

Kumo Kagyu
Illustrations by so-bin

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BLADE & BASTARD

—Return of The Hrathnir—

Wizardry

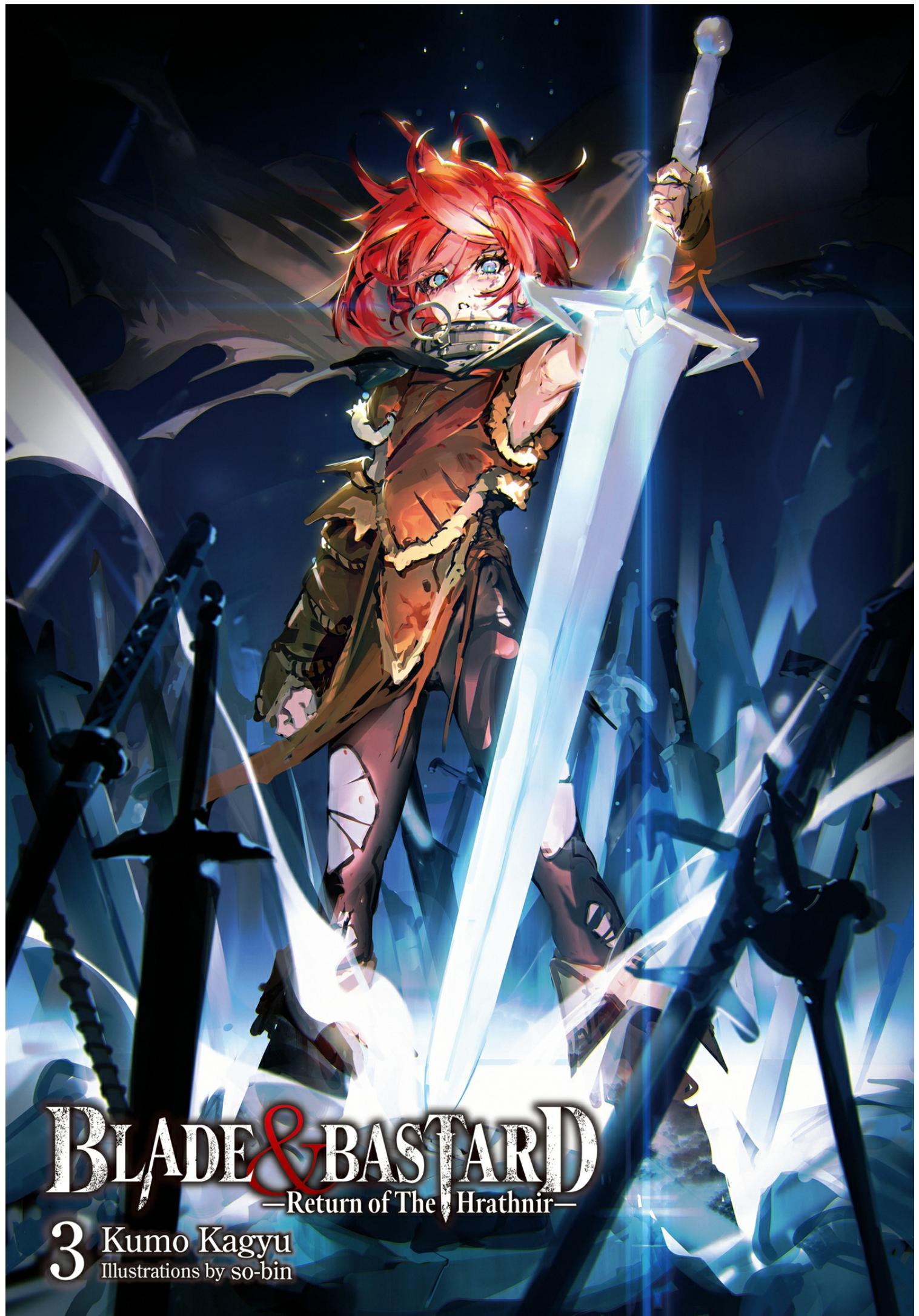
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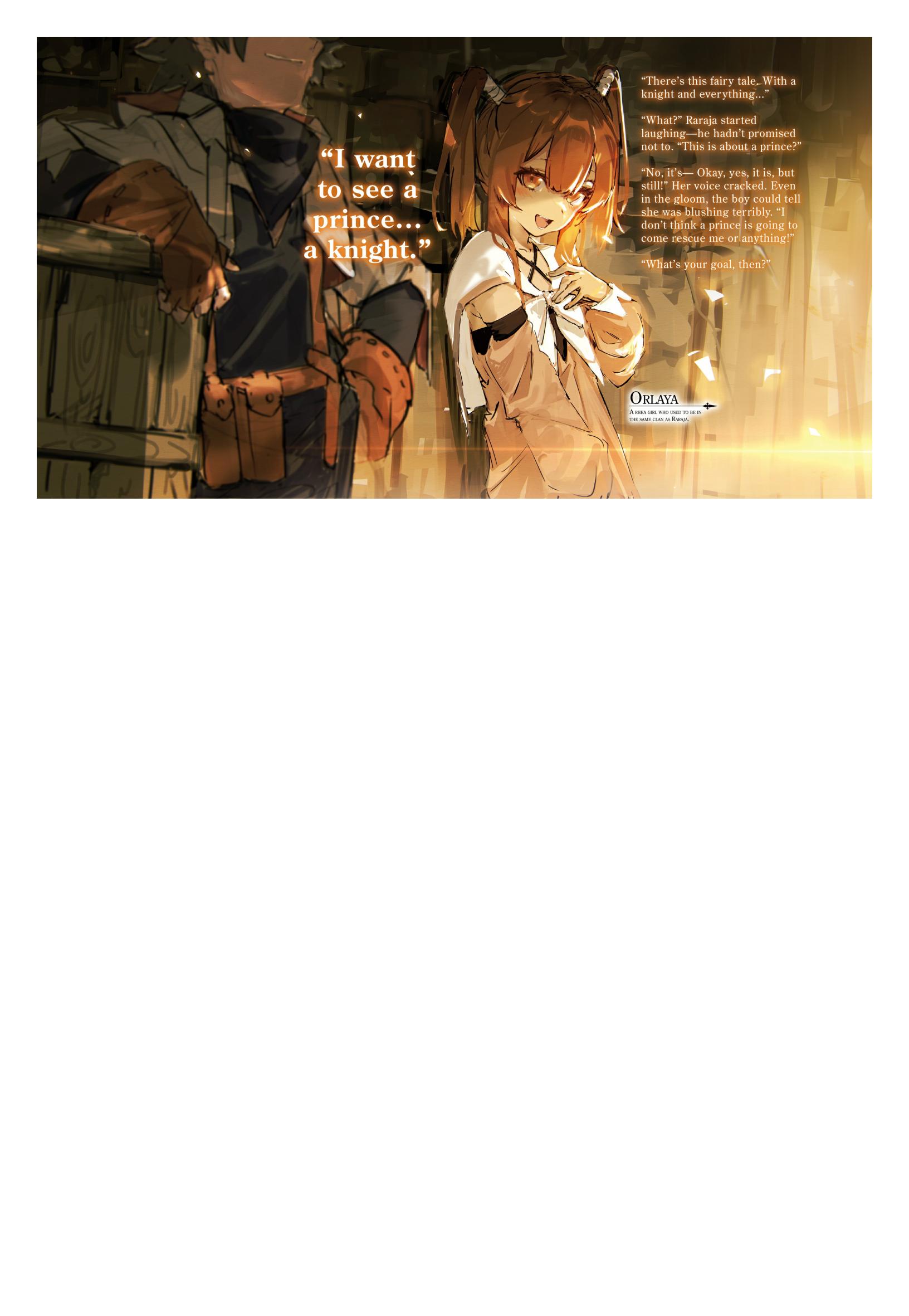
BLADE & BASTARD

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3 Kumo Kagyu
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“I want
to see a
prince...
a knight.”

“There’s this fairy tale. With a knight and everything...”

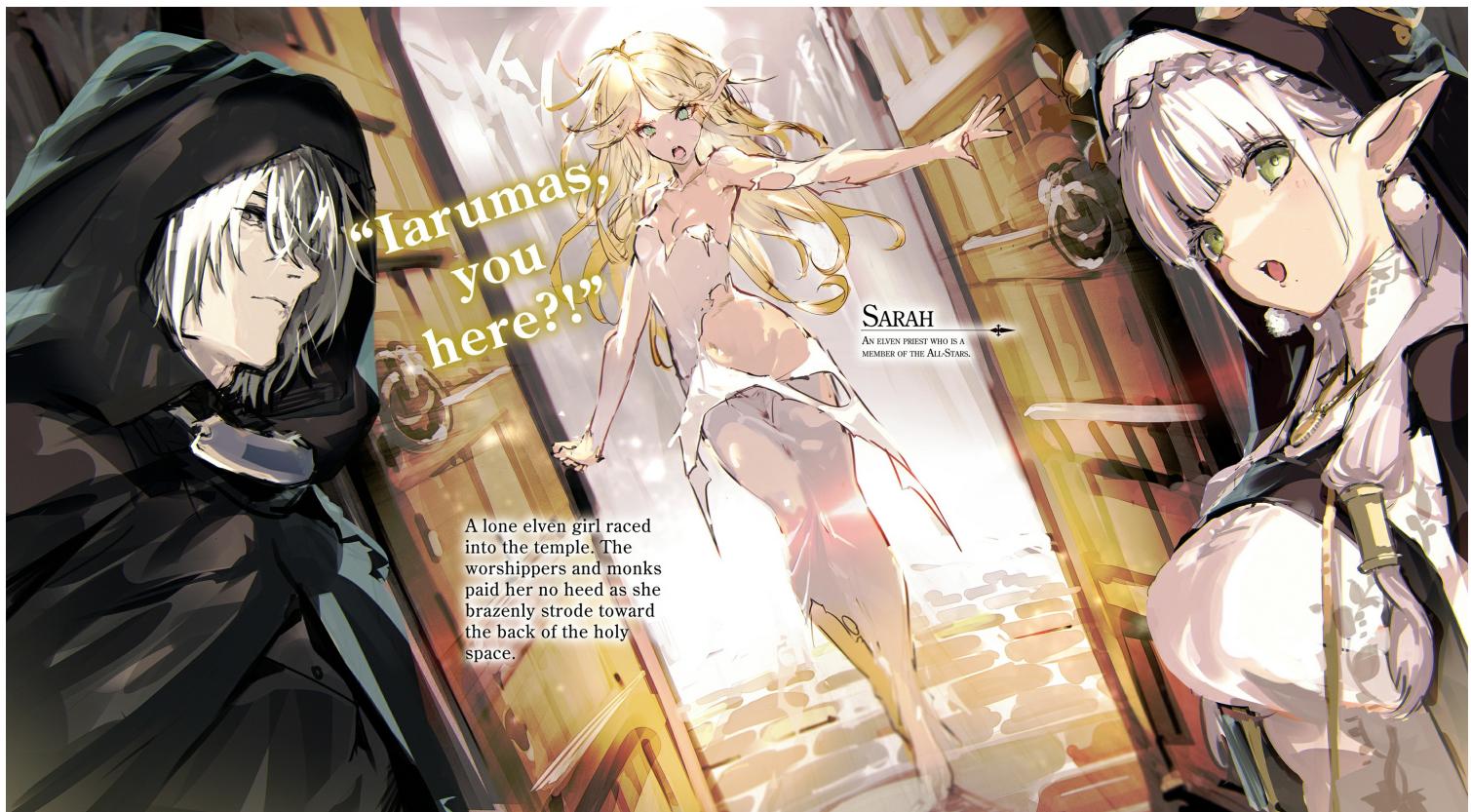
“What?” Raraja started laughing—he hadn’t promised not to. “This is about a prince?”

“No, it’s— Okay, yes, it is, but still!” Her voice cracked. Even in the gloom, the boy could tell she was blushing terribly. “I don’t think a prince is going to come rescue me or anything!”

“What’s your goal, then?”

ORLAYA

A RHEA GIRL WHO USED TO BE IN
THE SAME CLAN AS RARAJA.



BLADE & BASTARD

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1
BROKEN ITEM

CHAPTER 2
GOLDEN KEY

CHAPTER 3
ELEVATOR

CHAPTER 4
GREATER DEMON

CHAPTER 5
ALLOCATION CENTER

CHAPTER 6
MAGIC SWORD

CHAPTER 7
UNSEEN BEING

CHAPTER 8
HRATHNIR

CHAPTER 9
CANT

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter 1: Broken Item](#)

[Chapter 2: Golden Key](#)

[Chapter 3: Elevator](#)

[Chapter 4: Greater Demon](#)

[Chapter 5: Allocation Center](#)

[Chapter 6: Magic Sword](#)

[Chapter 7: Unseen Being](#)

[Chapter 8: Hrathnir](#)

[Chapter 9: Cant](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Textless Images](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

That king, the king who worships gold, will no more see his treasure room.

That king, the king who worships power, will have none within his tomb.

That king, the king who worships these—that king, he will find doom.

In front of you now, in that king's doom, the answer you seek doth loom.



Chapter 1 Broken Item

“Awoooooo!!!”

The redhead girl howled as she sprang at the stone devil. Her broadsword whizzed through the air, shattering the fiend into hunks of rock. The blade swung left and right, without regard for whether it hit anything, scattering pebbles across the burial chamber with each strike.

“Eek...”

“Damn it! Show some restraint, moron! We can’t get in there!”

