in hell could I do that." In truth, he *could*. But he couldn't possibly say that to Nym. He could only put on his best poker face and pretend. "How about you, Nym?"

"To some extent…but I can't see the end."

"What a coincidence. I can't see either," Lapis said.

"I don't see nothin'," Gula agreed.

These brazen lies did not stop them from keeping their eyes locked on the dark. Dia looked at Loren and his party, puzzled as to what they were up to, but he couldn't just blurt out the truth.

"For now, let's get some light and head in," said Loren. "Thankfully, it looks like the blood's dried off the walls and everywhere."

As the flesh golem disintegrated, the blood and fat that had moistened the walls of the cave had vanished too, presumably vaporized alongside the main body. The powder beneath their feet would be something of a problem, but they wouldn't have to worry about putting their hands on the walls to feel their way forward.

"Are you going in?" Dia asked curiously.

"Yeah. Might be survivors, and there's also gotta be whatever scared off your flesh golem, right?"

Though it might be heartless, Loren found himself thinking it would be simpler if there were no survivors after all. However, he also thought that whatever had scared the golem did require some investigation. The reason was simple. He could think of only one entity powerful enough to frighten an emotionless construct—the very same ancient dragon they had come to meet.

To be fair, Dia and Lapis were both on hand and had not sensed a thing. This made a dragon's presence quite unlikely, but seeing as they had no other leads, it seemed far more constructive to search here rather than combing the rest of the mountain.

"I'm not gonna force anyone to come with me. I'll have a little

look-see on my own."

"We can't send Loren alone," Nym said, readying her bow.

Lapis seemed somewhat put out that her line had been stolen, but she nodded.

Gula added, "Yeah, I'm not gonna let everyone else go while I twiddle my thumbs."

"If that's how it's going to be, then I must go as well," Dia concluded.

So in the end, everyone made ready to enter the cave. It was capacious enough for two people to walk side by side. Loren took the lead with Dia, who brandished a magic light at her fingertips. Gula stood at the center, while Lapis and Nym trailed at the end. After taking formation, they took the first step inside.

"I thought it would stink…but it's fine."

Even if you put aside the flesh golem's field trip, this had presumably been the den of a great many orcs, and Loren had imagined it would be filthy, with a foul odor lingering in the air. However, the air that filled the cave was somewhat musty but otherwise perfectly breathable.

"Well, the flesh golem has already been through this stretch. It absorbed all the grime and stench," said Dia.

Presumably, the place had been exactly as foul as Loren expected before they came here. But the flesh golem had charged through, scraping its body against the cave walls as it pressed onward, and it had taken all that into its fleshy body. When the golem

fell apart, that odor and filth had dissipated as well, leaving only the dust through which they dragged their feet.

"That's pretty convenient."

"Convenience is the entire purpose of a golem."

"Its appearance was pretty much the worst, though."

"Your creations are more endearing when they have one or two little flaws."

Loren considered the appearance of those twisted, kneaded innards and muscle as something more than a "little flaw," but it was also no longer his concern. In any case, the flesh golem hadn't made it that far into the cave and had evacuated pretty quickly, so there were very possibly more orcs inside. Loren kept up his guard, but for some reason, no matter how far they went, it didn't seem to matter. They saw neither sign of orcs nor the corpses they might have left in their wake.

"It looks like my golem did a proper cleanup," Dia proudly said as she shifted the magic light around to study every nook and cranny.

The golem had only made it a shallow distance in. Given how deep the cave was, how had it killed the orcs farther in? Loren was curious, but also afraid of Dia having some outrageous answer, so he decided it was best not to ask. Ultimately, it was all well and good as long as the orcs were dead.

"You sure it didn't clean up the survivors while it was at it?" Gula wearily asked from behind.

However, Dia puffed out her chest and loudly proclaimed, "I have seen no such signs, so surely there were no survivors in the first place!"

"Whoa… Loren, the Elder's fully in denial," Gula said.

Lapis added, "There was certainly a chance that some had survived, but now we'll never know. There's no way to counter her argument."

"You should be careful who you befriend," Nym warned Loren with all sincerity.

While there was doubtless something terrifying at the end of this passage, it was like the girls had left their tension behind at the entrance. Loren felt like he was the only one still on his toes.

"Still, there's really nothing here."

They proceeded with caution, but despite this supposedly being an orcish lair, it was notably devoid of any sign of living orcs. Usually, you'd expect to find a place to cook and a place to sleep. A place to lock up the captives taken from the villages they attacked, and a place to store food. But they found none of that.

A few spaces seemed like they might have been used as rooms, but nothing remained within them. They couldn't even tell what they had originally been used *for*.

"It's been wiped clean. Are you sure this isn't your hardworking golem?" Lapis asked from the back.

Dia looked away, acting dumb, and began to whistle terribly.

Can't play it off any better than that? Loren thought with a wry smile. But one more thing weighed on his mind.

An entity that struck fear into an emotionless golem.

Not only had it awakened an emotion in a being that supposedly had none, it had done so powerfully enough to make the golem forget its orders and flee in the opposite direction. This being was presumably somewhere down these cavernous corridors, but despite how powerful it had to be, not a single member of their party could sense it. Not him, nor Lapis, nor Dia, nor Gula.

"Dunno what's up. Maybe it left already," Gula said to no one in particular as she folded her hands behind her head and ambled on as though she harbored no concerns whatsoever.

In that case, we should have picked up some hint of it moving, thought Loren. But they hadn't sensed that either.

"Whatever it is, it may be incredibly skilled at manipulating its power and aura. Perhaps it can project it selectively?" Lapis suggested.

"Sounds terrifying. I don't know if I could beat that," said Nym.

The way she saw it, monsters that couldn't contain their sheer menacing aura were frightening enough. Those that hid their presence until they felt the time to make themselves known, though, were even more terrifying. After all, such behavior only came hand in hand with a high level of skill and intelligence.

I see her point, Loren thought.

The party cautiously proceeded into the depths of the cave, but once they'd pressed on for a while, Loren felt something on his right shoulder. He glanced over. Typically, he would have seen Neg, as it was his usual resting place. However, the spider was gone, having left only a white thread stuck to his usual spot. Loren's eyes traced the thread until he spotted Neg's black body clinging to the cave wall.

What's he up to now? Loren wondered as he allowed himself to be tugged aside by the string.

Suddenly, his nose was filled with a faint, sickly sweet scent that oozed from the wall. He stopped in his tracks.

"Mr. Loren?" Lapis called out, curious as to why he'd wandered to the wall only to seize up. She soon noticed that he was carefully inspecting the rock face and raised a hand to gather the others. Slowly, she brought her face to the wall as well.

"What's up?" asked Gula.

"How to put it…" Lapis said. "There's a rather dreadful odor coming from here."

That's how she'd describe it? Loren thought. *Seems pretty sweet to me*.

Gula also approached the wall, taking a light sniff. Then her face broke into a scowl as she covered her mouth and swiftly backed off. She reacted so suddenly that Loren braced himself, suspecting poison. But Gula's next words made his brain short out for an entirely different reason.

"That's got Luxuria written all over it!"

Loren's malfunctioning brain could only summon the image of glistening skin on full display. Of a barely covered crotch, a wide smile, and a cleft chin.

Before he knew it, he retreated a step back, his weakened legs failing to hold his body weight. But before he could fall over, he was caught by Dia and Lapis, who had circled behind him before he noticed.

Presumably, Lapis had darted to hide behind him the moment she heard Luxuria's name, and so had rushed to hold him up as soon as she saw him wobble.

What am I, your meat shield? Loren thought. But in this instance, he was thankful she'd been there. He regained his balance, somehow. His eyes fell on Nym, who had no idea what was going on, and Gula, who was glaring at the wall.

Leaving Nym aside for the time being, he watched as Gula, hand still over her mouth, cautiously approached the wall and carefully investigated it. Before long, she pulled away and returned to the group.

"This wall here, it was probably closed up by the *Stonewall* incantation. As for who did it… I actually kinda doubt it was the guy we're thinkin' of…"

So this *was* the lingering trace of a dark god of lust—but not Luxuria. If it had to be someone else, then Loren knew of only one other individual that matched the criteria.

But if that individual was here, that meant they were once again one step behind. Sure, it wasn't entirely impossible that the dark god

who led an army of muscle-bound men and women in Kaffa had come all the way here and built a wall, but if that was the case, Loren thought, they would have to seriously consider ridding themselves of Luxuria once and for all. Either way, this required further investigation.

"Can you get rid of it?"

"Well, yeah, a *Dispell* should do the trick… Oh, but if we're at the same level of magical skill, it might be difficult."

Loren and Gula thought back on the dark elf Noel, the attendant of the black swordsman who they damnably kept running into. Not long ago, Loren's party had been investigating some abandoned ruins that it turned out had once been used to engineer the dark gods. There, they'd found the same mechanisms that had created Gula and her comrades, and they'd also encountered Noel, who had been reborn as a dark god of lust.

At the time, they had gone their separate ways without getting into a real fight, but since Noel had obtained the power of lust, it wasn't strange that her aura was similar to Luxuria's.

"Give it a shot. We can't just shrug this off."

"I hear ya. Give me a sec," Gula said as she returned to the wall. Along the way, she passed Neg, who reeled in on his threads to once more perch on Loren's right shoulder.

Loren stroked Neg's back in thanks. The spider had picked up on a tiny abnormality that everyone else had missed and had let him in on it. Neg resumed his usual unmoving position.

"Loren, that spider has taken quite a liking to you," Nym said.

"Yeah, looks like it. Couldn't tell you why, though."

"Anyone liked by bugs and animals can't be bad. You really are a good kid."

Nym smiled as she patted Loren on the back; her choice of words had made him self-conscious, and he awkwardly scratched his cheek.

Meanwhile, Gula spent a stretch examining the wall. Then she took a step back, pointed her right palm at it, and chanted, "*Dispell*."

For a moment, the rocky surface emitted a pale light. Then, once the light faded, what had once been solid rock lost its shape and melted away into the air. Now that the entrance was revealed, Loren had to turn away from the sweet scent that poured out of it. He covered his mouth as he coughed and choked.

"O god of knowledge, may your arcane powers protect us from harm. *Protection from Magic*."

Lapis hurriedly invoked a blessing, raising everyone's resistance to magical assault. Without it, Loren and Nym might have succumbed to the scent and fallen into the throes of lust.

It was such a powerful fragrance that he could all too easily see it happening.

Loren had coughed so much that there were tears in his eyes, and he wiped at them as he peered into the entrance Gula had opened. The floor was covered with what looked like a magic circle fashioned out of purple light, and in the center of it stood a stone statue in the shape of a woman.

"What…what is that, exactly?" Nym asked from behind her hand.

Loren didn't quite know how to answer. Silver-rank adventurers like Nym had presumably been let in on the information about the existence of the dark gods, but it wasn't exactly easy to tell her that she was standing right next to one of them.

But if they didn't start with the whole Gula thing, it would be kind of hard to explain anything about the dark god of lust. Loren mulled over the best course of action, and he took so long that Gula spoke up instead.

"That's a spell that messes with your mind."

"I've never heard of something like that."

"I'm not surprised. No decent person would use it, after all. Only someone special like me—who uses their own unique variety of magic—can decipher that kind of thing."

Who calls themselves special? Loren thought.

But for some reason, after staring at Gula, Nym seemed to accept this explanation.

Just what part of Gula is even a little convincing? Loren demanded internally. But as he stared at Gula, who seemed kind of let down—perhaps having expected further interrogation—he thought perhaps there *was* something a bit persuasive about this angle.

"Guess she doesn't look like your average magician."

Magicians generally outfitted themselves with robes and staves. Gula's highly revealing outfit definitely didn't bring that noble

profession to mind. When she called her magic a "unique variety," you only had to look at her to think*, I see, no normal magician would dress like that. That explains everything*.

"I know I'm the one who said it, but it kinda stings when you just roll with it."

"Let's put aside the matter of Ms. Gula's eccentric fashion choices for now." Lapis pointed at the magic circle beyond the entrance. "Perhaps it would be a good idea to destroy that? This is just my best guess, but it might be what's inspired the orcs to pursue their ambitions with such fervor."

"You might be right. How do we do that?"

Loren considered having Gula cast another *Dispell*, but Lapis pointed at the statue positioned in the center. "That seems to be the crux of the spell sequence. If you destroy that, the spell will no longer be able to maintain itself."

"It won't run amok, will it?"

If they destroyed whatever was keeping the thing in check, the spell could well lose coherence and destroy itself. But it was equally possible that the magic would flare up and go out of control.

"Who knows?" Lapis said, cocking her head. "It is beyond my ken."

Lapis could analyze ordinary magic, but this circle had been created by the power of a dark god—a power foreign to her. As such, it wasn't out of the question that a completely unknown spell might produce an equally unknown effect.