Obviously, these haphazard swings posed an issue for her comrades—Berkanan and Raraja.

The boy Raraja cursed up a storm. Beside him, Berkanan put one hand on her triangular hat, attempting to shrink into herself. Considering her great size, it was a futile effort.

Why am I still on the front line? she wondered.

The Dragon Slayer, which rested on her hip, had remained silent ever since the recent battle against the red dragon. Now it was just a good sword, maybe a little sharper than most. Its motivation seemed to have vanished entirely.

Pathetic as it was to admit, Berkanan sometimes stroked the pommel, wondering if that battle had all just been a dream. At this point, Berkanan couldn’t imagine herself as a dragon slayer.

Yet, by comparison...

“Wow...”

“Arf!!!”

Garbage was the best she’d ever been. She swung her broadsword with gusto, scattering the pack of monsters. In a way, that was the same as ever—and yet, Berkanan felt as if the girl had even more vigor now. After all, Raraja, who used to be able to keep up with her, was currently lagging behind as he swung his dagger around, parrying blows from the gargoyles.

Garbage took the lead, diving into crowds of monsters, scattering them, and then moving on to the next group. The girl was having the time of her life. At

least, that's how it seemed to Berkana as she watched Garbage smile with her fangs bared.

"Is it because she was bathed in the dragon's blood?" Berkana wondered aloud.

"Perhaps," murmured Iarumas. He stood at the rear, watching with one hand resting on the black staff at his hip. Deep inside his black cloak, his eyes were focused—not on the three frontline fighters, but on the corner of the burial chamber.

Berkana reflexively looked in that direction. Her eyes widened.

The creature was massive. Goat-headed. And it was lumbering toward them.

"A new enemy, incoming from the side," Iarumas warned.

"Wh-Whaa?!"

A lesser demon?!

"Berkana!" Raraja shouted, still surrounded by gargoyles. "You handle things over there!"

"R-Right!"

Her voice cracked as she responded to her name, but despite that, Berkana headed toward the demon. From her perspective, her movements felt rapid, but to any objective observer, they would have seemed sluggish.

Drawing the Dragon Slayer in place of her staff, she sang out words of truth.

"Kafaref tai nuunzanme (*Stop, O soul, thy name is sleep!*)!"

The sleep-inducing miasma of KATINO surrounded the goat-headed demon, blotting it out, obscuring it from sight.

Indeed, Berkana had learned spells other than HALITO, the little fire. This was proof—at least one mote of it—that her fight against the dragon hadn't been a mere dream.

And even if KATINO was still only a first-level spell, the most basic of basics in the dungeon, Berkana saw things differently. For her, each spell was a joy. They filled her with love and pride, so much so that she wanted to cast them

whenever she had an opportunity.

Work, work, work...!!!

Even a lesser demon was still a demon. Berkana glared at the fiend, willing her magic to penetrate its spell resistance, though that mental effort had no impact on the result.

In reality, she must have just gotten lucky.

“GARGLL?!”

“I...did it...!”

The demon slumped to its knees, a threat no longer. At least, not until it reawakened. With the beast incapacitated, Garbage and Raraja could fully focus on the gargoyles.

Berkana now understood why the other adventurers had been so dismissive of a mage who couldn’t even cast KATINO. Though she had expanded her spell repertoire, she had no interest in switching parties, even though she probably could.

“Nice one!” Raraja yelled.

“Heh heh...” Berkana smiled, but not because of the compliment—it was a grin of satisfaction. Usually, her role involved drawing enemy attention away from the others, and she had been forced to behave more like a fighter. But this time, she’d been able to do her job as a mage.

It was rare that Larumas needed to draw the black staff that was the origin of his sobriquet—Berkana already knew that the staff harbored a saber with a frighteningly sharp edge. The color reminded her of stories she’d heard back in her homeland about a type of lacquer, dark as the night. *I think the sword’s called...Black Japanned? Hmm, that’s also the name of a giant-killing sword from...Hiren, a land even farther to the east than Almarl.*

When Berkana had asked Larumas if his sword was the one from Hiren, he’d simply said, “That’s a good one,” and denied it with a smile. “If it were, I could tell you that there’s no opponent more rewarding than a frost giant.”

That was probably a joke. Berkana had only heard of such giants in the

myths her grandmother told her that said, she also hadn't seen dragons or demons before coming to the dungeon.

"Are demons supposed to show up here...?" Berkana wondered.

The gargoyles were demons too, but they were weak, minor ones. They couldn't even take form without a statue to inhabit. Lesser demons were another story. Despite their diminutive name, they were powerful enough to manifest themselves in the living world.

Maybe the ecology of the dungeon was still all messed up after the fire dragon went on its rampage, but...

"If you wanna think about that stuff, fine, but save it for *after* we've taken care of these things!" Raraja shouted as he desperately evaded a stone beak.

"Oh, right...!"

Berkana lumbered forward, then let out a listless battle cry and swung around with the Dragon Slayer. Despite her lack of energy, the sword was still magical—more importantly, that massive body of hers made her stand out. It attracted attention. There was no reason the gargoyles wouldn't go after a girl whose flesh shook with each great swing of her enchanted blade.

"Wh-Whaa...aaaaah?! There's a whole bunch of them...?!"

"Nice!" shouted Raraja. "Keep on keeping 'em busy—just like that!"

It was now his turn to go on the offensive. Abominations of stone—there was no way his blade could pierce them. Raraja would have once thought this, but now...

"They're not so hard compared to dragonscale!"

The boy crouched, entering a gargoyle's blind spot, then pounced, his dagger gripped tightly in one hand. Aim set on a vital point—then one sharp thrust.

The eyes can't be hard too, right?!

This insight was a product of the experience Raraja had gained through surviving—proof of the growth he had achieved.

And thankfully, the creature's right eye was softer than a dragon's.

“GAGLLL?!”

The eye shattered as Raraja’s dagger plunged inside the socket. A cry of pain ripped out of the gargoyle—it sounded like a burbling drain spout.

“Y-Yahhh!”

And with the mass of stone blinded in one eye and writhing on the burial chamber floor, it was easy enough for even Berkana to smash it. The golden ring on her finger sparkled as she unleashed a comically huge swing. Combined with the massive size of her body, the strike hit with almost titanic strength.

“KLINK KLOCK?!”

There was a satisfying cracking sound as the stony devil was battered to smithereens. And all that power from a mage! How many of the world’s fighters would have envied her blessed physique? Yet Berkana found her form less than agreeable. Oh, unfair world.

“Groaaar!!!”

None of that mattered to the tiny shadow that raced through the dancing dust—Garbage.

The girl left the rest of the rocky things to the yappy one and the big one—she focused her aim on the sleeping idiot’s head. Her entire body tensed like a coiled spring, and then she let loose, unwinding, dancing with her broadsword. The blade sliced through the air, tearing straight toward the goat’s forehead.

“Gling?!”

Steel bit into flesh just a little, and then, with frightening ease, her broadsword shattered.

The excess momentum sent Garbage careening across the floor, the broken sword still in her hand. In front of her was the demon, now released from KATINO due to the painful bruise she’d inflicted (damage).

But Garbage’s focus (hit points) was still intact. With a low growl, the redheaded girl sprang forward, broken blade in hand.

“Awoooooo!!!”

Claws reached for her, but Garbage slipped past them. She raised the broken sword and smashed the pommel into the demon. The weight of that pommel, which had been enough to counterbalance the blade of a broadsword, came down with enough force to make the goat's skull rattle.

But that was all—such a blow was not enough to vanquish a fiend from another world.

The demon spread its four arms wide, chanting words that could not be heard by human ears.

A spell?!

"Uh-oh...!" groaned Berkana. Raraja was still preoccupied with the gargoyles—Garbage simply growled.

And so, larumas moved.

"Die!"

To Berkana's eyes, he appeared only as colorful wind. The instant his voice rang out, the black-robed man appeared before the demon. With a low shout of exertion, a white blade emerged from the black rod and traced four arcs inside the dungeon.

"AAHHGGGG?!?!?"

The demon screeched. Four arms were sundered from its torso. The surging magical energy dispersed.

Instantly, larumas's blade retracted in a brutal backswing, and the flat of it struck the demon's throat.

A muddled cry. Blood gurgled from the goat's mouth.

"If I had MONTINO, things would've been different," boasted larumas. "But without it, this is the way it's done."

"Awoooooo!!!"

Garbage bounded in and pounced—her follow-up attack was merciless. The demon thrashed on the ground, ichor gushing from its four stumps.

Her target had not changed, not since her very first strike. Garbage lunged at

the goatlike demon's forehead. Before, she'd hacked into the spot with her broadsword, trading a minor laceration for a broken blade. Then she'd clobbered the spot with the weight of her pommel.

"Grrrowl!!!"

And now, that same spot suffered another blow from her shattered sword. Then another. Another. Her bladework, which usually looked like dancing, grew wild, and she slashed with the intensity of a feral dog.

On the fifth strike, the creature's head split like a melon—gray matter splattered across the burial chamber.

"Woof!"

Covered in ichor from head to toe, Garbage gave it some more swings, still not satisfied. The goat-headed demon, which had long since slumped to the dungeon floor, spasmed erratically. The sounds of impact grew wetter with each blow.

Soon, its form would dissolve into mist, its soul vanquished back to whatever inferno it had crawled out of. But until then...

"Hey!" Raraja shouted. "If you're done over there, come help me out!"

"R-Right...!"

Not long after that, Berkana smashed through the last of the gargoyles. The burial chamber was once more as silent as the grave.

§

"Woooo..."

I guess even she can get like this sometimes...

Garbage emitted a low whine as she gazed down at her broken sword. Raraja had never seen the girl look so dejected—this was a far cry from her usual attitude.

She's acting kinda childlike... That thought filled Raraja with an indescribable sense of awkwardness. If only she would do her usual thing and kick the chest just as he was in the middle of probing the inside of the lock.

Actually, no, that'd be a pain too...

Raraja sighed. The lock clicked open, and as he began to raise the lid, he felt a slight resistance.

“Are you okay...?”

“Arf...”

Berkanan crouched her massive form down next to the girl. She tried talking to her. Neither had much of an effect.

Raraja glanced in larumas's direction as he struggled with the wire on the underside of the lid. As usual, the man was silent. He merely cast a dark glance in their direction from where he stood next to the wall.

Raraja bit his lip and, without meaning to, assumed a scolding tone. “Why don’t you say something?”

“About what?”

“Her broadsword.”

“Ah.” larumas nodded casually, like the whole thing just wasn’t a big deal. “These things happen sometimes.”

“They do?” asked Raraja.

“Indeed. For instance, like when you try to unleash the power of a magic weapon without really understanding it.” larumas chuckled softly and gave a light tap to the black saber hanging at his hip.

Raraja scowled, remembering his own experience with the Demon’s Stone. “That’s not what I meant...” he mumbled. But he kept his mouth shut after that. He didn’t feel like urging larumas to comfort Garbage, and he had his doubts that she would actually want that.

Frankly, Raraja wasn’t sure whether larumas even had the *ability* to comfort someone.

Asking him was a mistake from the get-go.

So, as Raraja figured out how to cut the wire, he put together his next question. “What’re we gonna do after this?”

“Pull out, I suppose,” said larumas. “Our frontliner is missing a weapon.”

“No. I mean about her broadsword.”



“Aah.” Iarumas nodded, his demeanor the same as it ever was. “Well, either we buy a replacement...or we find an alternative.” Beneath that dark cloak, the man’s expression grew very serious. And yet, there was a hint of jest in his voice. “And that alternative could very well be in that treasure chest. That’s a big responsibility you’ve got on your hands.”

“None of this is *my* fault!” Raraja clicked his tongue angrily and then returned to disarming the chest.

He selected a flat, file-like blade from among the new tools he’d acquired from Mr. Catlob. The wire in the chest was intended to trigger a trap when the lid was lifted upward. Who knew whether that wire would pull the stopper from a bottle of poison gas, fire a crossbow bolt, or set off an explosion.

Once it’s cut, it won’t be doing anything.

Raraja slid his delicate tools, which could never have withstood the rigors of combat, into the gap and proceeded to cut the—

No. This thing—it’s not a wire.

Raraja exhaled as he realized what his blade was touching.

A talisman. Much like a wire, it would trigger when the lid was lifted, but there was a difference—he mustn’t break a talisman.

This kind of thing’s why I can never let my guard down.

With the blade still in the gap beneath the lid, Raraja pulled a number of thin probes from his tool kit. Carefully, he then peeled the talisman away from where it joined the lid and box.

I didn’t need to hear your lecture...

Unsealing the box was *Raraja’s* job. He always harbored a sense of responsibility for it.

But right now, he felt like he was being even more cautious than usual, and focusing harder than ever. He didn’t like that. His normal prowess was enough—even without being extra careful, Raraja would have noticed the difference between a wire and a talisman in time.

In contrast to the eddy of thoughts whirling around in his head, Raraja's hands worked with mechanical precision. He peeled off the talisman, then sucked in another breath. Carefully, he dropped the talisman inside of the box. His hands went to the lid.

"Hey, I'm all done."

"Look! He's got it open," Berkana said, her voice carefree. "Maybe there's a new sword inside."

Garbage rose to her feet, broken blade still in hand.

"Woof."

She trotted over and barked at Raraja, demanding that he open it up already.

Raraja didn't let her behavior bother him. The lid fell aside with a heavy *thunk*, and the treasure chest was open.

Silence consumed the burial chamber as they peered inside.

A small number of gold coins. A scroll. The cursed talisman Raraja had just peeled off. Nothing else.