This explanation left Loren feeling tired already, but he couldn't just leave the circle as is. Whatever the statue was made of, he was sure it couldn't stand up to his blade. He slowly hefted his sword.

Though Loren feared what would happen if the circle burst out of control, he couldn't just leave it. Perhaps there would be some side effects, but he had Lapis—who as a member of the demon race excelled at all things magic—and Gula—who despite everything was still a god. On top of that, he would be aided by one of the most powerful undead beings in existence, the Lifeless King called Scena.

We can handle a little trouble, Loren thought as he held his sword high and sliced down.

He had a vague sense that the statue of the woman had probably been chiseled out of quite a hard and sturdy material. However, the statue provided hardly any resistance to Loren's blade, which passed straight through it. By the time it escaped the stone's other end, the blade had momentum to spare. Half of the stone woman fell to the floor, having been diagonally bisected.

At that moment, the symbols on the floor flickered out of existence, and the unbearable sweet odor vanished, as if it had never been there in the first place.

"Did it work?"

Lapis looked around and confirmed that nothing else seemed to have changed. She moseyed up to Loren's side and lightly tapped the stone statue with the tip of her boot. It let off a solid *thock*, but

nothing else. Once she was sure, she turned to Loren, who had sheathed his sword, and nodded. “It seems to be all right.”

“That should solve the orc problem, then.”

“I mean, the ones we were dealin’ with were already taken out by the golem,” Gula said, her tone somewhere between cynical and joking.

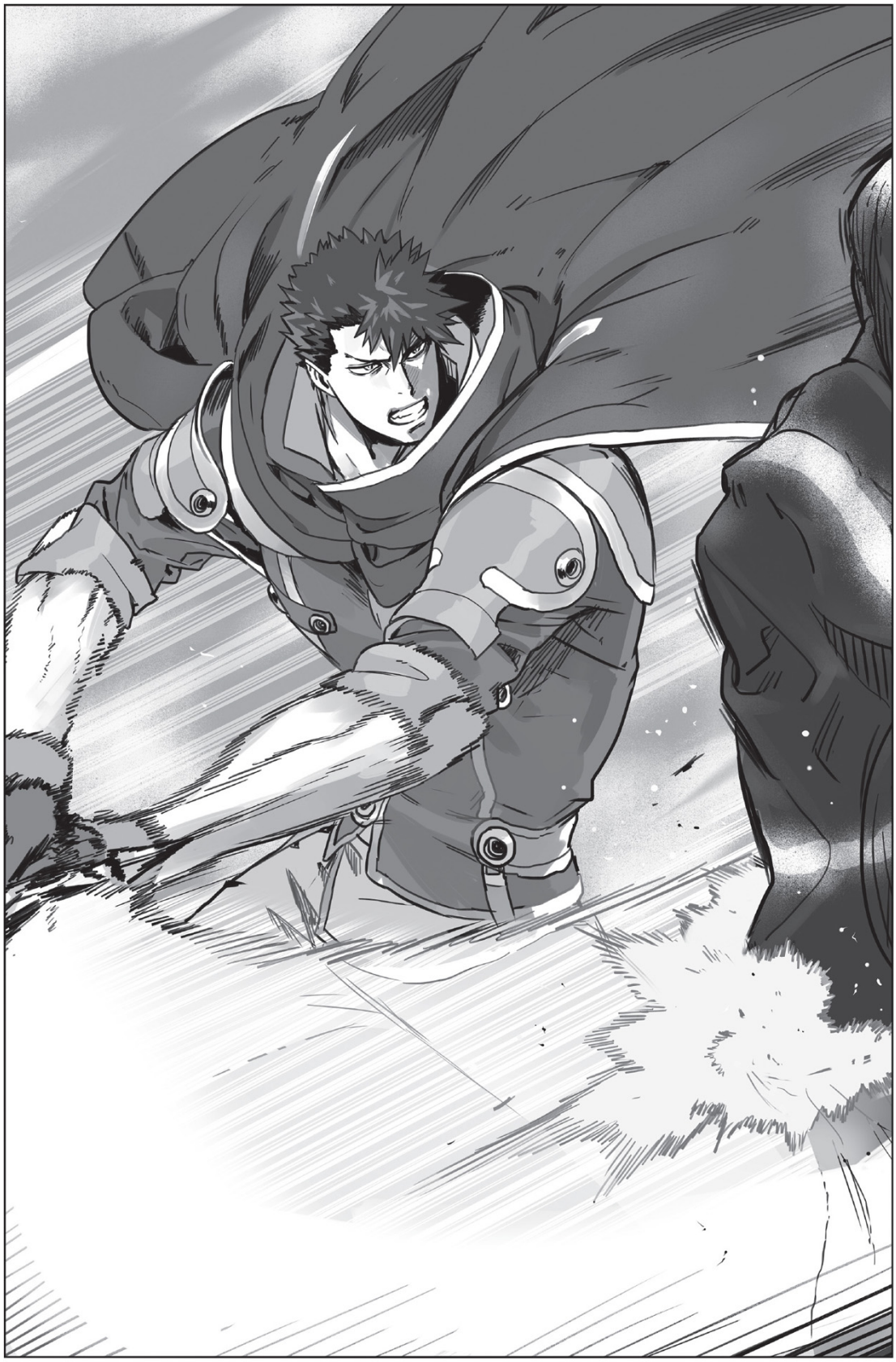
But as Gula sent a glare at Dia, something in the air suddenly *changed*.

Loren’s hand flashed to the hilt of his sheathed sword, and Lapis fell into a guard stance. The smile vanished from Gula’s laughing face, and Dia turned her glare—which had originally met Gula’s—to something deeper in the cave.

Nym was left standing in surprise as everyone else suddenly assumed battle formation. She glanced around nervously, unsure of what was going on.

“Did you sense that?”

“Yes, faintly. I didn’t get a very good grasp on what it was.”



"It was terribly brief, and then it was gone."

"Even so, its attention was certainly on us."

Nym tugged on Loren's sleeve. "Explain, please."

Loren released his hand from his hilt as he considered his options. His party had obviously all just reacted to something—a sensation of watching eyes, which had made itself known for only a moment before disappearing.

As Lapis said, it had been vague, but everyone apart from Nym had clearly picked up on it and acted on reflex. However, it had been so faint that Nym hadn't perceived it.

In theory, you could argue it wasn't strange that Lapis, Gula, or Dia had noticed—but Loren had, with his own instincts, picked up on a threat that a silver-rank adventurer had not. Though it didn't show on their faces, the rest of his group was quite impressed.

"For a moment, it was kinda like someone was lookin' at us."

"It wasn't with malicious intent, but their aura was quite powerful."

"From farther down in the cave, yeah?"

"The cavern does continue for a while. Shall we proceed?"

Dia pointed deeper into the cave, and Loren nodded.

"Yeah. We came here to investigate, so we oughta have a look."

If they turned back here, they would have hardly anything to report to the adventurers' guild. You reported destroyed villages to the local authorities rather than the guild, and thanks to the flesh golem's

cleanup job, there would be no evidence to back up any report of an unnatural outbreak of orcs.

"Then we should proceed with utmost caution," Dia said.

"Indeed," said Lapis. "If anything happens, let's leave it to Ms. Elder."

"Yes, well, I'm confident I can manage most things, of course. But this was originally your job, so are you sure you should dump all the responsibility on me?" Dia asked, brimming with pointed advice.

But Lapis didn't seem the least bit offended as she firmly replied, "Is it not an adventurer's duty to make use of whatever resources are on hand to escape whatever predicaments they encounter? That's what I believe, at least."

Behind her, Gula nodded several times to underline the point. But as Loren saw it, if things proved too much for Dia, then surely the dark god was next on the roster.

"Hey, Nym. You can pull out and head back whenever you want. We're partly here for our own reasons. You don't have to tag along," said Loren. He knew he'd feel awful for her—and for Chuck—if he got her any more involved in their business. Sure, there was some risk in sending her back alone, but with her silver-rank skills, he was certain she could make it back to Kaffa without their help.

But Nym shook her head. "I agreed to take this quest. I will see it through to completion. When I return, it will be with all of you."

"I mean it when I say this, Nym: You're gonna be a great wife."

Loren was just speaking from the heart, but Nym, who was so rarely moved by emotions, softly turned her eyes away, her cheeks reddening ever so slightly. Gula and Dia watched with malicious grins.

This is where they start teasing. Loren had to cut that off at the pass, so he sent them a scolding glare. Realizing that he'd seen right through them, they gave up for the time being.

"Can't you say something like that to me, Mr. Loren?" Lapis asked, her eyes alight with expectations.

Loren opened his mouth in an attempt to do just that—only to shut it before he even managed his first word.

As Lapis puffed out her cheeks in disappointment, he placed a hand on her head. "My words aren't gonna have any weight if I don't say them when I really mean 'em. If you're after empty praise, I'll say whatever you like. But is that really what you want?"

"Hmm. In that case, I suppose I'll leave you be for now."

Loren's words seemed to have cheered her up either way. But when Gula and Dia saw how easily Lapis backed down, they broke out into those same mischievous smiles. This time, it only took one look from Lapis for those smiles to fade, and they immediately inched away.

That must have been one hell of a look, Loren thought. Fortunately for Lapis, Gula and Dia had been standing at an angle that meant Loren had been unable to see her expression.

With that all said and done, they pressed on through the orc lair. Loren did notice something along the way—past a certain point, there

were no signs of orc habitation at all.

To be more precise, the orcs had never made it beyond the statue he'd destroyed. This was evident for a couple of reasons. Firstly, after that point, they were no longer wading through the dust left in the wake of the flesh golem's destruction.

The flesh golem had been in the act of retreat when it fell apart, and while it might have reached this stretch only to pull back during that escape, Dia had disintegrated it pretty quickly. Considering the distance it had fled, it seemed to have gotten quite far…but yet neither filth nor smell remained to suggest that orcs had ever lived here. It was safe to say they hadn't touched anything in the real depths.

As for the reason, Loren couldn't help but suspect it had to do with whatever it was that had, for a split second, fixed its eyes upon them.

"If you think about it logically, it's gotta be the ancient dragon, right?" Loren asked.

"You mean whatever is in the depths?" replied Lapis. "That may be so, but in that case, it gives rise to an entirely different question."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think an ancient dragon would allow orcs to settle in the cave leading to its home?"

Orcs were a notoriously filthy race. As their filth accumulated, the area surrounding the dragon's den would be filled with an incredible stench, until it became unbearable. It would be quite

unpleasant to live in proximity to such a monster, let alone in a cave linked directly to its den. Loren couldn't imagine an ancient dragon submitting to that.

"If orcs settled anywhere near my home, I would certainly burn them out within the day," Dia agreed.

"I doubt a dragon would even condescend to living with humans. Orcs are out of the question."

"Elves also do everything in their ability to exterminate any orcs that draw near their forests."

"Yes, I'm certain the dragon would never abide by it. But in that case, what exactly lies ahead of us?"

"Maybe it's a dragon that doesn't mind orcs?"

It took all sorts to make a world—at least, that ran true for humans. Surely it was the same for elves and demons as well. Loren knew too little about dark gods and Elders to say anything about them, but he suspected any people who cultivated an array of perspectives could produce an individual tolerant of even the most detested races.

This proposition was evidently ludicrous to Gula and Dia, as they both took it with mocking snorts.

"You're a rare fellow, Loren," said Nym. "Not many humans would think something like that."

Loren couldn't tell if this was an insult or a compliment—but from what he could glean from Nym's expression, he decided to take it as the latter.

"I don't hate that line of thought," Lapis said. "Not that I'm about to start indulging orcs because of it."

Though Loren couldn't say anything about it to Nym, Lapis and her kind were also commonly despised by humans. As Loren treated her no differently from anyone else, it was perfectly in character for him to entertain such a tolerant philosophy.

"Well, I admit the odds are low," he said. "I get that I'm the one who said it, but I can't imagine a dragon getting chummy with orcs either."

It would have been interesting to meet such a being, but if the ancient dragon who lived in this mountain were such an eccentric, then surely Emily would have mentioned something about it.

Chapter 5:
Advance to Arrival

STANDING AROUND and mulling it over wasn't going to get them answers. They had decided to move forward, and so that was what they would do. The party got into formation and pressed on—which was when Lapis noticed something strange.

"The width of the cave doesn't change no matter how far we go."

A naturally formed cave expanded and contracted the deeper one delved. Even if the change wasn't drastic, you could always expect at least a slight difference as you went. Yet ever since the entrance, the passageway had maintained perfectly consistent measurements.

Which means, thought Loren, *this isn't a natural cave*.

But even if he brought his face right up against the cave wall, he saw nothing but stone. It didn't look like the tunnel had been purposefully excavated. The rocky surface was just like the kind he could see in any other cave.

"Did the orcs dig it out?"

"If they did, I think it would be somewhat more crooked."