Raraja winced. "It's not my fault, okay?"

"Yap!!!"

Garbage gave him a good hard kick in the shin.

§

"Oh my!" Sister Ainikki's eyes widened.

Nary a day passed without adventurers visiting the Temple of Cant. They came to resurrect their dead comrades, even if only ashes remained. Those who sought miracles came with donations of gold in hand, carrying the bodies of the fallen.

However, in the case of larumas's party, only the last part applied.

They were a party of just four. That left two slots unfilled. Why, then, would they *not* carry back some bodies?

larumas the Corpse Hauler. While the meaning of that moniker had changed

slightly, the man still more or less embodied it.

“And that’s why there’s only one person today,” larumas said, setting his burden down in the mausoleum.

“Little wonder...” The beautiful, silver-haired elf shook her head with dismay and exhaled an exasperated sigh. “Surely you should have gone with Garbagesama today.”

“The dead have no business with Catlob’s shop.”

As larumas spoke, the temple’s acolytes came and carried off the body bag at his feet.

When larumas said “one person,” he’d obviously meant the corpse. He *had* returned from the dungeon early due to a party member’s difficulty. Was that an improvement from his normal behavior?

No. He’s just the same as ever...

“Iarumas-sama, I do hope you will consider, once more, what it means to live a better life.”

“When an adventurer starts pondering how to live right, or how to make money properly, it’s probably time for them to retire.”

“That is not what this conversation is about.”

The nun seemed to think it was her mission to reform larumas. Her long, thin ears perked up angrily, and she jabbed a pretty white finger in his direction. “No matter how much you play the hermit, no man is an island.”

“Well, that *is* why I want to form a six-person party.”

“That is *not* what this conversation is about.”

Honestly. Aine was almost ready to puff her cheeks out like a little girl. It had been a long time since the age when elves and dwarves were long-lived. By now, their life spans had shortened to match those of humans. Even so, this nun, who still possessed an inhuman allure, might have been younger than she appeared.

As larumas pondered that fact, he waved his hands and tried to explain

himself.

“Don’t be like that. Say I were to speak up every step of the way and get the girl back on her feet. There wouldn’t be any point to it.”

“Well... Perhaps you’re right about that,” Aine said begrudgingly. It was likely a fallacious argument, but one that contained at least *some* measure of reason.

No man is an island; however, if one cannot walk on their own, then what meaning is there to living?

“Iarumas-sama. If they ask something of you, please answer them.”

“As long as I can do it in my own way.”

“Yes, that’s quite all right.”

Sister Ainiikki gave a sage nod, and the corners of her mouth turned up. It seemed that she was satisfied. The sermon was probably at an end.

“Still, though,” she said. “Garbage-sama’s sword...broke, did it?”

Iarumas nodded. “A broadsword was only ever going to be able to take her so far. Perhaps it was time for a change anyway.”

“A shame. That nameless blade could have been deemed a Dragon Slayer,” Ainiikki murmured, letting out a sigh. “However...it struck down a dragon, so I am sure that sword was able to live its best life.”

For person and sword alike, a death lamented was a sign of a life well lived. Trading blows with a dragon had no doubt hastened the sword’s end, but a diminishing life span was part of life.

Garbage’s weapon had done its duty, remaining true to its master until the very end.

Ainiikki made the sign of the cross with her fingers, praying that the now-late broadsword be allowed into the City of God. She beseeched Kadorto to allow Iarumas and his party the same.

The man being prayed over quietly let her finish before he spoke up again.

“But, well, she can’t go adventuring without a weapon.”

“So she went to Catlob-sama’s shop?” asked Sister Ainiikki.

"With Raraja and Berkana tag along, yes," larumas confirmed with a nod. "There has to be something for her there."

"A substitute, at least."

"Yeah."

It's not easy, is it? Sister Ainikki's beautiful eyebrows sloped downward in a pensive look. There was a saying—a master does not choose his weapon. However, there had to be limits to how far that went.

The underground dungeon was the domain of myths and legends that transcended human knowledge. Even a famous blade from the outside world was no more than "a sword" once it entered that place. If adventurers were to oppose monsters of legend, then their weapons had to likewise be legendary. To walk the dungeon relying only on one's body would be an act of arrogance...or of something else. One could not be picky when it came to the things that helped during an adventure.

But nonetheless...

Even if one couldn't be picky, the availability of something helpful was another matter.

What weapon would be suitable for Garbage? Suitable for a girl who had slain a dragon, and for a girl whose palms still remembered the weight of the blade she had lost?

Living a better life. Dying a better death. These things were irreplaceable.

It would be nice if Catlob's shelves happened to carry a blade equal to the one she'd lost, but...

"Regardless, what she needs is a weapon," larumas said, speaking in an unemotional tone. "This may be an extreme argument, but there are cases where armor is meaningless."

Ainikki listened while immersed in the sea of her thoughts. The way she saw it, for this man, equipment was simply equipment—no more than that. If larumas had ever developed an attachment to anything, it was to adventuring, and that alone.

“And as we venture deeper and the enemies grow harder, we, too, will become hardened.”

“Do you not mean stronger, instead of harder? Well, not that it matters.”

Ainikki let larumas’s nonsense pass with a sigh.

Honestly, now...

Whenever she thought he might be getting better, he would go and behave the same as ever. And yet, there were parts of him that had indeed changed. This duality was what made living hard, fascinating, and full of happiness.

We move forward one step at a time.

She had to lead larumas until he was able to meet his final death.

“Whatever it takes,” Sister Ainikki whispered, reaffirming her mission. Then, louder, she said, “We must all find our weapons with our own two hands.”

Let us pray to God that the redheaded girl can seize hers.

§

“Arooo!!!”

Garbage yelped and discarded the sword, a look of utter disgust on her face.

“Picky, aren’t we?” Catlob growled, glancing at the sword on the counter with unseeing eyes. “That’s a Blade Cusinart, I’ll have you know.”

Then it must be a pretty famous weapon, right?

In the low light of the shop, Raraja stared at the aged sword. Yes, he could see it was a fine piece of craftsmanship. Oddly shaped though it was, the blade had been honed to a sharp edge. But there were any number of similar blades. After all, this was Catlob’s shop.

There was, however, one thing he didn’t understand.

Raraja lightly nudged Berkanan’s waist with his elbow—her ribs were too high—and he asked her, “Who or what is a Cusinart?”

“Erm,” Berkanan whispered, shrinking herself down as much as she could. “What I heard is, uh...Cusinart was an amazing smith from long ago... But,

well..."

"That is not precisely true."

Berkanan squeaked a little as the blind elf corrected her. Her reaction was much like that of a mischievous child who had been caught in the act, but Catlob didn't mind.

"There are some who say Cusinart is the name of a blacksmith, a clan, or even a workshop. However, the only thing we can say for *certain* is that the name is ancient."

This inscrutable shopkeeper always became quite eloquent when it came to the topic of equipment—especially of the ancient variety.

He's just like Iarumas, Raraja thought as he cast a dubious glance toward the blind elf. "So you don't know?"

"There are so many works that bear the name, and all of them are masterful blades, but no two are designed the same way."

Behold. Mr. Catlob picked up the blade that Garbage had just cast aside. At first glance, it appeared to be an ordinary sword, but oddly, the blade was divided at the tip, as if it were wearing a crown. Even Raraja could identify that feature as something that separated this blade from all others.

"Take this, for instance." Catlob gripped the handle and squeezed, letting out a light grunt.

"Woof!"

The blade suddenly spun into motion with a high-pitched whirr. Garbage scowled intensely.

Berkanan couldn't help herself, and she blurted out, "What even *is* that thing?" And who could blame her for wondering? Raraja couldn't believe his eyes either.

The blade was spinning with enough momentum to shred anything it touched. The whole thing seemed like a vicious joke.

But Catlob was entirely serious when he replied, "This is the Blade Cusinart, feared by many fighters."

Yeah, I bet they're afraid of it. Raraja imagined a knight wielding this spinning sword to fight a massive monster. Yes, the blade would surely slice and dice the enemy, but... *Er, yeah, I dunno about that thing.*

"Can we have something *sane*?" asked Raraja.

Catlob scoffed. "You fool. This is a proper weapon."

"If you don't mind me saying so, um..." Berkana looked from the Dragon Slayer at her hip to Garbage, who was glaring at the spinning blade.

"Maybe one that doesn't spin would be better...?"

§

"Woooof..."

Garbage let out a dissatisfied bark as she glanced over her shoulder at the sword now strapped to her back.

Ultimately, she had chosen a Sword Cusinart. This piece by the legendary smith was a single-edged sword, sharp as a razor. But there was something more important about it—the blade didn't spin.

As their group walked the streets of Scale, Raraja couldn't help but gripe at the girl. "You're so picky..."

Garbage had been presented with all of those incredible weapons, and yet she'd still managed to come away dissatisfied. It was like she thought that none of them could measure up to her old broadsword.

"Well, she's the one who has to use it..." whispered Berkana, who was stooping just a little. Raraja was to her left, and on her hip hung the Dragon Slayer in its sheath. Berkana stroked it with her large palm. "I think...I kind of understand how she feels."

"I'm not saying I don't get it," Raraja grumbled. "Just that she's being picky."

"Well, yeah... Yeah."

It wasn't as though Raraja was a master of his craft who could be indifferent to his own tools. He was only able to stand among the best because he had carefully selected his equipment—or at least, he was finally in a place where he

could actually choose which tools he used. That fact made him happier than anything.

A new knife. Lock-picking tools. The map bag given to him by Larumas. They all made his heart dance.

Even if I resent it.

He wanted to stop acting childishly when being gifted such things. Stop acting so overjoyed. And yes, he knew that was also being picky about his tools, just as Garbage was about her sword.

Raraja tried to look forward and not dwell on his past situation. His mind wandered as he trailed behind the redhead girl. She strode forward without hesitation while he and Berkana followed.

It's like we're her minions... No, Raraja corrected himself, just me.

The hero who slew the dragon—the leftovers that not even a dragon would eat.

The way people looked at Garbage had changed. No longer was she a filthy slave girl, but a *real* adventurer. They spoke of her in hushed voices, gossiping about what she'd accomplished.

It was the same for Berkana. The overgrown girl had become the mage who wielded the Dragon Slayer. However, she still timidly shrunk into herself any time someone referred to her as the Dragon Slayer. Not that she could hide like that, of course. And ducking behind Raraja was an exercise in futility.

As for how the boy felt about being used as a shield...

What am I? Her thief companion?

In the legends and ballads about heroes, it was rare to see the thief who accompanied the hero portrayed in a positive light. For whatever reason, Raraja was amused to see himself in that position now. The emaciated brat who'd run away from his hometown was now living large, even if he wasn't all that wealthy.

“Yap! Yap!”

Garbage barked repeatedly, leaving him no more time to think. *Hurry up, she*

was saying. The message came across without the need for words.

I know. Raraja picked up the pace, and Berkana lumbered along behind them.

“So, um, tell me...”

Even in the crowded streets, it was easy to recognize Berkana’s voice when it floated down from above him. He looked up, past her ample bosom, to her golden eyes, which blinked repeatedly as if trying to hide themselves.

“Are you...looking for someone, Raraja-kun?”

“Huh?”

“In the dungeon...?”

“Ooh...”

Ah, yeah. I never did tell her, huh?

Well, they were all like that. He didn’t know Larumas’s origins. Didn’t know Garbage’s past. And he knew basically nothing about Berkana either. She’d come straight out of the countryside in the east, entered the dungeon, and then was killed by the dragon.

That was all he knew—yet that story wasn’t enough to explain everything about her.

When she dies, turns to ash, and is lost—and when the same thing eventually happens to me—I want there to be something left behind. Even if it’s not enough to fully explain our stories.

Raraja’s eyes narrowed as he gazed at the sword on Garbage’s back.

“Hey. I told you about how I used to be in another party, right?”

“Oh, yeah.” Berkana nodded, her head bobbing up and down in big swings—although to her, the gesture seemed rather small. Then, as if recalling an important detail, she added, “In the stables.”

“They weren’t exactly the most good-natured of folks.”

“So their alignment was evil...” murmured Berkana. “Is that it?”

“Well... Maybe.”

Raraja demurred on that point. At the end of the day, good or evil alignment simply meant whether you put others first, or yourself. True evil was like offering to help an old woman carry her bags, then deserting her in the middle of the street.

But as to where his former clan’s alignment fell, Raraja had no answer.

“While I was with them, one of us...” Raraja paused for a moment, hesitating. “One of us died.”

Another pause. “Right,” said Berkana.

“They left her body to rot.”

That’s why he was searching for her...

When Raraja told her this, Berkana looked like she really wanted to respond. She opened and closed her mouth a number of times, repeatedly swallowing her words. Finally, she mumbled, “I hope you find her, then.”

“Yeah.”

Strangely, the conversation cut off right there. Berkana was silent, and that left Raraja with no reason to say any more.

After some time, Berkana suddenly started walking faster, surging ahead of the boy. Her braided hair swayed with her body as she moved forward—to stand beside Garbage.

“Arf...”

The girl gave her a look that said, *What?* Berkana bent down, bringing her face closer to Garbage’s.

“Garbage-chan, maybe we’ll find a different sword for you in the dungeon.”

“Grrrr...”

“Yeah... So let’s look together, okay? I’ll help...”

“Arf.”

Raraja didn’t know if they’d actually managed to have a proper conversation,

but he didn't mind seeing the two of them like this—Garbage looking up, Berkana crouching down.