Constructing a tunnel of constant width required a degree of both technique and expertise. If the orcs *had* dug into the mountain

to make their base, they would presumably have done so by way of brute force, and the resulting cave would be of irregular shape.

"Then who did it…?"

"Why, me, of course. Me. Can you hear me? It was me."

A sudden voice stopped them all in their tracks and put them all on guard. But there didn't seem to be anyone around.

Is this like Scena's telepathy? Loren wondered, holding his greatsword at the ready. But unlike Scena's voice, this one didn't seem to resonate in his head. Rather, it was more natural, and had undoubtedly been received by his eardrums.

What's more, it was the voice of an old man.

"Can you hear me? If you can, please do say so."

"Who's there?" Loren curtly replied.

He could only hear this speaker and had no idea where even to look; his wariness was only natural. If he spoke too freely, there was no telling what information he might be handing to a potential foe. So he kept it short, conveying only that he had heard the message.

But despite Loren's caution, the voice of his unseen conversation partner seemed to bounce with joy.

"Oh, it finally connected, then! You must have entered the range of my voice. My, what a blessing."

"Who are you?"

His other comrades said not a word, staring intently at Loren as he engaged the voice.

"What? You're no fun. More importantly, were you and your comrades the ones who destroyed that dreadful magic circle for me?"

The only thing that came to mind was that lust spell they'd broken up. "We might have," Loren replied.

"Very good, very good," the voice said happily. "It's been *ages* since I felt my well-being so endangered. If I have you to thank for its removal, I must extend my gratitude. You will meet no danger beyond the point at which you stand. Proceed and be at ease."

Any adventurer who trusted people who said they could "be at ease" was angling for an early death. But Loren got a vague sense that he could trust the voice. He was nearly convinced it would be okay.

But of course, he had no basis for this faith, and when he turned to his comrades for advice, they pondered the offer with conflicted expressions.

"A trap, perhaps," said Lapis.

"It's gotta be a trap, right?" said Gula.

"It's obviously a trap," said Nym.

"What idiot would take that at face value?" Dia concluded.

The women had come to a unanimous decision.

Am I naive? Loren wondered. For the time being, he was relieved he hadn't admitted to his gut instinct. That did, however, leave the question of what to do next.

"On the other hand, we have no choice but to go forward. While being careful of traps, of course."

In short, it would be more of the same, pressing forward and with due caution.

Not like I've got any other ideas, Loren thought.

As he took the first step, he heard a tired voice in his ear. "You're a wary bunch. Not that I blame you."

"Where are you speaking from?"

It was quite a strange feeling, engaging with someone he couldn't see. Conversing with Scena was kind of similar, but if Scena wanted, she could pop up in Loren's field of vision. He could also have whole conversations with her without verbal communication. That was inherently different from a potential foe striking up a one-sided chat.

"I am vibrating the air to create sounds that reach your ears. In short, I could vibrate it in such a way that your comrades wouldn't hear me, and you would look just like you had lost your mind and were talking to yourself."

"So you're a bastard, huh?!" Loren growled.

Evidently, the voice really had rendered itself inaudible to Loren's comrades. When Loren suddenly shouted for seemingly no reason, they skewered him with shocked looks.

Clearing his throat, Loren concluded he would dutifully ignore the voice until they had reached its owner.

At which point he heard it again. "Sorry, sorry. Perhaps I took that joke too far."

The voice seemed sincere enough, but Loren wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. He kept his mouth shut.

"The silent treatment, huh?" the voice said, sounding disappointed. "Very well. But consider this: The fact that I'm producing these ambient vibrations means that I can choose to manifest my voice anywhere I like… If you continue to hold your tongue, I might have to play with someone else."

"Just what are you scheming?" Loren demanded in a hushed tone. He had a terrible feeling about this.

"Well, I could imitate your voice and whisper something in all their ears—say, 'I love you.'" As if to prove its point, the voice exactly imitated Loren's own for those final three words.

"You got a death wish?" Loren asked in a low mutter, his voice cold as ice.

Lapis and Nym seemed to pick up his growl with their sharp ears, and they stared at Loren in even more shock. But Loren was less concerned with freaking them out than he was with stopping the voice's owner while he still could.

There was no telling what chaos he'd be in for if the voice really did pull off something like that. Sure, some of his comrades would be delighted to hear it, but others might just be confused. Some might even be enraged. And if they all came at him at once, Loren thought his odds of bringing the situation under control were pretty miserable.

"If you're really grateful to us, you better quit while you're ahead."

"'Twas merely a joke. You must be quite terrified of your companions."

"Unless you want me to wet myself, stop. Please."

"You sound sincerely concerned about that. Very well, I swear to refrain from further teasing."

Looks like this guy can't tell just who he's messing with, Loren concluded. Had this entity known he was proposing pissing off an Elder, a demon, and a dark god—who sounded sinister as hell when grouped together like that—it surely wouldn't have even suggested such mischief.

"But I will be so unbearably *bored* during all the time it will take you to get here. Can't you at least keep up a conversation?"

"Fine. I won't ignore you. If there's anything you wanna ask, out with it."

So long as the voice only allowed Loren to hear it, Loren looked to the others like he was talking to himself. But if it kept the voice in line, Loren was prepared to look like a weirdo.

"Then I shall ask away. Is the one who drew that circle another comrade of yours?"

"I'm not completely certain who was responsible for it, but I do have a vague idea. And if I'm right, then we're the furthest thing from allies."

"I see, I see. Next, I feel a peculiarly strong aura emanating from your present position. Can you tell me the reason?"

If they were talking about potent auras, the first thing Loren could think of was the mana imbued in the map that Emily had given them. However, the voice hadn't been specific. He could just as well

have sensed Dia the Elder, or Lapis the demon, or even Gula the dark god—essentially any of them apart from Nym and Loren himself.

If I don't know which one he means, I should go vague, Loren thought. "You'd be better off confirming that with your own eyes."

"So I may be sensing a variety of things. I see. How terribly frightening."

The voice had seen right through him. Loren was taken aback. It was clear that any half-hearted attempts to dance around the questions would just arouse the voice's suspicions. He needed to choose his words with greater care.

"Are you the ancient dragon that lives around here?" Loren asked, aiming for a little tit for tat.

"Wherever did you hear that? I have hidden in this place for a very long time now. Only a very select few even know of my existence."

Loren couldn't imagine why an ancient dragon would want to live in hiding. Surely such a massively powerful entity would only need to conceal itself for some terrible reason. But rather than pondering the matter, he focused on the question.

"We heard from another of your kind in a distant place. She went by Emily. Do you know her?"

"I don't remember any Emily… Well, I'd wager her real name is something else. Apparently, it is quite difficult for humans to properly hear our names, let alone vocalize them."

"She lives near the palace of the great king of demons."

There was a moment of silence.

Is he dredging up some old memory? Loren wondered.

Once the voice finally resumed, it was lively, as if it had stumbled upon a most pleasant memory. “Emily of the demon lands… Yes, yes, I know that one. I remember her now. I see, yes, I see. It is not strange to think she knew where to find me.”

“She poured her mana into an item we carry so you wouldn’t just up and attack us. That’s probably one of the things you sensed.”

“I see. Well, I can’t remember how long ago it was when we last met, so her concerns are justified.”

Just how long ago would it have to be for an ancient dragon to forget it? Loren wondered. For a short-lived human, it was probably so many years that he’d have a nervous breakdown just imagining it.

“We can discuss the specifics once we are face-to-face. It won’t be long until you reach my den. There is nothing to fear; please join me at your leisure.”

Loren noticed that the passage would soon hit a dead end. There didn’t seem to be any other paths, and Gula swiftly closed in on the end to check it out.

“Looks like another magic seal.”

“The fellow beyond it’s the one who called us. I’m sure he’ll open it up,” Loren said.

As if it had been waiting for these precise words, the wall blocking the way forward melted into thin air, revealing a hidden entrance.

"That's quite a technique," Dia said, sounding terribly impressed as the party passed through the entrance. "Even I could not perceive its true nature."

The passage opened into some kind of vast hall. A soft white light poured down from the ceiling and illuminated its contents. Treasures of gold and silver, as well as other valuables, were piled high against the back wall, glistening as they reflected the light from on high.

For a moment, the party was entranced by the sight, but their attention soon drifted to the dragon in the center of the hall, at which point their expressions grew surprised.

"An impressive feat, making it all the way here. I am the ancient dragon who dwells in these lands. My name is… Yes, you may call me Connin," the dragon said, the corners of his mouth lifting into a smile.

From the moment Loren entered that space, he'd felt like something was weird about it.

For starters, the domed hall didn't seem to have an entrance, aside from the one they had just come in from.

For another, the last ancient dragon they'd met had been utterly gargantuan. She'd needed a large entrance to facilitate the passage of her massive body. This place seemed to have nothing of the sort.

How did the dragon who lived here ever leave? Loren's question was answered as soon as he took in the dragon in question.

"Is there something caught between my teeth?"

The dragon—which looked back at them curiously—was far smaller than they had imagined. Forget *ancient* dragons—it was quite a bit smaller than even the most average specimen of dragon kind. It lay in the center of the room in a pose reminiscent of a dog, and it could not have been larger than a small horse.

I see. Given its size, it could just walk straight out of the passage we came in through, thought Loren. *But how am I supposed to believe he's an ancient dragon when he looks like* that*?*

"Tiny."

Evidently, Loren wasn't the only one who got that impression. As he studied the beast, Lapis inadvertently said exactly what was on her mind.

The rest of the creature looked exactly like what one would imagine when visualizing a dragon. Its body was a white so pure, it was almost incandescent, while its limbs and talons and fangs were all splendidly sculpted. But all things said and done, it *was* still rather small. It was like someone had taken the ancient dragon they'd met in demon territory, shrunk it down, and leached all the color from it.

With everyone staring at it so long and hard, the dragon's tail twitched against the floor. "Ah, you're enchanted by my appearance. You're making me blush."

Gula gave it to him a little too straight. "We're shocked because you're a pipsqueak."

The dragon named Connin peered up at her curiously. "Is my size a problem?"

"You're just so different from the last one of you we met. It's weird."

The ancient dragon in demon territory had been, in a word, titanic. She had left a powerful impression on them, and the sheer difference in scale made it hard to accept that this one could be at all related.



"'Tis a consequence of my living hidden away in here." The dragon gazed into the distance, seemingly reminiscing. "Being too large would make it quite inconvenient to conceal oneself, yes? Moreover, if you fail to eat properly, you can't maintain a body of such size for long. This body doesn't require much in the way of sustenance, so it is most convenient."

"Why're you hiding, anyway? Someone as strong as you wouldn't have any reason to squirrel themselves away, would they?"

As far as Loren knew, ancient dragons were some of the most powerful beings in the world. They could overcome entire armies all by themselves. He couldn't comprehend why one of them would have to live out of sight, out of mind. Surely, Connin had the strength to best any fool who dared challenge him.

"Why, it is because I am a pacifist," Connin flippantly declared.

Loren's eyes caught, for a brief instant, the moment when the dragon's eyes had searched the air. Even if he hadn't noticed that, he'd have had his doubts. He'd never met a self-proclaimed pacifist who could hold true to their words.

As the party silently stared at Connin a while longer, the dragon sighed and added, "The truth is: Once upon a time, the warriors of a certain kingdom inflicted a grave wound upon me. I hid away to heal my injuries—and because I had grown fearful of the world outside."

"Do you mean Neuna?"

"Dreadful people. They only saw my kind as bags of materials yet to be carved up."

It was no exaggeration to say that a dragons' body was a treasure trove of rare resources. Every single piece had its uses; the scales, the claws, and the fangs went without saying, but you could even make use of their internal organs. The blood and flesh could be put to use in making medicines and were apparently delicious to boot.

"The ancient kingdom's dragon hunts were so prolific that some accounts suggest dragon steak was a favored delicacy in the royal palace," Lapis noted, ever the reservoir of random trivia.

Connin nodded along.

"You say that, but is there even any meat on this one?"

A massive beast like Emily would certainly produce ample material to work with, but this guy was terribly small. After all the effort it would take to bring him down, Loren doubted there'd be enough meat on his bones to be worth the risk.

"Up until about three hundred years ago, I was a wonderfully large and splendid dragon," Connin replied, and rather testily.

But according to Connin, even at his more massive size, he'd had his claws full fighting off the forces the ancient kingdom had sent after him. After sustaining a grievous injury, he'd dug out a base in Fireflute Mountain and spent a long, long stretch of years in hiding to heal from his wounds.

"This small body also means I need to invest far less energy in treating my injuries."

"I feel a bit bad for this guy," said Nym, whose face had turned sympathetic during Connin's tale.

“Oh, you understand me?” Connin waddled over to her, nuzzling his head into her chest like a loving animal. Nym’s face was stiff at first—a dragon was cuddling with her, after all—but Connin contained his strength, and she found herself thinking of him like a small, gentle horse. She gently stroked his neck.