The dungeon's treasures called to them. Perhaps they could even find a weapon like Garbage's old broadsword. Their party had slain a red dragon. So how was searching for a corpse—or a sword—a big deal?

Maybe I should ask High Priest Tuck for advice.

Raraja still felt a little hesitant about striking up a conversation with Sezmar and the All-Stars, but their priest seemed like the type to hear him out.

The boy felt his perspective shift somewhat. His footsteps got lighter, and he chased after the two girls.

§

"Hurry up and do it already."

"Shut up. I know... Okay?"

The girl's fingers ached. She picked up the treasure she'd dropped when the man had impatiently shoved the back of her head.

It was awfully cold.

They were on the first floor of the dungeon, and many adventurers were gathered there. It was almost like a small town...but it was still the dungeon. The floors and walls were made of stone.

Laying down a paltry blanket wasn't enough to keep the cold from seeping into the girl's body, invading every pore. How terribly she longed for the warm *burrows* of her hometown. Were her parents enjoying teatime around now? This place—the dungeon—was not fit for habitation. Nonetheless, there was no other place left for her.

The girl... She squinted as hard as she could with her lone cloudy eye, and her fingers crawled across the treasure she held.

Her dead eye, gouged by a crossbow bolt, was bandaged. The body beneath her rag-like clothes was not in much better shape. If she were to carelessly touch a cursed item, its curse would no doubt eat away at her body. God's all-powerful miracles were not bestowed on all people equally.

It's so cold...

Her many aching wounds should have felt hot, but a chill had settled deep into her bowels. This was the feeling of death, and she knew it well—from personal experience. The priests at the Temple of Cant apparently said that death was to be *celebrated*. She couldn't see it that way.

Oh, but...

If she died, would her wounds go away? Would her curse?

Each time she heard that tempting whisper in the back of her head, the girl gritted her teeth and bit her lip. That said, any rebellious spirit she'd once possessed had long since broken.

She touched the treasure sword—yes, it was a sword—lovingly, tenderly, as though she were stroking someone's manhood. She'd touched so many that she was sick of it. But she *was* used to this. All the little cuts they'd given her ached terribly.

“Sorry,” the girl said in a weak voice. “This isn’t a Sword Cusinart.”

A sudden blow struck the girl’s head. Her mind went blank before it could register the pain, and she fell to the stone tiles, her neck at a dangerous angle.

The dull sound of forehead impacting stone—her skull rattled, and her consciousness with it.

After that came a searing pain on her cheek.

“It...’s...no...t...my...fau...lt...”

Her tongue tripped over itself. She couldn’t speak properly. It was like the time he’d twisted a wine bottle inside of her.

“No, it *is* your fault,” the man sneered. “It’s your fault that I’m in a bad mood.”

There was a wet sound as he spat on the girl—on the bandage that covered her ruptured eye. She hated that, even more than if he’d spat on her face. It felt like the spittle would seep through the bandage, violating her body through her socket.

Although, in her current state, that seemed like a small thing to complain about.

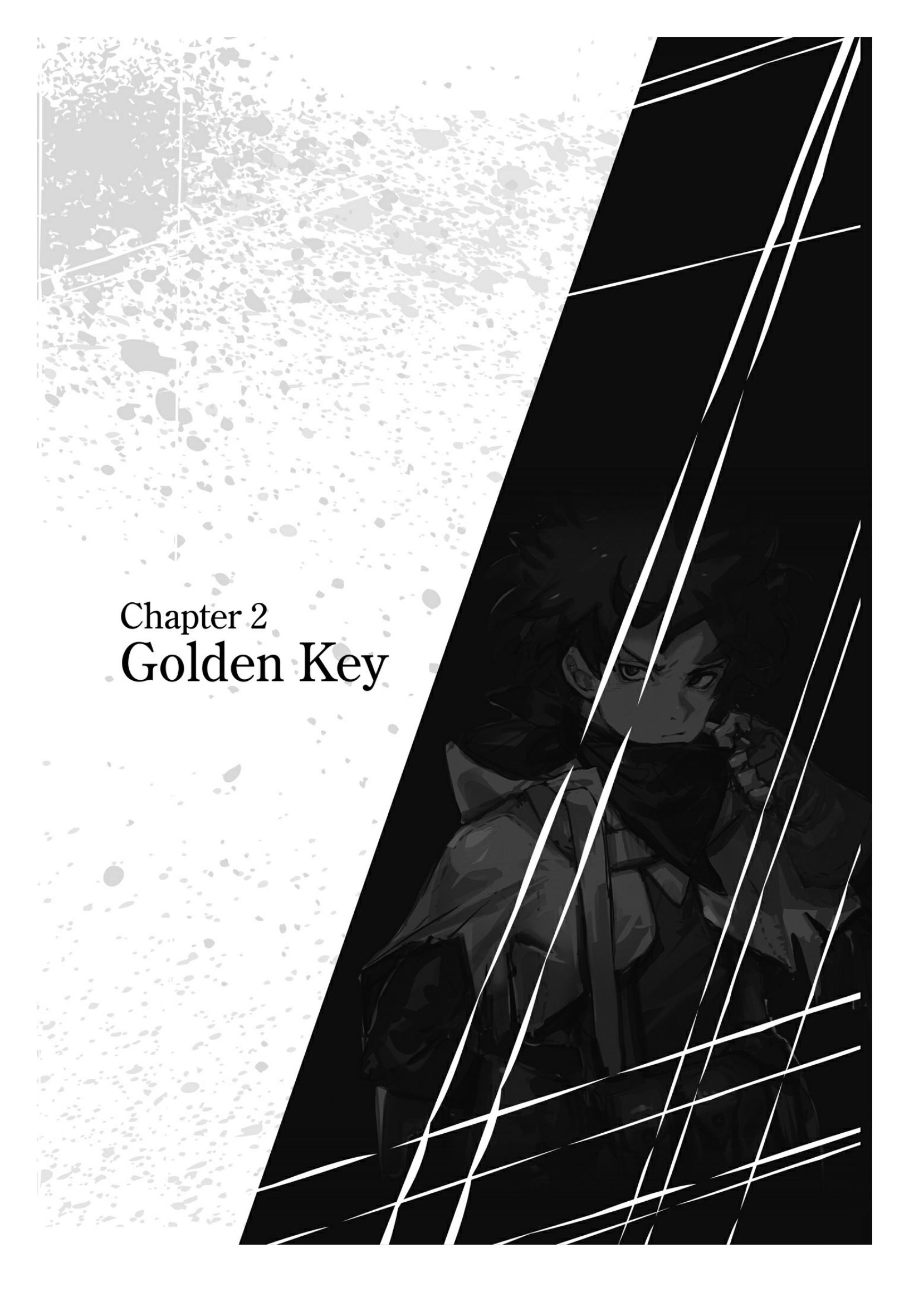
“Ngh, ah...”

The man’s boot dug into her face as she tried to get up. Like a dying insect, pinned and vivisected, she sluggishly thrashed her arms and legs. Her movements were the convulsions of a sick person. The only thing she could move freely was her remaining eye.

“Ugh, I can’t stand that brat...”

That was when the rhea girl saw it. With her one, muddied eye.

There, walking with a black-clad man and two girls, was the boy.



Chapter 2

Golden Key

"Hey, Raraja."

The voice of a scoundrel called out to Raraja while the boy was busy scarfing down gruel in the tavern.

Iarumas, Garbage, and Berkana were nowhere to be seen. Though it wasn't as if they hung around together all the time. Raraja didn't know what the monster's leftovers and the mage girl did on their days off. He could, however, imagine Iarumas sitting in some corner of the tavern the entire time...

Anyway, it would be unfair to say that Raraja's guard was down because he'd been caught alone like this. No, if he was to be faulted for anything, it was forgetting the possibility that his past might catch up with him.

"Wha..." Raraja almost spoke politely, but then he swallowed any pleasantness. "Whaddaya want?"

In front of him stood a familiar form—a massive fighter, his crossed arms rippling with bearlike muscles. Though this man had only spoken to Raraja on a few occasions, he'd hit him more times than the boy could remember.

"Huh. Talking to your clan head like that? You think you're a real big shot dragon slayer now, don't ya? Is that it, Raraja-*san*?"

The man's name was Goerz. In another life, one where the dungeon didn't exist, this man with the greatsword slung over his back would probably have been the head of a band of brigands. Fortunately for the world at large, Goerz had decided to make adventuring his occupation. Instead of killing and robbing innocent people, he targeted the monsters of the dungeon—as well as foolish adventurers who'd yet to make a name for themselves.

Raraja felt himself tense up, protests rising in his throat, but he resisted. This reaction was nothing more than a conditioned response. In his head, he knew that this loser wasn't so scary...not compared to a dragon.

Raraja never imagined that anyone was looking for him. He had assumed that he'd been forgotten—just another insignificant, stupid brat.

Forgotten... Maybe Raraja had felt relieved by that. Had he become too relaxed? The boy hadn't been expecting this man to appear before him with a

smile that was more like a beast baring its fangs.

Goerz sat down across from Raraja. The chair screeched in protest under the weight of his thick muscles and heavy equipment.

"I don't think you've got any business with me," Raraja snarled with all the attitude he could muster.

"Well, well, that sure was fast. Could learn a thing or two from you, Raraja-san."

This guy creeps me out.

That was Raraja's first concrete thought on the matter. He would understand if this guy had come here to pick a fight, to extract his pound of flesh as payment for how Raraja had ended things. And if Goerz were here to patch things up, hoping to turn a profit, Raraja would understand that too.

But, none of those seemed to be the case. His voice—that sneering tone, his malice readily apparent—could only mean one thing.

"What're you plotting?" asked Raraja.

Without realizing it, he tensed his legs under the table. His eyes raced around the tavern. Was he surrounded? He searched for the enemies' positions, just as he would whenever entering a burial chamber in the dungeon.

There was an unwritten rule against adventurers fighting each other on the surface. But at the same time, that which went unnoticed would go unpunished.

Obviously, Raraja wasn't about to raise a fuss over the beating his clan had given him just the other day. That kind of violence happened all the time in Scale. If anything, perhaps he ought to have been *grateful* that they hadn't killed him...though admitting that was difficult.

"Plotting?" Goerz scoffed. "You make it sound so sinister. We adventurers gotta look out for one another, right?"

"If you had a problem with my leaving the clan, then you shouldn't've chased me out."

"I wouldn't have if I'd known you were capable of killing a dragon. I regret it,

okay? Never thought you'd get in with larumas..."

Is Goerz here alone? Even if he is, he's still the most dangerous of the lot.

It was wrong to think of Goerz as a mere thug—the leader of some highwaymen or something like that. No, the simple fact was that he'd managed to bring together the sort of “evil” adventurers who acted not out of the goodness of their hearts, but out of pure self-interest. And that arrangement was only possible because his followers all thought it would be incredibly risky to try attacking Goerz and taking over the group for themselves.

But ultimately, Goerz was weaker than a dragon. There wasn't any need to be afraid. Raraja told himself this, but in the back of his mind, the boy knew that Goerz could kill him with one strike. The man would only need to swing that greatsword once, unconcerned with what anyone might think. Then Raraja would be dead.

Or would I?

It would be a battle of focus (Hit Points). Raraja thought about it. He would either survive by a hair's breadth, or he'd die.

That was why it frayed Raraja's nerves whenever the man waved his big hands around.

“You've got the corpse hauler, the monster's leftovers, and the big girl. At best, you're just the guy who carries their bags, right?”

Raraja said nothing. He couldn't suppress the look of intense irritation in his eyes, even though he knew Goerz was just trying to get a cheap rise out of him.

“Don't glare like that. It's just a joke.”

Raraja's better judgment advised him to let the guy run his mouth...but his emotions were screaming at him to slam a fist into Goerz's face. Why should Raraja just have to sit there and take it in silence? His spoon had long since ceased carrying gruel to his mouth.

“So,” Raraja said, “tell me what you want already.”

“Oh, nothing much. Just got a favor to ask, Raraja-san.”

The boy said nothing and just kept glaring.

"It'd be a shame to waste someone like you again—someone capable," Goerz said. "I'm thinking of testing our people. To pick out the best of 'em, y'know?"

"You can do whatever you like..."

Goerz ignored Raraja's comment. "You know the Key of Gold?" He rubbed his palms—thick as iron plates—together with a grin. "It's a treasure on the second floor, you see. Funny enough, even once someone takes it...the Key of Gold shows right back up again."

"Same as any other treasure, right?"

"Thing about this one, though," Goerz explained, "is that it always appears in the same location."

"Hmm," Raraja mumbled. "If that's true..."

The boy would be lying if he said he wasn't interested. Still, he regretted having listened to Goerz even for a moment.

"We'll send the rookies to go get it," said Goerz. "That's the test—whether they can do it or not. Works as sort of a weed-out filter."

Goerz's eyes narrowed as he looked at Raraja, the same way an angler would peer at a fish on a line.

"And, to give it a test run... Think you could go and get the Key of Gold for me? By yourself, Raraja-*sensei*."

The boy was speechless. There wasn't any reason to cooperate. Even without knowing the details, it was clear that whatever Goerz was up to, it was no good. But if Raraja were to claim that he wasn't interested in this unknown treasure...he'd be lying to himself. Garbage just broke her broadsword. Berkanan was a new party member. And though, neither Iarumas nor Sister Aine were rushing Raraja to pay them back, being in debt wasn't a good look.

More than any of that, though... Wouldn't this be a chance to really shock the man in front of him, as well as the members of his old clan?