This continued for a while, but Connin finally removed himself from her. He slowly returned to his place in the center of the room and muttered to himself, “Not quite what I was hoping for.”

“Loren.” If Nym’s voice had had a temperature, it would have been as cold as the final, frozen circle of hell to which traitors were condemned. “I want to kill the dragon.”

Loren held her bow down with a wry smile. “Drop it. I doubt those bone arrows will pierce its scales.”

A part of him thought that, as ticked off as she was, maybe she really would be able to pierce a dragon’s scales—but he still needed information, and so he needed her to exercise some restraint for now.

“Indeed, the sensation was less than perfect, but as the one who broke the spell, you have my thanks, elf girl. Thanks to that incantation, I had been unable to venture outside.”

“Was it that powerful?” asked Gula.

By her estimation, the magic circle, which had presumably been Noel’s handiwork, had constantly emitted the authority of lust—but that was it. It hadn’t seemed like it could bother an ancient dragon. But if the dragon himself claimed it had, perhaps it had been doing something she hadn’t detected. That would mean both that Noel’s

abilities were far greater than they had anticipated, and that they would need to investigate the circle again.

"Oh, no, the circle itself just let off a peculiar scent. The problem was the orcs that had been lured in by it."

"Are orcs a problem for you?"

They weren't as lowly as goblins, but when alone, an orc still wasn't considered much of a threat. In numbers, they could grow into a force to be reckoned with, but it was nevertheless hard to imagine them striking fear into an ancient dragon's heart.

"They smell *awful*. What's more, under the influence of that circle, the orcs have become…indiscriminate."

"What's that mean?"

"Ordinarily, orcs assault females… Those orcs…"

"Ah, enough. I don't want to hear it." Loren sensed he would definitely regret it if he heard the rest of that statement. "You're male, I take it?"

Seeing as Connin had first nuzzled into Nym's chest and then complained about it, Loren had his guess.

"Indeed. And as a man, I never thought I would live in fear of orcs."

Perhaps Connin had tried to slip through the orc den when things first took a turn. His voice quavered, his gaze trailing into the distance. As Loren watched, he found himself convinced they'd done the world a good turn when they annihilated those orcs and destroyed Noel's circle.

"You said you wanted to thank us," said Lapis. "In that case, I have a favor I simply must request of you."

"What is it? I'll grant you most anything, so long as it's within my capabilities."

Connin answered so readily that Loren felt like he was making that promise somewhat frivolously. Although he *had* stipulated "within my capabilities," so perhaps he had given it some consideration.

Lapis proceeded to explain the reason for their visit—of Magna and his misdeeds, and how they'd come seeking information that would finally let them get the upper hand over the man. Once he'd heard them out, Connin let out a low groan.

"I see. Then you may be in luck."

"You've seen them?"

They sneaked ahead of us again, Loren thought, startled.

But Connin shook his head. "I do not know if they were the ones you spoke of, but when that spell circle was first inscribed, someone tried to open the way to my den. I was wary—they'd been up to strange arcane tricks in the entranceway to my home, after all—so I did not open the way to them. I now suspect it was the individuals who've been troubling you."

"Meaning you didn't meet them."

"I did not see their faces, nor did we exchange words."

That's good to know, Loren thought. At the very least, that meant that Magna had not gotten his hands on whatever information the ancient dragon possessed about the ancient kingdom.

Taking on the air of a professor lecturing his pupils, the ancient dragon called Connin proudly puffed out his chest. “Now then, you wish to speak of the Magical Kingdom of Neuna—what you call the ancient kingdom. I do know of one thing that you could call the ace up my sleeve. It is the most powerful relic I have ever heard of, and I am more than happy to share word of it with you.”

If an ancient dragon called something “the ace up his sleeve,” Loren was sure it had to be incredible. But then a certain question came to mind.

As a species, dragons had a tendency to collect rare and priceless treasures. Surely they had items imbued with powerful enchantments mixed in with their hoards. This item Connin referred to could very well be contained in the very room they now stood within.

“You’re not gonna say you have it right here, are you?”

If he did, it would no longer be a relic of the ancient kingdom. It would more rightly be part of a dragon’s stash. Connin said he wanted to show them gratitude, but from what Loren knew about dragons, that probably didn’t translate to an eagerness to part with one of his own treasures.

“No, it’s not on hand. I have no interest in that which I can’t personally use.”

Upon hearing this, Loren surveyed the treasures piled up along the walls. Apart from coins and jewels, there were swords—either gilded or enchanted—as well as some other weapons, which seemed to totally contradict Connin’s claim.

Loren was about to open his mouth to say as much, but before he could, Connin walked over to the wall, plucked up one of the swords with his mouth, and swung it around as he held it between his teeth.

Fine, fine. Point made.

Taking this into consideration, Loren returned to the mountain of treasures. There was everything from swords to shields and spears, but it stood to reason that Connin could wield all of them with his mouth—hence why they were there.

That said, a dragon's scales were far sturdier than most shields, and their talons far sharper than most swords, so Loren didn't really see why a dragon would go out of their way to awkwardly take up a weapon.

"So what manner of magic artifact *can't* you use, Mr. Connin?" Lapis asked.

"Why, armor," Connin answered as he returned from the wall. "There's no way I could wear anything fashioned to fit a human form."

As he possessed a completely different physique, there were certainly a few factors preventing him from donning such a thing. A helmet *might* be possible, but this dragon didn't seem keen on taking just one piece of an armor set purely to claim it as his own.

"This set was a masterpiece of extraordinary quality—the culmination of all the kingdom's technology combined. And it lies in a ruin with which I am familiar."

“Well, that certainly reeks of trouble,” muttered Dia, who seemed to have a few choice thoughts on the matter.

Granted, powerful items did tend to attract trouble proportionate to their strength. Loren wouldn’t argue there. Usually, when everyone was scrambling to get hold of a particular item, Loren avoided getting close to it unless absolutely necessary. But *some* jerk—ahem, Magna—was running around and scooping up just such items, which he went on to use to cause even more trouble. So perhaps Loren didn’t really have a choice.

“I cannot say whether trouble lies beyond this horizon. After all, I never saw the genuine article myself.”

“You haven’t?”

Connin was putting on such airs that Loren had been convinced the dragon had seen it in the flesh. However, if he wasn’t lying, then it was worth questioning if the item really was where he claimed it would be.

“You will undoubtedly find it there,” said Connin. “So it was written.”

“Written where?”

“A stone monument was erected at the entrance of the ruins; the words were carved into the rock. Why else would they go to such efforts?”

Connin didn’t sound as convinced as he had when he started, now that the doubts were setting in. Everyone apart from Loren and Nym was starting to look pretty suspicious.

"A stone monument? They're just going to advertise to the world: 'Hey, look, amazing armor over here'?"

"That's crazy talk. What sort of ruins are these supposed to be?"

"Ruins made for the sole purpose of safeguarding armor? No, they wouldn't do something so wasteful… Would they? Would they really?"

Loren understood why his companions were so stymied. The ruins of the ancient kingdom weren't just ruins—they had all once been something people used. They would never have erected a building that didn't serve some explicit purpose—like a research laboratory, or a lodging facility, or a warehouse that now sat abandoned.

But at what sort of facility would one erect a stone monument at the entrance with an ode to some amazing set of armor? The very existence of such ruins was questionable at best.

"You sure you're not goin' senile, Gramps?" Gula asked mockingly, raising one eyebrow.

"How rude," Connin protested and stamped his feet in frustration. "I'll have you know that I'm as sharp as ever, from my head to my eyes."

But Gula only riled him further. "Not so sure about that. You've been around the bend how many times now?"

Loren left them to it as he turned to Lapis, Nym, and Dia to discuss.

"What do you think?"

"I don't follow the logic of these claims, but neither do I think Mr. Connin's lying," Lapis said. "He has nothing to gain from sending us into a trap, and he genuinely seems to feel indebted to us for ridding him of those orcs. The information is probably accurate."

"Although if you put aside the source, it's hard to believe a word of the claim itself," Dia noted. "I'm sure you understand this, but each and every ruin served a function. I've never heard of a facility that exists merely to tell people it contains a suit of armor."

"With that in mind, we should leave the decision to our leader," Loren said.

At that, three pairs of eyes turned as one to focus on Nym.

"M-me?"

"It may be a formality, but you *are* the leader of this party, Ms. Nym."

"Mercenaries can't wiggle around the pecking order. Them's the breaks."

"I'm just along for the ride. I never imagined the elf was your leader, though."

In order to qualify for the quest, Nym had indeed been assigned as their party leader, but she had never expected such a decision would be entrusted to her. After frowning at the three faces gazing at her, she turned to Loren with pleading eyes.

He placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Just kidding. We're not gonna throw you in the deep end. But…" Loren paused for a moment, his expression stern as he looked Nym in the eye and said

what he was really thinking. “You took this job because you wanted easy money, right? What happens after this has nothing to do with that goal. In fact, it’s got nothing to do with you at all, so if it’s in your best interests, you can turn back. Dia can show you the way.”

“It’s *just* getting interesting, and you’re going to treat me like I’m not one of you?” Dia protested, closing in on him.

“You *are* one of us,” Loren said flatly. “But we can’t just send Nym back alone, can we? And we need someone trustworthy to watch her back. From here on out, we can handle things our usual way. So can you go back with Nym?”

As a silver-rank adventurer, Nym boasted considerable skill, but it felt cruel to send her back to Kaffa alone. Loren worried something might happen along the way. With Dia guarding her, Loren and his party could set off for the ruins Connin spoke of without worry—but he’d known Dia would protest.

So he made a sincere plea. Dia puffed out her cheeks and allowed her discontent to be abundantly clear, but reluctantly conceded to his lowered head.

“But only if that elf decides to return,” she said.

“Of course. You heard her, Nym. You’ll be properly paid, obviously. If you need funds right away, I can have Lapis pay out right now.”

“I can give you a loan, Mr. Loren. But at a ten percent interest rate compounded every ten days.”

"I've already got so much debt, I don't even want to think about it. You're going to bump it even higher?"

Lapis's sweet smile made it hard to tell if she was serious. Loren's shoulders dropped.

This exchange brought a slight smile to Nym's lips. "I'm going with you," she said. "It wouldn't be any fun if I turned back here. Besides, it might be a formality, but the investigation of Fireflute Mountain requires a silver-rank adventurer to proceed. I can't turn back just yet."

"It could get dangerous."

Loren felt bad about this, but honestly, he would have been relieved if Nym took the offer to leave. They didn't know how dangerous Connin's ruins were, but it definitely wouldn't be smooth sailing from here. If anything happened to Nym right before her wedding, he had no idea what he'd say to Chuck.

"You really are a good kid, Loren, always worrying about me. And not just me but Chuck as well. But I am an adventurer. I take full responsibility for my own decisions."

"But…" He was about to go on, but Nym's resolve was firm, and he didn't see how his words could change it.

Then I'll have to get her back safe, no matter what, he thought, solidifying his own resolve.

Meanwhile, Dia was delighted to hear that she didn't have to leave. "Worst-case scenario, I'll raise you as an undead," she said happily. "You'll barely feel the difference. No need to worry."

"Loren, this child…terrifies me."

"Same here. But she's definitely serious," Loren said with a sigh as he attempted to calm Nym, who was trying to get as far away from Dia as possible.

Putting that aside, they had decided on their course of action. That meant it was time to draw more information out of Connin. They turned to the dragon, who had been busy griping at Gula, only to find that griping had turned into a dark-god-on-dragon wrestling match.

Even a dark god should be no match for an ancient dragon, Loren thought. But either Gula was putting up a good fight, or Connin had been weakened with his diminishment. Whichever it was, their strength seemed evenly matched.

"We reached our decision, Gula. You can back off now."

"Give me a sec! One more push and it's curtains for this damn lizard…"

"Don't underestimate me, little girl! I may be small, but you're nothing!"

Connin struggled and thrashed to escape Gula's choke hold, only for Loren to forcefully haul her off and settle the match. The dragon panted heavily, his breath shallow and erratic, and Loren rubbed his back as he asked for directions to the ruins.

Once he had regained his composure, to a degree, Connin ambled over to the entrance Loren's party had come through. He tapped his forelimbs against the floor a few times.

"Truth be told, there is a reason I settled here of all places."

After a few more taps, the floor opened up, revealing a spiraling staircase that led downward.

"Go down through here, and you'll reach the ruins. The path does not deviate. You will not lose your way."

According to Connin, he had crawled down into this cave both to heal his wounds and because this was the sole entrance to the ruins he spoke of. While Connin had been injured at the hands of the ancient kingdom, he was still a dragon. Once he thoroughly concealed and sealed the entrance with his magic, even the ancient kingdom would have a difficult time getting to what he considered their strongest asset.