The allure of the proposal tugged at Raraja's heart. He let out a groan, then paused for a long while. Finally, he said, "There's nothing in it for me, is there?"

"You're searching for that rhea girl, right?" Goerz tugged on the fishing rod.

“You give me the treasure, and I’ll tell you about her.”

§

“And so you accepted the offer.”

“Yes...”

In the end, Raraja reported his unsavory encounter to larumas the next time the party went exploring. There was no way to know if Raraja explained things only a few hours later or the following day; the dungeon blurred any sense of time. How long had they been delving through this endless series of stone walls, stone-tiled floors, and stone burial chambers?

More than long enough for the boy to relax—more than long enough for him to let it slip away as they took a break from exploring.

He’s loosening up. larumas didn’t say whether it was a good thing or a bad thing. He simply accepted it as a fact.

“Woof!”

“W-Wahh...!”

larumas’s gaze was on the two girls who were currently facing down a gang of spore-like balls that floated in the air.

“Arf?!”

Garbage seemed constantly dissatisfied with the way the Sword Cusinart felt. Either it was too light or too sharp. The new blade was thinner than her old one, and whenever she tried to swing her sword, it was almost as if the sword was swinging her instead.

By larumas’s estimation, she was probably putting too much momentum behind her strikes. And of course, it would make sense if she was—she’d never been formally trained in swordplay.

But what good would lessons in proper swordsmanship be against the monsters of the dungeon? Learning to fight in the dungeon, against its monsters, was something that could only be learned through practical study.

That was why larumas wouldn’t teach Berkana either.

“I-I can’t...do this...anymore...!!!” Berkanaan shouted desperately as she swung her blade. The way her flesh jiggled around as she swung the Dragon Slayer was nothing short of ridiculous. Nonetheless, in order to survive, she would have to build on lots of experiences like this one.

For now, the first thing she needed to do was build her stamina and perseverance—her focus (Hit Points).

After all, fuzzballs are a real pain to deal with.

But they made a fine replacement for straw dummies. Although these monsters floated in the air, they had no abilities beyond increasing their numbers.

There was no better opponent for a fighter unused to her sword—or for a mage who wasn’t good with one.

Even as Berkanaan whined, an endless supply of the fluffy monstrosities continued to pop up from nowhere in particular.

“It won’t end until you wipe them all out.”

“Wahhhhhh...!” Berkanaan cried out.

“Hisssssss!!!”

As he watched an irritated Garbage swing her sword around, Iarumas fought back a bored yawn. Raraja let out a groan.

“Hey,” he said, turning to Iarumas. “You think I can do it?”

“Hm?”

“Alone, I mean...”

“It depends on your objective.” Iarumas answered an indistinct question with an indistinct answer.

There was nothing for Raraja to do until the fuzzball battle was over. But the boy had been dwelling on his trepidation for so long that now his head was likely swirling. Iarumas didn’t mind indulging any questions the boy chose to ask.

“If you open every burial chamber, fight all the monsters, and open every

chest, then this is how you'll end up." Larumas gave the corpse bag at his feet a light kick.

Today's haul: six dead adventurers. Either they'd let their guards down because they were on a shallow level, or they'd been caught in explosions. Larumas's party would carry them back two at a time—three trips. It was a pain, but there was no avoiding it. If the job was easy, they wouldn't be getting paid for the inconvenience of collecting corpses.

"But if you avoid burial chambers, dodge the traps, stay away from monsters, and head straight for your target..."

"Then I can pull it off, huh?"

"Nothing is absolutely guaranteed, though."

In his time adventuring, Larumas had never known any certainty. If the first and second levels of the dungeon were places where a person could feel safe walking alone, they would be safer than the town at night.

"Wait... You're not gonna tell me whether I should do it or not?" Raraja asked. It was a somewhat sulky question—the boy was looking to see how Larumas would respond.

"It's not my place to decide," Larumas answered. "But without a thief, we can't open chests. So that would be a pain."

"Would I be putting you out if I died?"

"It would be a pain," Larumas repeated. Finding a new thief—one with suitable skills, alignment, and thinking—would prove a hassle. So, with a low laugh, Larumas added, "Don't worry. I'll collect your corpse."

The boy chuckled. "That's not reassuring..."

"Raraja...-kun! We're done...!"

His head snapped up as Berkana called out to him. Her voice sounded exhausted. Drenched with sweat as she was, she almost appeared to be crying.

They must have really gone all out to exterminate the fuzzballs.

Garbage, meanwhile, stood next to the treasure chest. "Yap!" she barked

noisily.

"If you don't hurry, she'll kick it again," muttered larumas.

"She'll kick it either way, the idiot."

"You have a point there."

With light steps, Raraja ran over to the girls—to the treasure chest.

What followed were the sounds of lock picking, of Garbage's barks, Raraja's insults, and Berkanan's hurried intercessions.

It was the same as ever—an ordinary scene for their party.

"The Key of Gold, though, huh?" As he watched them, larumas stroked his chin. There was one thing about the story that concerned him. "Was that item ever such a big deal?"

§

Standing at the entrance to the dungeon, Berkanan did her best to hide her timidity. She peered down at Raraja and hesitantly asked, "Are you going to be okay?"

In her mind, she was leaning just slightly to glance at the boy; in reality, she slowly bent down, quite far indeed, so that her head was next to his.

This drew the stares of the other adventurers near the entrance. Their eyes felt like knives stabbing into her.

"Yeah," Raraja replied sharply.

Berkanan's eyes wandered, uncertain. *Maybe that was the wrong way to ask him...* Her question almost made it sound like she didn't believe he could make it alone. This wasn't the case, though—Raraja was her senior in the party and the adventurer she trusted the most.

"Well, larumas gave me his approval," said Raraja. "All I'm doing is taking a walk down to the second level. I'll manage somehow."

"Yeah..."

"But if I do screw up..." The boy paused for a moment. "I'm counting on you."

“R-Right... I’ll definitely come find you...!”

Raraja gave a dry laugh. “Now there’s an unsettling thought.”

That wasn’t a good reaction. Berkana shrank into herself as much as her massive body would allow. Obviously, part of her trepidation was because she was timid by nature, but there was more to it than that.

Am I worried...?

Yes, perhaps she was. Walking the dungeon alone was not a sane thing to do, though it was easy to think otherwise after watching larumas. Not even members of the All-Stars would venture underground alone.

An uneasy sensation flooded her chest.

Thinking back...this apprehension had been there ever since she’d heard that Raraja would be delving into the dungeon for his old clan. Could she be feeling this way because she had never adventured without him before?

When she thought of it that way, Berkana realized that her negative emotions were all about *her*, not Raraja. She felt a little disappointed in herself. It wasn’t how she should be acting in front of a boy who would soon be heading into danger.

“A-Anyway, I’ll... I’ll be cheering for you, Raraja-kun.”

The boy chuckled. “Yeah, that sounds much better.”

She let out a sigh of relief—once she’d tamped down her own uneasiness, she’d been able to pull a grin out of Raraja.

Berkana looked down at the bag she always carried and quickly thrust her hand inside. The first thing she pulled out was a small bundle—at least, *small* from Berkana’s perspective.

“Erm, here...” she said. “I packed a meal for you. From Durga’s Tavern.”

Raraja took the bundle from her. “Hey, that’s great.”

“This waterskin has watered-down tea in it...and this one’s soup.”

“Yeah, I guess you don’t drink alcohol. Okay.”

“Eat the soup early, okay? Oh, and...here’s a recovery potion. And one for

paralysis.”

“You’re sure you wanna give me all that?”

“Yeah.” Berkanan nodded. “I did say I’d be cheering for you. Ah, right, and also...”

“There’s *still* more?”

“Heh heh...” Berkanan grinned.

The bag seemed small relative to her body, but in absolute terms, it was rather large. *“Your bag will hold anything, Berka,”* her grandmother had once told her with a fond smile. For the longest time, Berkanan had believed that the bag her grandmother had given her was magical.

Raraja blinked in surprise. Delighted by his reaction, Berkanan puffed her chest out a little. She must have looked awfully proud to the people nearby.

“Here’s a Scroll of KATINO and a Scroll of HALITO,” Berkanan said, handing them over. “I did my best to copy them for you.”

She’d asked Iarumas how to prepare the scrolls and then spent a lot of money doing so. The potions had cost a pretty penny too, but these scrolls were on another level. Altogether, a thousand gold. It was a good thing she’d still had money left over from slaying the dragon—she could thank her frugal nature for that. The experience had taught her why, despite there being many mages in Scale, almost none of them crafted scrolls. The juice just wasn’t worth the squeeze—though, in Berkanan’s case, she felt like it had been.

“You’re sure?” Raraja asked again.

“Yeah,” Berkanan replied, nodding once more. “I know you have to delve into the dungeon alone, but they never said you couldn’t get help before you leave.”

Raraja was speechless.

“Oh, um, er... Should I...not have?” Berkanan shrank into herself again, deflating like a balloon.

Raraja stared at all the things she’d given him. He shook his head slightly.

“No, I was just surprised... Thanks. Berka—Berkanan.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Just Berka would have been fine, she thought, but she just couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud.

“Oh, and one more thing...”

To cover her awkwardness, Berkanan dug around in the bottom of her bag. This time, she produced a small leather pouch, the contents of which even she didn’t know.

“Iarumas says it’s a parting gift for you.”

Raraja scowled. “From him? Sounds sketchy.”

“Really?” Berkanan cocked her head to the side. “I don’t think so...”

“You’re going to get scammed one of these days...” Raraja said. Then, without hesitation, he opened the oddly light bag. He turned it over and shook it into the palm of his hand.

Out fell a single gold coin and a spool of fishing line.

“That jerk...” Raraja frowned. He clenched the coin and line in his hand and wound his arm back to throw them, but ultimately, he slipped them into his pocket instead.

“Tell him he should’ve at least given me a Ring of Jewels.”

“Huh? M-Me?” Berkanan blinked. “Tell him yourself, Raraja-kun.”

“Aah...” Raraja looked up at the leaden sky of Scale and let out a great sigh. “Yeah. I’ll do that. Change my message to, ‘I’ll remember this.’”

“Okay, got it.”

That’s much better. Raraja should say it himself once he gets back.

A smile naturally came to Berkanan’s lips as she imagined it. Raraja coming back was inestimably better than the alternative—finding his remains, stuffing them in a sack, and hauling them out from the dungeon.

When they were done, Raraja hefted his luggage onto his back, struggling just a little under the new additional weight. Berkanan awkwardly helped him, and after some time, they were able to sort things out enough that he could

manage it all.

It was finally time for Raraja to step into the dungeon. Berkana took a deep breath. She'd been thinking all morning about what she should say, and she'd finally decided.

"Give it your best shot..."

"Yeah."

Raraja offered that single parting word and waved his hand. Then, as casually as if he were going out for a stroll, he disappeared into the darkness of the dungeon.

Berkana watched him until he was completely out of sight. And even once he was gone, she just kept standing there.

§

"That jerk..."

Raraja hurried through the corner of the first floor where adventurers tended to gather. There were generally two types of people who congregated here: those who wanted to team up with adventurers of different alignments and those who made their living off of healing and identification.

Raraja had no business with such people—frankly, he didn't even spare them a glance as he passed by. He was already happily preoccupied with his own adventure, even if the goal irked him.

Things were so different now than they'd been in the past. That fact spurred his feet on, speeding him away from that place. Yet despite his enthusiasm, he was still grumbling about the fishing line and golden coin in his hands.

Yes—the coin and line in his *hands*. Not the set in his pockets.

Raraja felt like Iarumas had seen right through him, and that was greatly upsetting.

"The set that guy gave me is just a backup. Backup..." Raraja grumbled as if making excuses.

He threw the gold coin, which was already tied to the fishing line, out onto

the floor up ahead. The coin rolled and bounced across the stone tiles before falling flat. Raraja reeled in the line.

This place is okay.

He'd been through the first floor of the dungeon many times, so he knew there were no traps.

Well, that's not exactly true. I know there's never been traps here before.

Ever since the recent dragon incident, Raraja didn't trust his maps or his memory of where he'd walked. There was *something* in this dungeon. Something that had the power to change the layout without warning. And as much as he wished otherwise, he had gotten involved with that *something*. A little caution was well merited.

Besides, it was possible that the tiles he'd stepped on *so far* had just so happened to be the safe ones. Perhaps if he'd walked just a little differently, a trap would have opened up beneath him. He didn't want to think about it.

Here in this dungeon, time was never expended, and it was the one attribute he could use infinitely. Life force, spirit, and focus—these could all be reduced to zero, but Raraja could use all the time in the world here, and it would never be wasted.

At least, that's what larumas'd say...

Raraja didn't blindly believe in anything that man taught him. But if the boy thought something larumas did seemed valid, then he would actively emulate that behavior. He'd done the same so long ago, back when he'd been a "chest opener" for that accursed clan. He would avoid doing things that had gotten others killed, and he would imitate the things the group had managed to do without dying. It was like walking in the footsteps of his predecessors. Slowly, Raraja had built up a sense of security that way.

Of course, he had by no means played everything safe.

"If I weren't willing to venture into danger, I wouldn't be able to delve into the dungeon," Raraja told himself.

He stepped forward cautiously into the darkness.

As a matter of fact, this was not, strictly speaking, the *first* time Raraja had entered the dungeon alone. He had come by himself once before with the Demon's Stone in hand, preparing to attack Iarumas and Garbage. Iarumas had commended on the guts that must have taken, but there'd been a simple explanation for it—Raraja's mind had been under the influence of some strange magic. He couldn't remember a thing that'd happened during the whole event. If not for that influence, he would've never been courageous enough to brave the dungeon alone.