"So the long and short of it is that you wanted your revenge."

Connin smiled as if to say, *Serves them right!*

But the only message that got across was the sheer pettiness of an ancient dragon.

While they were stunned by Connin's spite, they couldn't stand around forever. They'd obtained the information they were after, and now it was time to act.

Either way, it seemed that Connin had no intention of going with them. But just in case something happened, he told them he would temporarily seal the entrance and wait for their return.

"I've tried a few times myself, but I could never reach it," Connin said, sounding somewhat frustrated.

This left the party feeling rather more tense. So not even an ancient dragon could reach their destination?

"It must be a really dangerous place, huh?" said Loren as he led the way down the stairs.

"I'm not so sure," Gula said, tilting her head. "I don't know if it's because he got smaller or what, but his raw power's nothin' to write home about. Maybe he's more on the magic side a' things?"

According to Gula, you could sort dragons into general types. There were the physically gifted who overwhelmed others with pure might, and then there were the magically skilled, like Gula suspected Connin to be.

As with most things, there were those that didn't fit into either category as well—akin to individuals like the human Claes, who focused on developing special abilities called gifts.

"If he specializes in magic, I can see why Mr. Magna couldn't reach him," said Lapis.

Connin's dwelling had been concealed by a stone wall of arcane origin. Between Magna's and Noel's sheer power, Loren figured they would be able to breach a measly slab of rock, no problem, but if it had been sealed with magic, perhaps physical means would not suffice. Moreover, dispelling it would require magical proficiency that exceeded Connin's.

It was pretty rare to come across a magician whose magic rivaled that of an ancient dragon, and the results spoke for themselves: Magna had been unable to enter.

"If he's that skilled, he would be able to cast a powerful enhancement on himself too. If he wanted to, I believe Mr. Connin could make himself so powerful, you wouldn't be able to lay a finger

on him," said Lapis. Then, looking pointedly at Loren, she went on, "So you probably ought to avoid making an enemy of him."

Loren had no intentions of antagonizing a dragon in the first place. While obtaining the title "Dragon Slayer" would earn him a little respect throughout the continent, once he had it, it would attract far more trouble than honor. As far as Loren was concerned, it was something he could do without.

"Goodness, this goes deep," Dia murmured as she gazed down the spiraling staircase, which remained the only path forward.

The inner edge of the staircase surrounded an atrium. Meanwhile, the outer edge lined a wall that was presumably made of manamen—a material commonly used in the ancient kingdom—as it emitted a faint glow. Anything close to the wall was fairly visible even at a distance, but when Dia looked down, the floor was so far that the meager light could not illuminate it.

"Going down is easy. The problem is going to be the climb," Nym said, understandably frustrated.

This long descent meant that the return to the surface would take just as long. Obviously, going up was tougher than going down, and they would have to do it after they'd finished exploring the ruins. Even someone confident in their physical prowess would find it a daunting climb. Small wonder the slender elf already dreaded what was to come.

"How far down do we have to go?" Gula asked. "It feels like we've been going for ages. Seriously, those ancient kingdom weirdos

were *so* inconsiderate. If you're gonna build such a long staircase, you should make a device that automatically takes you up and down."

Loren wasn't generally on board with using magic to solve each and every little problem, but this time, he was all for it. These stairs went on forever.

Since it was a spiral staircase, the distance they walked was actually far greater than the depth they had actually descended. But he was still sure they had gone quite a long way—and there was a great deal more to go.

The steps beneath his feet were plain stone, emitting no hint of light, unlike what came from the walls. It was simply step after step through an unchanging world—so much so that you could easily lose your sense of time and forget why you'd even started your descent in the first place, or even lose sight of where you were going. That was the feeling Loren got, anyway, but he shook his head to center himself.

Behind him, Nym placed a hand on the wall. She looked like she'd just realized something was happening to her body. Her legs quivered.

"There's a faint mind-manipulation spell in place," said Dia. "Get a grip."

What's that? Loren wondered as he tried to take the next step forward. But he misjudged his footing and nearly collapsed, only staying up with Lapis's assistance.

If he fell forward down this flight of stairs, he would have nowhere to go but down, and there was no telling what injuries he

would sustain by the time he reached the bottom.

With her hand on the wall, Nym tried to walk forward—then suddenly Gula circled behind her, stuck her arms under Nym's armpits, and slapped her palms on the elf's chest.

It was so sudden that Nym let out a shriek, but as Gula was both behind her and stronger than she was—and because her mind had been as rattled as Loren's—she was unable to shake Gula off.

While Nym struggled, Gula's hands crept all over the elf's chest. Nym soon fended her off and guarded her chest with crossed arms. Gula placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Nym, girl, a woman isn't defined by her chest."

"Loren, I want to kill the magician."

"Drop it. That cleared your head up, didn't it?"

Owing to Nym's pale white skin—a common characteristic among elves—the vein that rose on her furious brow was incredibly visible. She was clearly livid, but Loren shook his head.

It would be troublesome if she really did shoot Gula dead, but the intense rage had apparently jarred her enough to dispel the mental interference. As Nym closed in on Gula, her steps were far more aggressive than they would have been if she were only playing.

Whether Gula had meant to help all along or had just gotten lucky in the midst of mischief, she had managed to free Nym's mind. It was reasonable to be angry, but killing her would be a bit much. Moreover, Loren had also been shaken from his stupor by Nym's shriek, so he had even more reason to stick up for Gula.

Scena's apologetic voice echoed in his ears. *‹Sorry I can't really be useful when it comes to these things, Mister. I could share my own mental resistance…but that's closely linked with my being undead, so it might be dangerous to lend it to a living being.›*

Undead generally enjoyed a strong resistance to anything that influenced the mind or soul. However, this resistance was a side effect of not having much of a soul to speak of, or of their minds already being quite corrupted. Thus, Scena was reluctant to share her resistance with Loren.

"That's quite a mean-spirited trap."

"If you continue driving your wagon through an empty plain for long enough, the driver will eventually nod off, no? This trap amplifies that effect one hundredfold," Dia explained as she tapped her fist against the wall. "It is like a poison that drips slowly into your mind over a long period. If you have a strong spirit, you can recover on your own… However, if you are concerned, I have an alternative."

"What are you planning?" Loren asked as he gave his thanks to Lapis and lifted his weight off of her.

With a grin, Dia clenched her fist and started tapping even harder. "The trap relies on this monotonous, unchanging scenery, you see. So, how about I destroy a few points at random as we go—to add a little enrichment to the enclosure?"

While that would certainly impede the effectiveness of the trap, it jeopardized the return journey. Loren declined the proposal outright.

Besides, they were walking right beneath Connin's den, and if Dia's destructive tendencies gave the dragon any trouble, they were

completely out of the question.

"I'm fine. Focus on Nym."

"I'm fine too. No problem."

The real problem here was Dia's desire to smash. Nym understood this and gritted her teeth, forcing herself to regain her composure. Looking somewhat disappointed, Dia lowered her hands.

From there, they continued to descend.

From his place at the front, Loren finally saw the point where the stairs cut off. The endless stairwell was about to end.

His gaze shifted to what lay beyond. There was nothing more than a featureless corridor that extended in a single direction. He could see nothing else.

"Is that the ruins?" Gula pointed down the passageway once everyone had made it off the stairs.

Not far from where the stairs ended, they saw a metal double door. In front of the door was a stone stele with a polished black surface—a sight that exactly aligned with what Connin had described.

Loren slowly approached the stone; however, though he could clearly see letters carved into the surface, he had absolutely no idea what they said.

Anticipating that Loren would find it illegible, Dia popped up beside him, glanced at the stone, and read it out: "Here we store armor to protect you. May its aegis keep you safe."

"It appears there really is an armor," said Lapis.

"If they word it like that and there's no armor after all, then we'd be dealing with a real nasty piece of work," Gula added.

"The door is not locked," Nym remarked after pushing the entrance door slightly.

Presumably, when Connin had come here long ago, he had somehow managed to unseal it. Even so, he had been unable to reach his destination. Then the problem had to be farther in.

Loren approached the door and pushed it open. "It's surprisingly narrow in there," he found himself noting.

The women peered in behind him. The corridor extended straight forward from the door, and before long, it ended at…another door. This one was entirely gold and extravagantly ornamented.

"Is it behind that door?"

"Who knows? We'll have to see for ourselves."

Loren determined there were no traps in the short, straight stretch. Even if there were, they had probably been set off by Connin when he had last come through. It wouldn't be too dangerous.

"All right, let's go have a look, then," Gula said.

The party needed no further prompting. They passed through one door, and before long, reached the golden one. There, they began their meticulous investigation of everything in sight.

Chapter 6:
From Question to Result

"HOW SHOULD I PUT THIS?" Gula said, unable to keep her thoughts to herself. "It's in terrible taste."

Loren didn't blame her for it.

The door before them glistened gold from top to bottom, and even in the dim light, it was almost blindingly radiant.

"You don't reckon it's solid gold, do you?"

Sure, these were ancient ruins, but the double doors were quite large, and a likewise substantial amount of gold would have been required to cast them. Naturally, the overall cost would also be exorbitant, so Loren assumed it was, at most, a thin gilt coating.

"It is indeed most likely pure gold," Lapis said. Loren's eyes widened in disbelief, and Lapis tapped the door a few times with her knuckle. "It doesn't seem to be a paint job, certainly. This is probably gold down to its core. It's ridiculously valuable, but I doubt we can break it off and take it back with us."

"Were they insane?"

The only purpose these ruins served was to house a bit of armor. Why did that require doors made of pure gold? Loren couldn't wrap his mind around it. Perhaps it was a show of the ancient kingdom's might? He couldn't eke any further meaning out of it.

Contrary to Loren, Lapis seemed entirely unsurprised. "Those in power are afflicted with a terrible need to indiscriminately throw around as much gold as they can. This is a facet of human nature that has persisted through all times and places."

The door itself was thoroughly examined by Dia, Gula, and Lapis as they discussed various possibilities. But at long last, they all let out deep sighs at practically the same time.

Did they figure something out? Loren wondered as he waited with Nym.

Lapis took responsibility and turned toward them to offer a brief report on the results: "It's hopeless. This one will not open."

"Well, that's a surprise."

Sure, Connin had said he had been unable to reach the end, so Loren had suspected this wouldn't be easy, but he couldn't hide his shock when Lapis flat-out admitted it.

"It's a no-go, Loren. No matter what I do, I just can't nix the spell sealing the door," Gula moaned.

"I'm quite confident when it comes to magic, but this is the first time I've seen such a powerful spell," Dia added. "This seal will never lift—not unless you know the specific way the door is meant to be opened."

Loren and Nym looked lost. Lapis realized they didn't seem to understand the fundamental premise, and filled in with more context.

"This door has been sealed by a particular spell. Usually, you'd just need to dispel it, but we are unable to."

"But no lock can only be locked, never to be unlocked," said Gula. "That's a contradiction, ain't it? And not even magic can overcome that contradiction."

"Indeed," said Dia. "And so a certain item exists explicitly to resolve this contradiction."

"So if I'm hearing you right…you need a key?" Loren guessed.

All three of them nodded.

"If we had a key, it would open just like that."

"And without a key, we can't destroy or move whatever lies beyond."

"Something incredible must be waiting on the other side. This spell may be simple to explain, but it's awfully difficult to construct."

Having been faced with a spell that they couldn't overcome even with their power, the three women seemed quite annoyed—especially Dia, who seemed less discontent than outright angry that her Elder powers were useless in this situation.

She must feel like she's been thwarted in what she considered her field of expertise, Loren thought. He turned to Lapis, who seemed relatively less frustrated. "So what's this key you're looking for?"

"Oh, that's simple—but very unforgiving in its simplicity. That's how I would put it… In short, the key is nothing but a word."

As she said that, Lapis pointed to a string of characters carved into a portion of the door. Loren couldn't even tell what language it was, let alone read it. He looked to Nym, who shook her head to say she was no better informed.

But the others seemed to find it legible.

"Right here, it says, 'You must give your answer to the question.'"

"That answer should be the key."

"Yes, but there's no way we could possibly answer it."

Lapis shook her head, resigned to the belief that it was utterly hopeless. Loren found himself curious as to what the question was, exactly. After all, he was looking at a team consisting of an Elder, a dark god, and a demon—three of the most powerful entities on the continent. Yet they were unable to figure it out.

It had to be an incredibly difficult problem.

Perhaps for this reason, Lapis looked troubled as she read out the question on the door:

"You shall answer with its name. It is old, it is young. Its height exceeds mountains, yet its voice is softer than the flap of a mosquito's wings. When it is distant, you cannot remove your eyes, yet when near, you cannot hope to see it. If you look up to it, its head will be beneath your eyes. If you look down, its head will be far over yours. What is it?"

"I've never heard of something like that," Nym said in all honesty.

"Neither have I," said Lapis. "In the first place, the question itself is brimming with contradictions. I've never heard of something so contradictory anywhere in the world."

"Is there a meaning in the very contradictions themselves?" Dia pondered. "But…that doesn't actually leave much in the way of leads."

If you could answer the question, the door would open, but since Dia couldn't bust her way through, she seemed keen on opening it properly and thereby outwitting whoever had thought up the puzzle. However, the question was purely incomprehensible, and she had no idea where to start.

"Perhaps the answer is that there *is* no answer?" she said.

"Sure, I'll try it," said Gula. "Ahem. No such thing exists!"

The second Gula finished speaking, she was sent flying back.

It was so sudden and so forceful that the party was late to react. They whipped around in a panic, looking in the direction she had flown, and saw her flattened on the first door, which had closed behind them. She had crashed into it with quite a bit of force, and was stuck there for a moment before gravity finally got the better of her and she slowly peeled off, falling to the floor.

"It seems an incorrect answer comes with a penalty. How troublesome."

"Now that I'm getting a better look at it…that first door has been magically strengthened."

If the first door had been strengthened to withstand any impact inflicted upon it, then whoever made this place must have been confident that the spell on the inner door would see its fair share of victims. Presumably, there hadn't been any traps on the first one so

that any would-be intruders would fall for the second door's trap and be pulverized. It was a reliable way to take out unwanted solicitors.

"Well, allow me to clarify my answer! The answer is *nothing*!"

The moment Dia said that, her body was sent shooting back.

Though Dia was an Elder, the sight of her small body hurtling toward the first door with such force inevitably made one envision terrible injuries. Nym let out a slight shriek, but Loren was moving even before that, and he caught her slender body with his own.

Unable to fully absorb her momentum, he was shoved several paces back, but neither he nor Dia was injured in the process.

"Mr. Loren, will you do that for me if I get sent flying?" asked Lapis.

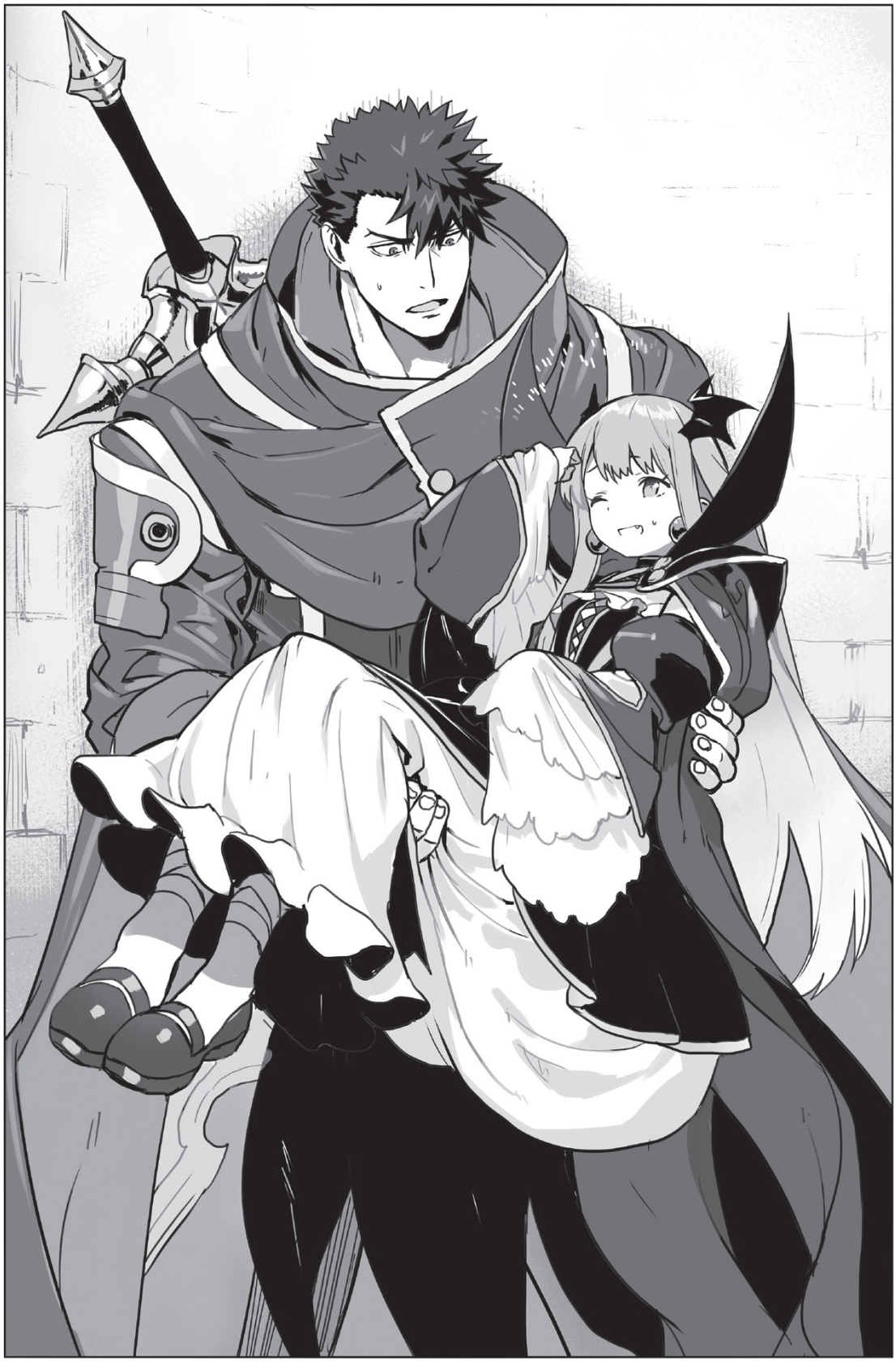
"Sorry about that," said Dia. "I did not think Loren would catch me."

Dia was far smaller than Loren was, small enough to settle comfortably in his arms. Awkwardly scratching her head to play off her wrong answer, she escaped Loren's grasp and set her feet on the ground, whereupon she poked Lapis to stop her before she could provoke the door. For some reason, Lapis seemed raring to have a go.

"I would refrain," Dia said. "Loren will wind up injured."

"I'm not that heavy."

"This has little to do with weight. Small as I am, I made quite the impact. You're inarguably larger than me, and if you were sent flying at the same speed, the blow will be proportionally greater."



Naturally, if Lapis was sent flying, Loren would move to catch her. But when he caught Dia, he'd been struck rather powerfully, even through his protective jacket. He wasn't fully confident that catching Lapis would end well for either of them.

Dia had reined her in out of concern for him, and though Lapis understood this, it was apparently difficult to accept.

"Isn't it unfair that only you got a turn, Ms. Dia?" She glared at the Elder resentfully.

Dia calmly replied, "I was fully prepared to meet Gula's fate. I certainly didn't expect Loren to catch me."

"Loren is a good kid," Nym said sagely. "He'll put his body on the line if he thinks you're in danger."

"Okay, but I was blown away, and he didn't catch me…" Gula muttered as she crawled her way back to them.

Loren felt like he was in the wrong here, and he lightly lowered his head to her. "Sorry about that. You shot off so quickly, I couldn't react in time."

He'd managed to catch Dia only because he knew what to expect. Gula, however, had been left to deal with her super-fun time all on her own.

"Well, here we are," Gula proclaimed. "We're gonna find that answer and open the door no matter what it takes. Or else I'm gonna be hungry for it forever."

"You say that, but how are we supposed to answer that question?"

"Shall I seek assistance from another Elder…? No, the drawbacks outweigh the benefit…"

"Even if I wanted to borrow the insights of my own elders, my homeland is a bit too far away."

The women gathered together, racking their brains as they tried to devise some method by which to uncover the answer.

Meanwhile, as Loren gazed absentmindedly at the golden door, he realized he had to check something with Lapis.

"Hey, Lapis. I've got a question."

"It will be quite all right, Mr. Loren," Lapis said, clearly thinking he was anxious and seeking to offer kind reassurance. "We have some of the best and brightest on hand. It may take some time, but we'll sort out the answer eventually."

He actually had something else on his mind, but he took this to mean that she wanted to think a while longer. For the time being, he left her to it. As they spoke, Gula and Dia debated various possibilities, but it didn't seem like they were getting anywhere productive.

"Hey, magic-wise, what's that one entity that contains any and everything again?" Gula said.

"Do you mean Chaos? If that was the answer, the ancient dragon would have been able to pass through long before now."

"Hmm, then maybe it has to do with some specific religion or an alchemical thingy…"

"You mean in a 'one is all, all is one' sort of sense? That *is* one way of looking at things, but I doubt it applies when the question asks for a *name*. Neither 'the creator' nor 'the transcendent one' seems quite right either."

Loren could only half follow this conversation, but one thing was certain: the answer certainly wasn't there. The reason Loren thought this was incredibly simple.

"Hey, uh, I know the answer."

Even if these debates continued for all eternity, Loren felt that they would never reach a conclusion. And once he opened his mouth, the three arcane savants, who had all been desperately searching for an answer, froze.

Is it really that surprising? Loren wondered. But evidently, his words had come as a complete shock, and they all looked rather doubtful.

"Are you…certain? If you are, then I'd like to hear your line of reasoning."

"Sure thing. Here's my answer: Its name is the phantom beast Quadasedro Phygejelp."

"Huh?"

Loren's reply made all life drain from Lapis's face. The way she was looking at him made clear precisely what was going through her head: *What on earth did this weirdo just say?*

Her reaction was notably better than Gula or Dia, who snickered the moment the words left his lips. From their perspective, his answer

was complete and utter nonsense.

The world was vast, but the existence of this phantom beast had never been confirmed anywhere in it, nor did Loren think it ever would be. To his companions, he sounded like he'd proudly proclaimed the existence of an imaginary friend he'd made up during a childhood game.

But then they saw the golden door slowly open, as if someone was pushing it from the inside, and their expressions turned paler, and paler, until they were practically corpses.

"That can't be…"

"Personally, I'm surprised none of you knew it," said Loren. "That monster turned up in a fairy tale the chief told me when I was a brat. The protagonist loses his way, and the phantom beast puts him on the right path."

"I've never heard that story before!"

"Neither have I…"

Dia recovered quickest and tapped her index finger on her brow as she muttered something. After a while, she nodded and folded her arms. She seemed to have come to an understanding. "Ah, hm, yes… Oh, I get it. I see now why none of us could get it."

Loren had been sure that everyone knew about the phantom beast. He wasn't really following whatever Dia had concluded, but Lapis and Gula, who still didn't understand what the hell was going on, latched on.

"Well, don't keep it to yourself. Please explain."

"Right. At this rate, I'm gonna feel sick no matter what we figure out."

"It's not so difficult. We were convinced that the words carved into the door were a riddle. But here's the thing—they weren't. The key to open the lock was not some profound philosophical truth; it was simply asking for a predetermined password."

A riddle was designed to be answered, provided you gave the question enough thought. But the door had not wanted a solution to a problem. Instead, it had demanded a password that someone would need to know in advance. Regardless of how they racked their brains, they would never have been able to solve it.

"The name of the phantom beast Loren speaks of is a string of meaningless syllables," Dia said. "But if you think of it as a password, then you realize it doesn't *need* to have a specific meaning. It just needs to be correct."

"But how's that supposed to work out, then?! And hey—who's Loren's chief supposed to be, if he knows that kind of thing?"

"I don't know what to tell you," said Loren. "He just said he was gonna tell me a fairy tale everyone knew, so I lent him an ear."

"Like hell there's a fairy tale with characters who've got such long, weird, and incomprehensible names!"

"Sure, but even if you say that… Well, it's open, so what does it matter?"

Gula seemed to feel like Loren had cheated. She remained disgruntled despite his attempts to appease her. But Lapis, who had

since recovered, had already lost interest in the door and what lay beyond it. She was more curious about Loren and his chief, who had told him the fairy tale.

The same could be said for Dia, who watched Gula argue with Loren as she whispered in Lapis's ear, "This might be worth looking into. I cannot move as freely myself."

"Yes, I understand."

Lapis nodded seriously before changing her expression. She stepped up behind Gula and tossed her aside, grabbing onto Loren's arm.

"Huh?"

"Now, now. Let's dwell on all that difficult stuff later. The door is open! So why don't we pay our respects to what the ancient dragon called the most powerful relic he'd ever heard of."

"That's all well and good, but…"

Gula had been shoved aside rather forcefully, and while she was completely off guard. She was now plastered face-first against the floor, prostrate, with her behind in the air.

That must have been pretty painful, Loren thought, growing concerned. But he allowed Lapis to drag him away and through the open doors.

The golden doors led into a vast room. Unlike the previous chamber, this one didn't have a third set of doors on the other side. It seemed to be a dead end. Considering the distance from the entrance to the room, it was quite a small space overall. But if the sole purpose

of these ruins was indeed to keep a set of armor safe, perhaps a snug, compact little cell was all it needed.