But...

That was before. I've got real guts now.

Indeed, Raraja was now alone, carefully, *cautiously* walking through the dungeon. If there were some way of measuring a person's ability (level), then his had no doubt gone up.

“The Key of Gold...”

Unfolding the map, Raraja checked his current location—which was on the first floor, of course—and murmured his objective. The words unintentionally slipped from his lips, even without anyone around to hear them.

Had he grown so used to communicating, to exploring in a party of three or four? Or were the words meant to mask his fear? Or was it perhaps that he thought double-checking was useful?

Raraja considered these options for a moment, then dismissed them. *It doesn't matter which is the truth.* Whatever the reason was, he didn't let it bother him. He had more important things on his plate.

“They were saying it was on the second floor...”

His finger traced the route he was to take. Fortunately, he could make it to the stairs that led down to the second floor without passing through any burial chambers.

That was a really big deal.

If he passed through a chamber, he would need to fight its guardians. This, of course, would be dangerous for a lone thief—even if he were only going up

against orcs or bubbly slimes.

"If you must pass through a burial chamber, only visit ones that other adventurers have cleared."

This was one of the few pieces of advice larumas had given Raraja about adventuring solo.

The guardians of a burial chamber wouldn't reappear if they had already been killed that day. It remained unknown whether that was due to the summoning restrictions that controlled the dungeon, or if wandering monsters simply hated the scent of death that lingered around a cleared burial chamber.

Regardless, that was the rule. It was an important thing to know.

With all this in mind, Raraja had a strategy for the first floor. The real problem...was going to be the second floor.

Based on what Goerz had told him, the Key of Gold was inside a burial chamber. And if he wanted to get it out of the treasure chest, then he absolutely *needed* to fight the monsters there.

"I should've had larumas go ahead of me."

With larumas, Garbage, and Berka—Berkanan—they'd manage just fine. Like Berkanan had said, no one had forbidden him from asking for help *before* his solo delve.

Just kidding.

Raraja was well aware that it wasn't possible. Hadn't the client told him? The Key of Gold reappeared over and over. Didn't that mean the monsters guarding it would also reappear?

What would happen if Raraja entered the burial chamber recklessly? Without thinking it through? Assumed that his party had already cleared it out?

Am I overthinking this...?

He'd previously considered the idea that this was all just a trap to kill him. Was that merely paranoia? Well, if his former clan was just picking on him, trying to trip him up, then this situation wouldn't go very far. Probably.

Sure, he'd quit their group. And they wanted to make him pay for it...but not with his life. Probably.

Though, even if they didn't outright *want* to kill him, they definitely wouldn't care if he died.

"Ah, damn it..."

Thoughts swirled inside his head. No answers emerged. He felt as if his mind were lost in a maze.

Or maybe a dungeon.

That stupid joke helped him relax a bit.

Raraja had his hands full with his own adventure, so why did people have to keep bringing trouble into his life like this? He wished he could have just ignored his former clan's proposition—and ignored any guff they tried to give him about his refusal. That would have been best.

"I want to leave this clan as soon as possible, go back home, and look after my parents! You had some reason for becoming an adventurer too, didn't you, Raraja?"

He still remembered her words—her voice.

Raraja took a deep breath. In. Out.

"Go in, get it, and return... That's it. That's all there is to it."

First, he had to make his way down to the second floor. Head for the stairs. Take it one step at a time.

This wasn't complicated.

Raraja steeled his determination and began walking forward.

§

"Damn it!"

However, he soon found a major complication blocking his path, and not just a metaphorical obstacle—a literal door.

After descending to the second floor and proceeding cautiously with the

Creeping Coin, he'd located the corridor that would normally lead to the burial chamber containing the Key of Gold. However, this corridor was blocked by a door.

He pushed on it. Pulled it. Tried to slide it aside. The door wouldn't budge.

Even if his companions had been with him, none of them would have been able to force it open.

Raraja sighed. *This really is a trap, isn't it?*

He'd never heard of something like this. At this point, even the Key of Gold itself was starting to sound dubious. But he couldn't accept defeat. He wouldn't just give up and go home.

The clan wouldn't believe anything Raraja told them. They'd point and laugh.

I've come this far. So I'm going all the way.

Groaning, he pulled the map out of his dragonskin map bag.

He'd covered a fair amount of territory since joining larumas's party with Garbage and Berkanan. Most recently, they'd been focused on training, locating Berkanan's Dragon Slayer, and eliminating the red dragon. However, their ultimate objective, the one they'd entered the dungeon to do, was to find corpses. So, it was common for them to only enter burial chambers that someone else had already cleared.

There were times when they entered other chambers and opened treasure chests, but that was only to search for valuables.

If there was some object that was required for accessing the Key of Gold...

Well, larumas would never go looking for it.

Raraja would have to search the burial chambers he knew. But assuming there would be monsters...

How am I going to cut my way through them?

The boy mulled over the things he'd experienced so far and the things he'd heard from larumas.

Hm. The monsters of the burial chambers...

The dungeon was warped—both metaphorically and literally. According to larumas, the dungeon was made up of nothing but white lines on black. The size of one step, one section, one space—it *changed* for each person. Growing sometimes. Shrinking at other times.

The same went for what was inside the burial chambers. Including the monsters.

“If you absolutely must enter a burial chamber,” larumas had said, *“Run away, close the door, and open it again and again until you encounter an opponent that suits you.”*

The monsters changed so much that it made you wonder whether the dungeon might be connected to different universes.

Or so larumas says...

Raraja had never tried this method for himself. But larumas had said that it would work, so Raraja was planning to give it a shot. And if it turned out that larumas was wrong, Raraja would get to laugh in the man’s face. Either way, the boy would be satisfied.

However, there was one hole in this method. larumas had warned him about it with a slightly grim smile.

“It only works if you get monsters you can run from.”

If Raraja were to open the door to find a red dragon, it would be curtains for him. He didn’t even want to contemplate it.

“All right.”

No one said he had to find the thing on his first trip. If it wasn’t in the burial chambers he challenged today, then he could search different ones tomorrow. After all, time was the one thing he could spend frivolously while exploring.

I see. So that’s how it is...

The boy realized the nature of his situation, came to understand it, and *learned*. If there was such a thing as gaining experience, this was it.

Raraja cautiously walked around the dungeon, throwing the coin and reeling it back in.

§

There was always a suspended moment of tension whenever Garbage kicked in the door of a burial chamber. Unknown beings could always be lurking on the other side.

“Graaawoooo!!!”

With a loud roar, the redhead girl pounced upon the dim shadows of the chamber. Her sword glinted, even in the gloom, seeming to rend both the monsters and the darkness asunder.

“GABBBBBLLLEEE?!?!?!”

Pale skin and pickaxes... A pack of ogres, huh?

Iarumas sighed. Ogres didn’t frighten him. “There are a lot of them. Move up. And remain alert.”

“R-Right!” Berkana answered, sounding flustered. “Got it...!”

As Berkana lumbered forward—in her mind, as nimbly as she could—Iarumas laid his hand on his black staff.

Standing before an ogre, even Berkana’s massive body seemed childlike. The size difference was even greater for Garbage. Nonetheless, the girl let out a doglike growl and swung her sword.

“Arf!”

The blade, crafted by the master smith Cusinart, did not mind the rough treatment in the slightest. It seemed dignified even as it whistled through the air—even as it tore through an ogre’s chest.

However...

“Yap?!”

Garbage’s excess momentum spun her around once, twice, three times more. She stumbled with a resentful bark. The thin blade was light as a feather—it would have allowed a master to slash ten times in the span of a single breath.

But to Garbage, it didn’t seem right. She lowered once more into her fighting stance. And as she did...

“I-I’ve got this...!”

Berkanan slashed desperately at the ogres, trying to support Garbage. The large girl bit her lip. Her face was pale; her eyes were wide with fear. She looked nothing like an adventurer. Her slender arms waved the Dragon Slayer around like it was a stick. She looked almost like a child at play, though her power was on another level entirely.

“ROOOAAARRR!!!”

“E-Eek?!” Berkanan leaped backward with a shriek as another ogre swiped at her from the side with its pickaxe.

Her movements were sluggish—her body swayed in time with them. There was no escaping the impression that her large, voluptuous body gave off. Even so, she managed to maintain her focus. Regardless of what she thought of her current performance, there was no doubt that she had greatly improved since she’d first entered the dungeon—the difference was like night and day.

“Yap!”

And as a result of Berkanan’s clumsy swordplay, Garbage was able to pounce. She swung the blade that wouldn’t behave how she wanted, venting her frustration on her enemies.

That said, no matter how sharp the blade was, she couldn’t shed her opponents’ blood if the sword missed its mark entirely.

The ogres quickly backed away, then roared as they all rushed Garbage at once.

“Ruff!”

“Wh-Whah?! No?! Ahhh?!”

The girl barked like a dog. Berkanan screamed. Flesh was torn. Bones were broken. Blood splattered.

If all you heard were those sounds, you might imagine an entirely different scene, but the girls were putting up a good fight against the gang of ogres.

Iarumas watched it all out of the corner of his eye as he carefully scrutinized the burial chamber.

There's no sign that Raraja's been through here.

Given this incredibly dangerous situation, that was one thing to be grateful for.

Iarumas widened his stance. He glared at the darkness, his alertness spreading out in all directions.

The ogres were not the true danger here.

"Iarumas-san!" Berkana sounded like she was about to cry. "Come on, cast a spell already!"

She was just whining. That's what Iarumas thought at first. He was about to dismiss it, but he reconsidered, shaking his head.

"Ogres sleep well," he advised.

"Huh?! Oh...!" Berkana's face lit up, and her black hair swayed behind her.

Perhaps it was due to her total lack of faith in herself, but her mind was always desperately racing. This meant she was quick on the uptake. Though, of course, Berkana herself was unaware of this.

"Garbage-chan, um, er... I'm counting on you...!"

"Yap!"

Perhaps all that Garbage understood was that the big one was saying something. It didn't matter—this was enough for the girl to infer what she needed to do.

When Berkana slowly moved back, it was Garbage's turn to move forward.

She didn't act out of a sense of altruism, nor was she really thinking about supporting Berkana. No, Garbage moved because she believed she had to do things herself, since everyone else was useless without her.

Garbage brandished the sword that she felt she couldn't rely on and slid it toward an ogre's neck.

"Woof!"

"EEK?!"

Blood flew—but it was a shallow cut. She'd gone too fast. The blade had swept past just a moment too soon. If she'd delayed a beat, the ogre's neck would have been in the prime position for a beheading.

Garbage spun around once more, her feet sliding across the stone tiles as she was unable to control the unexpected extra momentum.

“GRRROA?!?!?!”

The ogre finally moved into the position where it ought to have been, and she somehow managed to deal it a painful blow. Still, Garbage gritted her teeth, dissatisfied with the result. At least she had given Berkana plenty of time.

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

Using the Dragon Slayer in place of a staff, Berkana raised her voice and earnestly chanted the true words. The miasmic air of KATINO took form in the burial chamber, instantly ensnaring the ogres.

“I did it...!”

A mage who couldn't cast KATINO was useless. That seemed prejudicial, but a mage who *could* cast the sleep spell was an immense asset to a party.

After slaying the dragon, Berkana had learned the spell KATINO.

Even if it's the most basic of basics, it's still a huge step forward.

The ogres were no match for Garbage with their minds numbed. Even Berkana could cut down a monster that was just standing there. The girls were merciless, or perhaps desperate, as they went around snuffing out the ogres.

Far from this scene, in the darkness of the dungeon—in between the white lines on black—bloodlust seethed to the surface.

Iarumas crouched, taking a deep breath.

There.

The blade inside his black staff flashed out of its sheath and cleaved through the void.

Not long after, Berkana walked over to Iarumas, sweaty and out of breath.

She didn't look at all like she'd been victorious. "I-I think...you could've...helped out a little... Just saying."

Garbage was in the center of the burial chamber. She swung her sword around in irritation, her nose twitching. She belted out a single bark, and larumas watched her race off into the back of the chamber.

"I was doing my own work," he replied.

"Work?" Berkanaan looked at him, disheartened. "You killed a bunny...?"

larumas's blade was pointed at the small, white beast that now lay dead at their feet.

§

"No treasure chests today."

"Wooooof!"

"Barking won't change things." larumas spoke in a firm tone without a hint of mercy.

Garbage was openly dissatisfied, kicking the chest hard and then resting her foot on it. She snarled, as if demanding he open it, but larumas didn't relent.

"We don't have a thief."

"Arf!"

"No."

"Yap!!!"

Berkanaan squeezed the waterskin she was holding with both hands. *Wh-What should I do...?* she wondered. No ideas came to mind.

Just as the waterskin was about to burst, she finally said, "I-I agree with larumas..."

Garbage whined.

"I...think we should give up on it... Just for today..."

"Aruff..." Garbage voiced her displeasure, kicking the chest one last time before removing her foot from it. Her attitude suggested that this was less of an

“I guess you’re right” bark and more like “I’ll back down this time.”

Regardless, Berkana let out a sigh of relief—the fight between Larumas and Garbage was settled.

If only Raraja-kun were here...

She stayed silent, feeling awfully pathetic for thinking that.

Despite having slain a pile of ogres, Berkana wasn’t happy about their victory in the slightest. Though, if her grandmother back home had known that she’d learned to fight like this, she would have been over the moon. Or perhaps the old woman would have scolded her, would have said that as a mage, she ought to stick to casting spells.