There was a basin in the center of the room where water pooled, and in the center of that was a set of golden armor—presumably what the ruins had been built around. It had been arranged to kneel in the same pose a knight would use to pay respects to his lord: on one knee, with its head respectfully lowered.

It also emitted a powerful aura—so powerful, it could be felt at a distance. It was clearly both terribly expensive and terribly strong.

"It's a tad ostentatious, but… I see. I understand why they built these ruins to preserve it."

"It's still so far away, but I'm gettin' chills down my spine. Pretty flashy, though."

"It's so gaudy, it hurts my eyes."

"I don't know who made it, but they had terrible taste."

"Wanna bust it up, then?" asked Loren. As he drew his greatsword and held it in both his hands, all eyes gathered on him. Loren blinked, startled, as he noticed their stares. What had he done now?

"Whaddaya mean, destroy it?!" Gula snapped.

"No, well, I mean. I'm not gonna *wear* it. It's way too gaudy."

At this, Gula turned back to the gold armor.

Its beautiful craftsmanship made abundantly clear that it had been made by someone of incredible skill. Every inch of it was covered with engravings, ornaments, and various rare metals and a

splendid array of gemstones. If it were displayed as an art piece, it would undoubtedly be a wonderful relic of a bygone age. However, when it came to wearing it into battle… It wasn't *completely* impractical, but it would take a good bit of courage to wear something so sparkly.

"I get that, but it's been enchanted to hell and back. I'm sure it's got some real high specs."

"Fine, Gula. You gonna wear it?"

Gula pointed at the suit of armor, maybe imagining herself in it, but then immediately shook her head. She turned to Lapis, who shook her head in a similar fashion.

"For me, it would be a problem of height, so there's simply no question. You need not even ask," Dia piped up before Loren had even shifted his gaze to her.

It seemed everyone was in agreement that they didn't want to actually use it.

"But that Magna guy?" said Loren. "If he got his hands on this, he'd definitely wear it."

His black plate armor was already plenty conspicuous. Magna could pull it off like it was nothing, and if he caught sight of this gold armor, he might don it just as shamelessly.

"Sure, we could try keeping it somewhere safe. But as long as we have it, that bastard's definitely gonna be on our case. And if we leave it here, can you guarantee Connin can keep it sealed away forever?"

"Isn't it fine, so long as the door doesn't open?"

Loren had unsealed the door to the armor, but if the door resealed itself once they closed it, then only people who knew the incomprehensible name of that phantom beast would be able to get through. So Lapis hoped, anyway.

But Loren didn't agree. "I'm just guessing here, but if that bastard learns we were able to open that door, he'll come after us anyway. It'll be a huge pain."

Even if Magna didn't know the password, he'd be perfectly happy to know that *someone* did. It would be only natural for him to assume he could draw it out of them. In that case, Magna would hunt them with a vengeance—even more so than he had before. Nothing but trouble lay down that road.

"That's why I think busting it up's the best option. Any objections?"

"I'm starting to come around to the idea."

"If you don't want to use it, but you don't want anyone else to use it either, then destroying it is the most comprehensible approach."

"Feels like a waste. But it's from that blasted ancient kingdom, so I'm not gonna lose sleep over it."

"Do what you want, Loren."

"That settles it."

As he held up the greatsword, Loren's aura swelled.

Through activating his self-strengthening sequence, he boosted his physical capabilities with the mana coursing through his body.

Then, kicking off the floor, he charged, wind wrapped around his body. The blade plummeted, striking the shoulder of the kneeling suit of armor and cutting true. On the return swing, he inflicted another slice on the already bisected armor, shredding it to pieces.

The ornaments decorating its surface shattered on impact. Glistening fragments of metal and gems scattered through the air—and for some reason, Neg earnestly gathered them up with his threads.

"What's collecting those gonna do for you? I mean, they'll earn you more than nothing, I guess."

"Spiders of Mr. Neg's species will eat ore to further harden their carapaces. And when you get down to it, metal and jewels are nothing more than ore."

Just as Lapis said, Neg brought those gathered fragments to his mouth. It was unclear how he did this, but he managed to chew and swallow until he was satisfied with his meal. At that point, he ceased his gathering and settled down.

We won't make any money if you eat them all, Loren thought with a shrug as he returned the sword to his back, then turned to his companions, who had overseen the destruction.

"All right, let's head out."

"Despite everything, this job ended without a hitch," Lapis mused. "I suppose that's a good thing, but it feels somewhat anticlimactic to end a job with you still on your feet, Mr. Loren."

"You would call all that *without a hitch*?" Nym asked. "If we were any less fortunate, we'd all be dead."

Nym was probably speaking from the perspective of any other adventurer. Maybe Loren had gotten used to it, because like Lapis, he felt the whole ordeal had been a bit lackluster.

In all seriousness—they hadn't lost anyone, and no one was being sent to the hospital, as had become their norm. This job had been a huge success, and the disappointment he felt was therefore proof he was losing his mind.

Having reached that conclusion, Loren urged his comrades to put the ruins behind them.

Epilogue:
Celebration Turns to Robbery

THE CHURCH BELL RANG.

As cheers resounded through the air, the church doors slowly opened, and from within them emerged a man and woman with a rather dubious air about them.

The man sported unshaven stubble and wasn't exactly a looker. He seemed somehow odd in his formal white suit, and it felt more like he had been forced into it. The point was that he seemed very out of place.

By contrast, the woman was fearsomely beautiful. Her long, dagger-like pointed ears, coupled with the golden hair that glistened in the sunlight, made her look like a fantastical being from a fairy tale. The pure-white dress that exposed her shoulders and clavicles all the way down to the slight curve of her chest only added to this impression.

The man and woman held hands as those who had been waiting outside the church showered them with words of blessing.

Watching from a slight distance, leaning against the wall of another building, Loren smiled as he murmured, "That dress takes some courage."

A dagger suddenly appeared, stabbing into the wall right next to his face. It quivered with the force with which it had been thrown.

Loren stayed frozen, confirming its existence with a slight shift of his eyes as his admiration swelled for the skills of the smiling bride.

The hem of her skirt was flapping—presumably from the motion of snatching a dagger fastened to her leg and throwing it. But her movement had been so swift and natural that only a small portion of the crowd even registered it.

Otherwise it would have caused quite a ruckus, Loren thought as he plucked the dagger out of the wall and tucked it into the folds of his coat.

Bloodshed had no place on this day of celebration. He hadn't felt any ill will directed his way, so she had probably intended to miss, but the flash of a blade was always cause for commotion.

After everything that had transpired on Fireflute Mountain, the party had returned to Connin's den and told the ancient dragon the details of what had happened in the depths below his home.

Connin had been devastated when he heard of the armor's destruction. But after glancing at Loren, he seemed to come to an understanding about something or another and made no further comment.

As for the rumors of the dragon of Fireflute Mountain, they had decided to report the truth to the guild—with Connin's consent, of course. The details were still slightly obfuscated. According to the report, they'd only seen the beast from afar, and the rest was rather vague. Even if they did report not only getting up close and personal but actually having a conversation with the dragon, the guild would

never believe that an iron-rank adventurer had accomplished such feats.

In fact, once Loren thought about it, he realized it would be even harder to believe that they'd met an ancient dragon so small, Gula had been able to wrestle with it.

One problem yet remained, which was the fact that 40 percent of the adventurers who had gone before them had never returned. At first, Loren had suspected the dragon of the mountain was ferocious and that they had fallen prey to it. Having met Connin, he was no longer sure.

He'd asked Connin if he knew anything about it, and according to him, Fireflute Mountain was a dangerous place where quite a number of powerful monsters prowled. It was hard to buy the idea that other monsters would settle on a mountain inhabited by a dragon, but Connin was a rather peaceful soul, and he only ate enough to sustain his small body. Him being a rare exception to the rule, perhaps the monsters simply hadn't realized they were living in close proximity to such a fearsome creature.

But if that was all there was to it, then the survival rate should have been higher. However, it was also possible that these parties had all been so focused on the rumors of a dragon that they had neglected to prepare for other monsters. This was Connin's theory, anyway.

It wasn't like they could ask the dead, and Connin didn't pay much attention to adventurers either, so the true cause for the disappearances remained unknown.

Meanwhile, they had parted with Dia at her home base.

She had declared the outing a decently worthwhile way to kill time—but it was Nym who was left with the strongest impression. The moment she realized they were parting ways with the Elder, she patted her chest in relief.

I guess that really is the normal reaction, Loren thought. But even if he'd wanted to mimic her, he missed the boat.

Before she left, Dia went to discuss something with Lapis, but Loren couldn't hear what about. In any case, if it ever proved important, he was sure that Lapis would tell him.

The cheers grew. The newlywed couple was treating everyone to a round of drinks.

Having accompanied them on this job, Nym had earned quite a substantial sum. Sure, the reward from the adventurers' guild had been meager, but Gula had shrewdly gathered up the fragments of the gold armor Loren destroyed.

As expected, it had been made of pure gold. Gula had taken this gold to a smithy, where she had it forged into ingots. The party had, in turn, given a hefty cut of their profit to Nym—as a show of thanks and as a wedding gift.

It was still odd that such a supposedly powerful suit of armor had let itself be broken down and melted into so much scrap. Lapis had an explanation, however.

"I presume it was the sort of enchanted artifact that only exhibits effects when worn. When it's just sitting around, it's merely a

hunk of gold in poor taste."

While Loren had been the one to break it, he had worried that the fragments might retain some of the enchantment of the whole piece. He would have been reluctant to sell it off even in scraps, not knowing what dangers it might still pose. Now that the scraps had been thoroughly transformed, he no longer had to worry about that.

Maybe we would've been fine if we'd just melted the whole thing down at once, Loren thought.

But even if all that gold had sold for a good price, it had only gone for its weight in, well, gold. It had therefore been nothing more than a drop in the bucket against all the debt hanging over Loren's head. He was just thankful he'd at least managed to get a good wedding gift for Nym.

A voice called to him as he was lost in his thoughts.

"You're not going to get any closer?"

It was Lapis.

Loren, Lapis, and Gula had received proper invitations to the wedding. Since it was a once-in-a-lifetime event, Gula had slipped into a dress from who-knew-where and attended with glee. She usually sported an incredibly revealing outfit, but today, of all days, she had decided to dress appropriately—and as Loren watched her from afar, she seemed out of place because of it.

She was a pretty lady, despite everything, and unlike Chuck and Nym—who lacked a bit of volume for the dress she was wearing—Gula and her outfit looked perfect for each other. To anyone else, she

would have seemed just lovely, but for some reason, Loren found her uncanny. So many people had been invited to attend, and yet strangely only Gula seemed to stand out.

"I guess you don't have to go out of your way to dress up, then," Loren said to Lapis, who was clad in her usual priest vestments.

A part of him felt that weddings were precisely the right time for priests to dress as priests. But seeing her in the same clothes as usual didn't exactly add to the celebratory mood.

"It's a different sect, actually. That is a church for the gods of luck and business. If I approached in this outfit, I would be cast out as a heretic."

"Seriously?"

"No, no, just a joke. They wouldn't be delighted to see me, but they wouldn't be offended either."

"Then you could've worn a dress, right?"

"You're not dressed up either, Mr. Loren."

Chuck and Nym were adventurers, and their guests were mostly adventurers as well. But perhaps as was to be expected of silvers, they had a number of affluent friends. Most of the men in attendance had come in proper formal wear.

Of course, here and there, Loren could pick out adventurers who had been unable to acquire formal outfits, and though they had removed their weapons, they celebrated in their everyday clothing.

"I don't own anything appropriate."

Loren had considered joining in casual wear, but he didn't own many clothes to begin with. He would inevitably have had to go in the same shirt and pants he wore under his usual armor, and he felt that was flat-out unacceptable for the festivities.

"I would have gotten you a pure-white suit if you'd just asked me."

That sounds off, Loren thought. At these ceremonies, only the newlyweds were supposed to wear white, and guests were discouraged from doing so… But he felt Lapis wouldn't really care even if he pointed it out.

Loren shrugged. "I couldn't pull it off."

"I don't mind," she said, a serious look on her face.

Loren didn't really know how to respond. Ultimately, he couldn't find the words and just shook his head in silence.

The day went on, the ceremony proceeded, and Loren noticed that the guests had grown boisterous. Before he knew it, Chuck was no longer next to Nym, and when Loren surveyed the area to see where he had gone, he found Chuck being hoisted up and carried around by the burly men he called comrades and friends.

Yeah, that's also pretty common for this kind of day, Loren thought. But the real center of the ruckus wasn't Chuck but Nym. He squinted to see what was going on.

Standing in her white dress, Nym was holding up something that had been wrapped in the same white. It was a bouquet of many

different types of flowers, bound in snowy lace, and she held it high in one hand for everyone to see.

What's she going to do with that? Loren thought—before recalling a certain old wives' tale. It said that the person who caught the bouquet thrown by the bride at her wedding would be the next to get married. It was a jinx, or perhaps just a superstition.

Presumably, Nym was about to toss her flowers. Loren wondered if the participants would scramble and dive, willing to sacrifice all dignity to lay claim to it.

The situation he imagined was, in fact, highly unlikely. But with that said, of the many people gathered, only one would be able to achieve victory, and he couldn't help but think of it as the eve before battle.

For that precise reason, as Nym lowered the bouquet for a second before tossing it high into the sky, Loren was about to avert his eyes. But before he could, a sudden gust of cold air flew right past him, shaking him to the core. Before he knew it, his eyes were following the trajectory of the bouquet.

It went without saying that the gust had come from Lapis. As a veteran mercenary with a modicum of adventuring experience, Loren could tell.

Lapis charged while exuding an aura that made his blood run cold—it was sharp, fast, strong, and unthinkable for a priest.

The other hopefuls began to collapse, one after the next, as if they had been felled by Lapis's sheer menacing presence. She swiftly cut through their ranks and planted her feet where the bouquet was

set to fall. Then the cold faded, replaced by a soft smile as Lapis caught the falling bouquet with both hands.

The guests who hadn't participated in the contest were taken aback. Even Nym, the one who'd thrown the flowers, could only smile stiffly. Lapis was the only one who looked truly joyful. She turned to Loren, who had watched her from a distance, and waved with the bundle of flowers.

"Mr. Loren!" she called out. "I caught it! Looks like it's going to be my turn next!"

Every time you flex your demonic abilities, you're in danger of being found out, Loren thought. *Was that really worth it?*

Presumably, if he asked, she would nod and say, "Of course."

Loren didn't understand how much weight the bouquet superstition held, but surely it had plenty of meaning to those who'd sought to catch it. He felt bad for the guests who'd been rendered unconscious, but they had lost the moment a being like Lapis took the stage. It was tough luck for them, but Loren was filled with something close to resignation.

He also spotted Gula in the crowd, biting a handkerchief in frustration, having evidently totally missed the event.

Anyway, until he offered some response, it didn't look like Lapis was ever going to stop swinging the bouquet around. Feeling that this was a decent conclusion to their recent adventure, and with the eyes of the crowd gathering upon him, Loren raised his hand to wave at her in turn.



Bonus Story:
From the Notes of a Certain Priest

I UNDERSTAND I CALL MYSELF a priest of the god of knowledge, but I do occasionally come across questions that I simply can't answer. Questions whose answers I value far more than my own safety. If I give them a voice, it feels like various things will all be ruined; I am well aware of the danger. But my thirst for knowledge takes precedence, regardless of what peril stands before me.

Truth be told, I recently came across something that turned my regular craving for knowledge into true ravening. So, without any concern for myself, I went ahead and asked.

Asked Ms. Nym, to be precise.

As for who Ms. Nym is, please refer to my previous entries.

Regardless, about the question I put to her: I just *had* to know if she was wearing any undergarments.

I mean, doesn't that outfit make you curious? There's quite a profound slit running up both sides of her hips, yet I never spy any lines that might suggest underwear. Considering the eccentricities of the elven race, who could possibly blame me for wondering? No one! That's who.

Well, the answer came in the form of a rather swift arrow, which lightly grazed my cheek. What a thrill.

"Any more stupid questions and the next one will hit," she told me, and I'm sure those words were not a lie. If I ever end up in a

similar situation, I'll have to come prepared with a sturdy shield. Perhaps Mr. Claes could fill that role.

Putting all that aside, this time, we set off to find any information we could about the ancient kingdom.

It wasn't that I had any pressing interest in the kingdom, but that black swordsman, Magna, seems to pop up everywhere we go, and if we want to rid ourselves of him, we realized we would need information on the ruins he always seems to frequent.

Of course, this is information on a nation that fell hundreds of years ago. It isn't just lying around everywhere you look, and I don't expect the people who are in the know are generally keen to part with their secrets.

So where exactly did we decide to search for it? Why, with the dragon who lives in Fireflute Mountain.

Actually, back when we got to know a dragon named Ms. Emily, I received some intel on her peers living in other lands. One of them was our Fireflute friend.

We learned we could earn a reward for investigating the area, even while our primary goal was obtaining information on the ancient kingdom. We also had an item that would prevent the dragon from attacking us out of nowhere, so the whole trip seemed like easy money. But that was where I made a tiny miscalculation.

When a dragon is involved, the job is considered beyond the skill of iron-rank adventurers, who are seen as barely graduated from newbie status.

Oh, Mr. Loren, won't you go and pass the silver-rank exam already? With his skill and his personality, he can certainly *reach* silver, and I'm not even being biased here. There seems to be quite a discrepancy between how others view him and how he views himself.

He even refuses to accept that the moniker of the Cleaving Gale is his to claim. I do think it's high time the guild paid him proper attention, but seeing as he constantly denies all credit and there's no evidence to speak of, there's not much I can do there.

If Mr. Loren's mercenary friend—the one we met just recently—were still alive, perhaps we could have figured out some kind of reveal. I can't bring that up with Mr. Loren, though. It would just make him sad.

Now then, setting that aside, if we didn't plan on taking an official quest, there was no real need to have silver-rank qualifications. But it always feels like I'm missing out if I don't take what I can get, so I was mulling over what to do, when suddenly we were visited by the very elf who had threatened my life over a mere philosophical quandary: Ms. Nym.

It seemed she was in sudden need of cash, and if there was a job that meant easy money, she wanted in.

There were a few strange things about this request.

For starters, Ms. Nym is affiliated with a rather skilled silver-rank party, and I had a hard time imagining them failing so badly that they would fall into debt. I believed them to be an earnest bunch, but perhaps I'd misjudged them—or so I feared. When we asked what

had brought her to this sudden need, the reason was entirely understandable.

To summarize, Ms. Nym was finally getting hitched to her comrade, Mr. Chuck. They always had a good thing going on, so I knew it was bound to happen someday. However, Ms. Nym's clan has a custom where a man and woman exchange gifts when they pledge their lives to one another, and she needed money for that.

At that point, everything else just seemed entirely inconsequential. That black swordsman who kept cropping up like a dreadful kitchen pest? That dragon in the mountain? Piffle. Did any of them really matter? Mere side plots.

Instead, I found myself possessed by the need to understand and record exactly what part of that dissolute man our resident cool beauty was attracted to. What had led up to their initial attraction? How exactly had he proposed?

Is this a problem?

Perhaps it's a problem.

After all, I'm the only one interested in Ms. Nym's love life. Meanwhile, anyone who might be reading these notes…

Hm… Well, I get the feeling things might just work out.

Anyways, back to work.

Once we designated Ms. Nym as our party leader, we were allowed to take on the Fireflute Mountain investigation quest. So we headed straight out of Kaffa and headed for the mountain—albeit with one slight detour.

Since we were passing through anyways, we stopped by the home of the Elder vampire, Ms. Dia.

We didn't really intend anything by it; we were simply in the neighborhood. However, it was there that Mr. Loren asked Ms. Dia about Ms. Scena, the Lifeless King who resides within his body.

We had recently secured ancient ruins that are very likely capable of creating a vessel to house Ms. Scena, and all that remains is to revive her soul, somehow or another. But this part of the process is actually incredibly difficult. What's more, Ms. Scena is an undead entity, and she cannot be brought back without significant work.

I do think it was a good idea to ask an Elder—precisely the sort of being who stockpiles unnecessary information—but Ms. Dia's response was somewhat complicated.

I will omit the details. Just know that it would be incredibly difficult, but if necessary, I'm sure that Mr. Loren will seek out one of the methods she laid out.

After that conversation, Ms. Dia proved herself to have far too much free time on her hands—she requested permission to tag along. We did not decline, and soon we were once more on our way. But when we approached the mountain, things started to get a wee bit strange.

One of the villages at the base of Fireflute Mountain had been destroyed. As we were investigating the possible causes, we were attacked by a large number of orcs. Worse yet, *naked* orcs.

For what it's worth, I am what you might classify as a pure maiden, and if faced with the naked body of an orc, I am fully entitled

to scream, oh, ten or twenty times.

In fact, I'd say Ms. Gula, Ms. Dia, and Ms. Nym were the crazy ones. They were completely fine even after having to look at *all that*. I insist that my response was perfectly normal.

Well, I suppose it's possible that Ms. Nym is used to all things Mr. Chuck… But when I consider asking, I feel a chill run down my spine, so let's give up on that while we're ahead.

We instead focused on the simple question of: Why are there so many orcs here? We were still wondering that as we dispatched the horde, even up to the point that we found the dragon we were looking for.

He is named Mr. Connin, and he has declared himself to be a pacifist. Apparently, he was troubled by his inability to deal with the orcs that had camped at the entrance to his cave.

A dragon who can't handle orcs… I'm not sure what to think of that. Presumably, if he wanted to, Mr. Connin could have managed perfectly fine on his own, but perhaps he refrained due to fear of collateral damage, should he get serious. There were quite a few villages nearby, after all. I'm perfectly pleased to know such a dragon is somewhere out there.

As thanks for ridding him of the orcs, Mr. Connin told us about another ruin from the ancient kingdom—one that lay right beneath his den. Apparently, he had once been injured in a confrontation with that same kingdom, and to get back at them, he had built a nest right on top of some valuable equipment. That seemed to be his idea of revenge, but to the ancient kingdom, I'll wager it was more like

suddenly finding oneself in possession of a fine guard dog, and at no extra cost.

Only those long-lost people would know the truth, one way or another, and there's no way of confirming it today. For now, let's keep our problems to what we can see in the present.

Yes, problems. About those problems.

Not even Mr. Connin had been able to reach the deepest heart of the ruins he guarded. There were no traps to speak of; he simply could not open the door.

The door's design was not especially unusual. You only had to speak the answer to the question carved onto its front to unlock it; it was only that I had absolutely no clue what the answer might be. Quite a grave situation for one of the god of knowledge's priests to find herself in, don't you think?

But no, it wasn't that I was falling short. A dark god, an Elder, and a demon all put our heads together, and we still couldn't figure it out. It was clear that this was no ordinary question, but still, not being able to answer it put my professional pride on the line.

I thought I could just give an answer no matter how wrong it was, but as Gula offered her own body on the altar of investigative sacrifice, we learned that any wrong answer was met with a swift penalty.

As we mulled over what we ought to do, the solution dropped into our hands from out of the blue. The one who dropped it was, in fact, Mr. Loren, who we'd all assumed would be least helpful when it came to riddles.

I'm aware I am being a little rude, but I didn't imagine a former mercenary had the necessary skill set. But to my surprise, Mr. Loren declared that he knew the answer with a surprising confidence.

I concluded that if he was that confident, I'd allow it—and indeed, his answer opened the doors, easy as anything.

What face am I supposed to make at a time like that?

Laughing was rather impossible, so there was none of that, no. And once the curtain had been pulled back, we realized just how hopeless our task had been.

We had been convinced we were trying to solve a riddle, and we had therefore attempted to derive the answer from the question. But that question wasn't a riddle at all—it was a prompt to divulge a preordained password. Mr. Loren managed to answer it…because he knew it. There was no strike of inspiration or innovative logical leaping or anything of the sort.

Apparently, Mr. Loren had heard the password from the chief of his mercenary company when he was still a child. I'm getting the feeling the mystery surrounding his old captain's identity has only grown deeper.

Beyond the door, we found a suit of golden armor, but we quickly decided to destroy it. Mr. Loren couldn't use it, evidently, and it was so clunky and gaudy that neither I nor Ms. Gula felt compelled to claim it either.

But if we left it untouched, that black swordsman, Mr. Magna was liable to become a gold swordsman instead.

Seeing as someone had gone out of their way to build that facility merely to keep that armor safe, it was clearly an enchanted object of incredible value, and we couldn't let something that powerful fall into Mr. Magna's hands. Destruction was the only option.

I did feel it was something of a waste… But neither did I want to see Mr. Loren decked out in gold.

And that's all I have to say about work!

We ended the job on a high note and received our reward from the guild. I'm sure Ms. Nym used her cut to exchange a wonderful gift with Mr. Chuck.

After that, we were invited to their wedding. But to me, the important thing wasn't Ms. Nym's daring dress or Mr. Chuck's oddly ill-suited suit. Nor was it Ms. Gula's unnecessarily refined taste in fashion. No—it was the trajectory of the tossed bouquet. Nothing else was on my mind.

Yes, yes, I did end up being a tad childish when I unleashed my power, but let me end by saying I succeeded in claiming what I had sought.

Now it will be my turn next. Or it *should* be, but who can say?

Can't a girl have some faint hopes? I often end up thinking this sort of thing…

That said, I also think it's time to lay down my brush.



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