Then again, if she learned Berkana could now cast KATINO, her eyes would widen, and she’d shower her granddaughter with praise.

“You can’t get used to all of *this*?”

“Eek?!”

When Larumas suddenly spoke to her, Berkana nearly dropped her waterskin in surprise, then overcompensated by clutching it tightly.

Garbage sullenly headed toward the door to the next chamber, but Larumas stayed where he was. He upturned his own waterskin, pouring water down his throat. It was as though drinking was something he was simply obligated to do rather than something to refresh himself. Once finished, he prepared to continue exploring.

Berkana watched him for a moment, then hurriedly wet her own throat. The water should have been lukewarm, but it felt cool, invigorating. She let out a contented sigh, and then some words slipped past her lips.

“I think, maybe...I don’t want to get used to adventuring.”

It was only after she’d spoken that Berkana even realized she felt that way.

She fidgeted, her eyes wandering as she tried to gauge Larumas’s response. He was as quiet as ever—not saying anything. He just gazed at Berkana.

She felt awkward and continued fidgeting. “I...um, if there’s a bottom floor to

the dungeon..."

If such a place existed. *If* they could reach there.

If, if, if. A hypothetical. Vague, formless. A future she couldn't even imagine.

But *if* it were truly possible...

"I want us to all go there, together... I think."

Iarumas did not respond. Perhaps he tried to. But Garbage barked out an "Arf!" from the other side of the room. It seemed she'd found either the corridor or a door that led to the next burial chamber.

The man in black was already walking as he pulled out his map with experienced hands.

Iarumas did not answer.

But he didn't say no, right? That was enough for Berkana.

Then, she remembered something and quickly added, "Oh, um. I-I'm happy to have more spells, though... You know?"

With that, Berkana rushed after Iarumas and Garbage.

Now, if Raraja would just come back...it would all be good.

§

Raraja finally saw results three days—well, three *trips*—after he'd begun exploring.

His sense of time was untrustworthy in the dungeon. It might have felt like three days to Raraja, but how many had it really been? It was better to just mentally change the metric he used to measure time. Three trips there—three trips back.

The way Berkana had fussed over him each time he'd returned... It embarrassed him. But he was also grateful for her.

"Hmm... This is just the Key of Silver, huh?"

Raraja held up a small silver key, aged and tarnished. He'd caught an orc cowering alone in one of the burial chambers and stabbed it in the back. That'd

got him the treasure chest which held this tiny key.

Perhaps finding this key had been a waste of effort; perhaps it had been a great success.

“There was a silver door, wasn’t there?”

Definitely a success.

Raraja glanced at the orc that had collapsed in a puddle of its own blood, then pocketed the key and put a hand over his chest.

He wasn’t used to killing humanoid monsters yet...especially if they had no intention of harming him. Though, calling even passive monster encounters “friendly” felt a bit ironic. He didn’t feel particularly guilty about it, nor did he feel excited. He was at some half-hearted point in between—what larumas would call neutral.

I never know what that guy’s talking about.

Was he serious? Was he joking? Had he lost his marbles? He did keep saying that the dungeon looked like nothing but white lines to him.

Raraja felt a chill as he gazed around at the stonework dungeon. Sure, even *he* experienced times during combat when all he saw in the darkness were monsters. It was the same whenever he was opening chests—he would lose sight of everything else around him.

But that was because he was focusing—it was completely different from the world larumas had described.

What was it like for Garbage? Or Berkana...? Or Ainikki?

And how had it looked to that rhea girl?

Raraja said nothing. He just shook his head, dismissing the fruitless questions. He began walking through the darkness of the dungeon again, alone and in silence.

His only companion was the Creeping Coin, thrown forward and slowly reeled back in. It kept him from feeling lonely.

The map, his memory, the scenery before his eyes. After comparing these

against one another, Raraja headed toward an area in the middle of the second floor. He'd discovered a burial chamber there, but he hadn't explored it thus far. There was a very clear reason for that.

"It's silver...but does that really mean that a silver key will open it?"

Raraja stood before a large, ancient-looking silver door. The designs carved into its surface depicted devils emerging from a mist that flowed down from the heavens.

Raraja scowled cynically. *Makes you want to tremble and run away.*

It was always some stupid band of adventurers who would break the seals on stuff like this and unleash devils upon the world. Then, a brave hero would come along and vanquish the evil. Nobody ever remembered the fools from the beginning of the tale.

A hero, huh?

Did people like that really exist? If they did, then the dungeon would've been cleared long ago. And anyway, some guy claiming to be "heaven's chosen one" or whatever wouldn't be worth squat down here in the depths. No, if there really were a brave hero, they would have to appear from within the dungeon itself.

Like, for example, the redhead girl and the black-haired girl who'd slain the dragon.

Well, if anyone could claim to be heroes, it would be the All-Stars, I guess.

If Raraja were to unwittingly unleash a devil, those six would be the most likely to vanquish it. And then Iarumas and Berkana would collect Raraja's corpse. Garbage would come along too.

So really, he didn't have that much to worry about. Was dying once truly *that* big of a deal? Raraja didn't think so. Or, at least, he tried to convince himself of that.

"Let's do this!"

He inserted the silver key. Turned it. The lock clicked. He kicked in the door. Tension gripped the moment.

What's the enemy?!

There were a number of them in the chamber. Raraja shot a quick, sweeping glance around the area.

“Ahhhhhh...”

“Growwwwwwwl...”

His eyes first landed upon some unsettling creatures in the back of the burial chamber. They let out horrible groans as they slowly rose to their feet.

He instantly identified them as zombies—there were four.

Here goes nothing!

But there was something more. He needed to watch his feet.

There they are—creeping cruds. Filthy piles of ooze undulated on the ground, crawling toward Raraja and making disgusting noises.

The creeping cruds and zombies began closing in.

If this is all there is...

He could manage...somehow.

No...

This is bad.

Iarumas had warned him that a zombie's claws and fangs secreted a paralyzing toxin, one that wasn't present in creatures before they became undead.

“It's a bigger nuisance than you'd think,” he'd told the boy, smiling from within the shadow of his dark cloak. *“When you're all alone, becoming paralyzed means certain death—just as certain as getting your head cut off.”*

That was an unsettling thought. Raraja considered fleeing. But he also felt like he might be able to handle it. He hesitated, backed away half a step, and then...

“Screw it!!!”

The boy sprang forward, his dagger flashing through the gloom. His first strike was low, a slash near his feet. The blade shredded one of the writhing puddles

of ooze, and it burst open in an almost explosive splatter.

Raraja felt like it would be easier to watch out for the zombies while he eliminated the creeping cruds on the floor—doing it the other way around would be more difficult. He didn't have any idea whether that assumption was correct though.

“Ahhhhhh...”

“Yikes!”

Zombies reached for him with their outstretched arms—Raraja quickly parried. Unfortunately, there were a lot more of them than there were of him. For every beat of combat, Raraja could only swing his blade once, while the zombies, with their numbers advantage, could attack four times.

He deflected, dodged, evaded, and then...

The last zombie struck—Raraja got scratched. The blood drained from his face. He thought he could feel the wound going numb...but that was just his imagination.

“You rotten—!”

Raraja cursed as he crushed a second creeping crud, but then there were four more attacks from the zombies.

“Waaah?!”

This time, Raraja was able to fully defend himself. He sprang backward, taking a deep breath. He'd managed to defend. To avoid their attacks. To remain relatively unharmed. But he was mentally exhausted. His focus (hit points) was being ground down.

What do I do?

“Ahhhhhh...”

“Ahhhhhh...”

The zombies shambled toward him. And there were still more creeping cruds.

Damn you...

What would larumas do? Or Garbage? Or Berkanan—Berka?

“Hope this works!”

Raraja didn’t hesitate. He sprang forward like before, but this time, he reached for his bag with one hand.

“Screeeee...”

As the zombies closed in, he pulled out an item. His fingers were unskilled with this sort of thing, but he managed to break the seal and unfurl the scroll.

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

Instantly, a miasma shot out of the scroll, slowing the zombies as Raraja watched on.

Guess there’re still some brains in those rotten heads of yours! No, wait—are their heads actually just packed full of mucus? Well, whatever.

“I’d better be thanks...to Berka.”

He wasn’t used to calling her “Berka” to her face. But right now, murmuring it to himself was no trouble at all.

Raraja ignored the addled zombies—they could wait—and quickly dealt with the rest of the creeping cruds.

Humanoid though they were...killing zombies didn’t bother him much. After all, they were already dead.

§

“So this is it, huh?”

All the enemies had been eliminated. Raraja was once again alone in the now quiet burial chamber. He’d succeeded in picking the lock on the chest, and *this* was what he had to show for it.

Raraja wore a vague, inscrutable expression as he gazed at the Statue of Bear. It was indeed a very fierce bear statue. Almost like the person who’d carved it had wanted to say, “I’ve killed a million of ‘em.”

What the hell am I supposed to do with this?

He wanted to clutch his head in his hands. Wanted to scream out loud. What was the dungeon master thinking? He couldn’t imagine what would possess

someone to hide *this* in an isolated burial chamber...and behind a locked door no less.

Raraja just crouched there and groaned for a while. Finally, he sighed in resignation. “If this is what I found, then I guess I’m supposed to take it with me.” That was the only option, so he’d have to do it.

He struggled to stuff the bear statue into his bag. Eventually, he managed it, though one of the bear’s arms stuck out. If he’d known he was going to need to lug this thing around, he would’ve brought a bigger bag.

And if Berkanan were here, I could’ve foisted it off on her. That bag of hers is awfully big.

Raraja considered this as he pulled the map out of his map bag, studied it, and then set off down the path he’d previously traversed. The corridors, the scenery, the map, the traps under his feet—he examined them all, taking each step carefully, heading toward the burial chamber that held the Key of Gold.

Raraja tossed the coin, then reeled it in. He smirked cynically.

There’s no way the rookies could do this...

This way of thinking... It was almost as if he were no longer a rookie himself. After all, he’d fought a red dragon, so he probably wasn’t.

But I dunno.

He didn’t feel ready to call himself experienced—to call himself an expert adventurer.

This was because he knew Iarumas, Ainikki, and the All-Stars. Even Garbage had probably been delving into the dungeon longer than he had. Compared to them, Raraja barely knew anything about this place. He’d only just begun absorbing the barest scraps of knowledge about how to survive here.

But...

I understand more now than she did then.

That rhea girl. Back then, she’d known as much as he had—nothing.

If he were able to meet her again, then maybe...he'd get to put on airs as the more experienced one. When he imagined that, it seemed kind of fun. Perhaps he'd hold on to that pleasant vision for the future—a tale of tomorrow with nothing to back it up.

Raraja was relaxed enough to be aware of how silly it was, but the mental image was enough to put a spring in his step. Before he knew it, he found himself standing in front of the door once again.

He steadied his breathing. The Key of Gold was just through that door. But was the Statue of Bear the key? How would *that* work?

He needn't have wondered. When Raraja put his hand on the door, it opened on its own—he didn't even have to push it. The door had been like a single panel of metal, but at his touch, a seam formed in the middle, and the two half panels silently slid aside.

Raraja gulped, then licked his lips and moved forward.

Dagger in one hand. Posture low. He cast his eyes left and right. No enemies in sight. Cautiously, he advanced.

There was a small burial chamber beyond the door, and at the back of it...

Another large door.

Raraja gently put his hand against it.

He pushed on it. Pulled it. Tried to slide it aside. The door wouldn't budge.

Even if his companions had been with him, none of them would have been able to force it open.

“Again?!”

Ultimately, it would take another three trips. He had to find the Key of Bronze and the Statue of Frog before he could loot the Key of Gold.

§

The exchange was to happen on the first floor of the dungeon. This location had been decided by the other party, but Raraja couldn't have asked for a better place.

This way, no one can complain if things get violent.

Even though this parley was taking the form of an exchange, there was no way the other side hadn't prepared something. Maybe the rhea girl herself. Or, failing that, some clue as to her whereabouts.

Even if whatever they brought turned out to be fake or a trap... Even if Raraja got into an argument with them over it...

Down here, anything goes.

Those were Raraja's thoughts on the matter.

In the world above, there was an unwritten rule against adventurers coming to blows. But not in the dungeon. So, given the spot they'd chosen for the exchange, Raraja could be sure that they were going to try to pull something.

Two can play at that game.

No matter how good his former clan members were at adventuring, they definitely weren't tougher than a red dragon. As long as they didn't decapitate him in a single blow, he figured that he ought to be able to grab the rhea girl by the arm and run for it. He'd reach out to her—call her name. She would bolt away from them, take his hand, and they'd run away.

The rhea girl was like a swift spring breeze. He could see her vividly in his memories. No doubt about it—this girl, who always had her hair tied back in pigtails, would absolutely follow him. And if anything, she would be the one actively looking for their chance to escape. *She'd* be the one to call *his* name.

As long as I take her hand, the rest will work out.

"And that's what this key's for, huh?" Raraja unconsciously touched the weight in his pocket.

The Key of Gold.

It was exactly as its name described. He'd needed two keys and two statues to reach it.

He'd taken out the capybaras guarding the burial chamber, opened the chest, and gotten the key. Nothing dramatic had happened—it had been sitting in a chest just like any other treasure. And because it didn't seem special...it didn't

feel real. Why, despite the weight of the object, did it feel so incredibly light?

Raraja had endlessly touched the key, scrutinized it closely. He'd even gone to his companions for confirmation.

Obviously, Garbage had just barked, but...

"This...is the Key of Gold?"

He recalled the vague, indecipherable expression on Berkana's face as they'd talked about it in Durga's Tavern.

"You're really sure?"

"This is all there was," Raraja told her, pursing his lips. "So it should be the one, right?"

"Well, you could be right about that, but..." Berkana hung her head and shrunk into herself.

Raraja never knew what to do when she got like that. It always felt like he was one wrong word away from making her cry. Frankly, he was scared of what would happen to him if she did burst into tears. He imagined Sarah of the All-Stars—her long ears twitching angrily.

As he tried to figure out what to say to Berkana, he looked in Larumas's direction. Beneath his cloak, the man was chuckling to himself in a soft voice, although it wasn't clear what was so amusing.

"Well, bring it to them and see how it goes," Larumas had previously told him. *"After that, whatever happens happens."*

And so, that's exactly what Raraja was doing.

He walked past the throng of anonymous adventurers who crowded the entrance to the first floor. No one usually thought twice about an adventurer's name and background, but this particular group always seemed especially dubious. These were people who had been unable to find a party, so they made their livings providing their dodgy services as healers, appraisers, or occasionally, as party support. Were these adventurers of good alignment, or

evil? Most were, perhaps, somewhere in the middle, though there was no guarantee that brigands didn't lurk among that crowd.

That's why Raraja made a point of ignoring guys like them.

The boy continued on without a word, advancing through sections of the dungeon, until—

"Hey, you made it."

"Yeah..."

—he encountered a smirking face that he never wanted to see again. Raraja hoped that this would be the last time.

Goerz was standing there with a greatsword strapped to his back, looking as though he was about to go adventuring. He was waiting for Raraja, just like the dubious gang at the dungeon's entrance had been waiting to form a party.

Raraja had just barely managed to keep the resentment out of his voice...or at least, he thought he had. He didn't think he could completely hide his feelings, but he still had to *try* to keep up the appearance of civility.

"How'd it go, Raraja-*sensei*?" Goerz said in a chummy tone.

"If you send newcomers to a place like that, people are going to get killed," Raraja responded sharply. "It was way different from how you described it."

"Oh yeah?" Goerz shrugged. "Well, I did get all my intel from some rumor."

The man snickered. He didn't feel sorry at all. Or perhaps he just didn't care if any newcomers he sent to retrieve the key wound up dead. It was probably a bit of both.

Raraja groaned. He pulled the light-yet-weighty object from his pocket.

"Here it is—the Key of Gold."

"Hmm, so that's it, huh?" In the gloom of the dungeon, the gold glimmered like a twinkling star. Goerz's eyes narrowed, and he let out a very deliberate hum to show how impressed he was with it. "It does look to be the key. But I can't be taking any chances. Let's check and see if it's the real deal."

"What, you want to go all the way to Catlob's place?" Raraja asked.

"We won't take that much of your time, Raraja-sensei..." Goerz turned to look behind him. For the first time, Raraja noticed the figure crouching in the shadows. "Isn't that right?"

"Orlaya...?" Raraja murmured.

The girl had once been like her name—a tiny flower that blossomed in the fields. But what Raraja saw now looked like a writhing maggot that had been uncovered by an overturned rock.

Before him was an emaciated bundle of skin and bones covered in rags—in bandages. It looked like a girl. Her one remaining murky eye turned toward Raraja. The pupil was clouded.

Raraja unconsciously repeated her name. "Orlaya...?"

Everything about the girl was different from his memories, yet for some reason, he'd still made the connection. There was no doubt in his heart, no disbelief—it was her.

"Hand it over already," she croaked.

Instead of responding to her name, she demanded the key from Raraja. Her arm, withered like a dry branch, reached out toward him.

Her hand was extended...

Raraja didn't take it.

With a slight click of her tongue, she seized the Key of Gold like a scavenging vulture. Orlaya narrowed her one eye and immediately began running her fingers over the key.

Raraja immediately recognized what she was doing—identification. High Priest Tuck had let him watch the process countless times before, although there was a difference between how the priest moved and how the girl was moving now. Orlaya's injured fingers brushed the key tenderly, as though she were stroking someone's manhood. Her touch was experienced. It was plain to see that she had done this countless times before.

But even if Raraja could register those observations, understanding them was another matter. A while back, in Catlob's shop, he'd felt a distinct gap forming

between his body and mind. And now, such a rift was once again opening up within him.

“What is this?” the bandaged rhea girl—Orlaya—spat. She looked hatefully at the Key of Gold. “You think you can buy me with this thing?”

“Huh?”

Raraja was speechless. *Buy? Buy what? Her?*

“No. What’re you saying? I never—”

“You’re exchanging the Key of Gold for me, so that’s what it means, right?”

“Well...”

She... She was right. Yes. It was true. But not in *that* way. Something was wrong here. That wasn’t his intention. Not at all.

But the facts remained the same—he was exchanging the key for her life. Which meant that, yes, in a way, that *had* been Raraja’s intention.



He could tell that Goerz was smirking.

Orlaya glared at him. “You think you can swindle us with this? This worthless trash? Don’t make me laugh!”

It was a trap after all. The whole thing, from beginning to end. All of it...

Including Orlaya.

§

“So, basically, you were trying to pawn off trash as treasure, huh? Raraja-sensei...”

Raraja was only able to snap back to his senses because of the experience he’d accumulated.

Shing! A blade unsheathed. The dull, heavy mass of murderous intent. It was direct and efficient—like stomping a roach or swatting a fly. According to Iarumas, sensing murderous intent was a product of the imagination.

When your instincts tell you you’re feeling something like that, it’s really just your experience talking.

As those words rushed through Raraja’s head, he realized that he was already jumping backward. Where his torso had been just moments ago, the iron blade of a sword mowed through the air like a scythe.

A Sword of Slashing. Goerz!

“Guess you can’t complain if I kill you!” the man taunted.

“Wha—!”

Raraja crouched, bracing himself. He looked left and right.

I’m surrounded.

Familiar faces suddenly began appearing from within the crowd of dubious adventurers congregated on the first floor of the dungeon.

These were his former—he didn’t want to use the word companions—*clanmates*.

What now? What should I do? What did I come here for?

Orlaya.

He looked around for her, tried to call her name. But it was hopeless. Their gazes locked. That sole remaining eye glared, stabbing into him, cold and sharp.

Rejection... Her intent was clear.

In that instant, all of Raraja's previous plans went completely out the window.

Goerz's sword kept coming. Raraja reflexively ducked out of the way. For some reason, his legs gave out beneath him, and he wound up on his backside.

The sword was wordlessly raised again. Its shadow fell across Raraja's forehead.

He was a dead man.

No doubt about it—they were going to get him this time. Right here.

Right in front of Orlaya.

He couldn't stand it.

But then...

“Awoooooo!!!”

A petite figure pounced over the heads of the adventurers, letting out a howl as she swung her sword. It flashed through the air as Goerz leaned back out of the way. She spun around once more with her remaining momentum.

Goerz's eyes widened as he spotted the shine of a Sword Cusinart, the envy of fighters everywhere. “Damn you, Garbage!” he yelled.

“Woof!”

Ignoring Goerz, Garbage looked down at Raraja with those blue eyes of hers that were as clear as bottomless lakes. Resting her blade against her shoulder, she stared down at him with a look of exasperation. It was like she was saying, *This guy's hopeless without me...*

Normally, giving Raraja a light kick would have been enough to rile him up, but right now, he was speechless.

Why was she here? It seemed that Goerz was wondering the same thing. But

before Raraja could ask the question, the answer emerged from the crowd.

“Oops.”

A man walked toward them. His laugh was soft, cruel, and hollow.

The black-clad corpse hauler—the bearer of the black staff.

“Iarumas!”

The man in black cocked his hooded head. “That sure was fast, Goerz.”

“You put him up to this, huh?” Goerz snarled. But his rage passed quickly. Goerz would have been long dead if he were the type to lose his head over something like this. He held his Sword of Slashing at the ready, shuffling his feet and gauging the distance between himself and Iarumas. Goerz was well aware that his opponent’s black staff harbored a saber. “You have a change of heart? Never thought you’d stick your nose into this kind of thing.”

“I don’t think I have.”

Iarumas was the same as ever. He always stood the same way while he was in the dungeon—never breaking his stance. His lips bore a slight smile. His eyes were narrowed in amusement. Those same eyes only saw the dungeon as white lines on black...or so he claimed.

He was enjoying this deeply. It was an odd sight—but one Raraja was accustomed to.

Loosening the black staff with one hand, Iarumas boasted, “Too much slaughter corrupts, while being too pure dulls one’s skills. When it comes to killing techniques, you need just the *right* amount of impurity.”

“Tough talk...” muttered Goerz.

“I haven’t even begun to fight.”

There was no telling when Iarumas would close the gap between them. Right now, his demeanor was like that of someone out on a casual stroll.

Goerz was unsure of how to press the attack. But at the same time, he didn’t seem frightened. He weighed the options in his head. He needed to balance punishing Raraja against striking down both Iarumas and Garbage.

And also...

"I heard the dragon-slaying party had a big-ass female fighter in it too."

"Mage," larumas corrected. "She can cast KATINO."

He needed to balance the possibility of another enemy lurking, waiting—one who might be a mage. Assuming, of course, that larumas wasn't lying.

The scales inside Goerz's head began to tip.

Garbage was ready to go at any moment—she built up power in her legs, almost like she was a compressed spring. And even as all of this happened, Raraja stayed on the floor of the dungeon where he'd fallen near Garbage's feet, unable to move.

He was nailed to the spot—perhaps deliberately.

Orlaya's one good eye pierced Raraja, and she didn't take it off him. Her face, twitching with resentment, looked horribly warped and ugly.

Raraja felt like he was going to cry. For some reason, try as he might, he couldn't call her name.

Orlaya didn't speak his name either.

"Fine, then." After some time, Goerz slowly lowered his blade. Garbage let out a bored snort. "The kid's not worth fighting you lot over."

"Is that right?" murmured larumas.

Without answering, Goerz turned to his men. "We're going."

The clan members obediently did as they were told, following him as he left. That, of course, included *her*.

"Orlaya..."

By the time he finally forced her name out of his vocal cords, it was too late. She obviously couldn't hear his puny whimper, and she didn't look back.

All Raraja could do was watch as her tiny back vanished into the depths of the dungeon.

"Raraja...-kun?"

A hesitant voice came from behind him. He let out a sigh.

“Berka...nan.”

“Yeah.”

He looked back to find the big, black-haired girl doing her best to look as small as possible. She nodded at him. There’d been no real trick concealing her—she had simply been there among the crowd, crouching.

Raraja somehow managed to murmur a “sorry” or some similar apology.

“Yeah.” Berkanan nodded again, the same as before. She waited for Raraja to rise to his feet.

As Raraja was slowly getting up, Garbage gave him a good, hard kick. He groaned in pain but didn’t raise a fuss about it. He figured he had it coming. But he would’ve preferred to have Orlaya slap him.

Once he was back on his feet, Raraja faced the man in black.

“You came to save me, huh?”

“That wasn’t really my intent.” larumas shrugged a little, shaking his head. “We were simply on our way to explore the dungeon, and we ran into you.”

“I’ll bet...” Raraja figured it was probably true. That’s just the kind of guy larumas was.

“Did you fail?” asked larumas.

“Looks like it...”

“Well, these things happen.”

Was that meant to console him? Raraja stared at larumas. He was still wearing a slight smile—which meant that what he’d said probably *wasn’t* meant to comfort the boy.

Raraja suddenly noticed that the tip of his foot was touching something.

The Key of Gold. Orlaya had thrown it at him at some point.

Raraja picked up the key, wiped it off on his shirt, and pocketed it.

“As long as you’re alive, you’ll have another chance,” said larumas.

“Oh... Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Iarumas wasn’t the type to offer words of consolation. If he was saying this, then it was simply a fact.

§

“Tch. That damn maggot Iarumas...”

Goerz’s bile-filled words echoed through the dungeon, mixing with the sounds of footsteps—his gang of adventurers, whose names were of no consequence, trudged along beside him.

In all likelihood, Goerz had only planned to humiliate and torment Raraja. He probably would’ve left it at that.

He’d never expected Iarumas or that mutt Garbage to show up.

So shortsighted...

Orlaya knew better than to say anything in times like this. It was true that Goerz was shortsighted. He never thought beyond the current situation, and he always made whatever choice benefited him—whatever made him feel good.

He was no better than a thug. Even highwaymen were more clever.

But the dungeon wasn’t an easy place to traverse. A man like him couldn’t have survived so long on the strength of his arms alone.

Threats and chances for survival—enemies and allies.

Who could Goerz belittle, mock, and torment?

There was something about this man—something feral—that let him sniff these things out.

That was why he was strong. That was why he’d survived.

Orlaya kept her mouth shut, desperately lowering her eyes as she tried to chase Goerz’s words from her head. She needed to avoid his gaze. To keep him from reading her heart. She did her best not to think about how he was going to use her to vent his frustration. How he would make an example of her as a proxy for their collective failure.

She could manage the pain, the suffering, the agony—as long as she emptied her head. Each individual moment would hurt, but once they passed, it would be over.

And yet, for whatever reason...that accursed boy's face was the one thing permanently burned into her memory.

It's all because of that guy... Because Goerz wouldn't stop saying his name. She'd never remembered him before now, but the moment Goerz had mentioned the boy, well, just look at what'd happened to her.

Emotions flared up inside her again and again like explosions. Blood rushed to her head. Her mind contorted. Thoughts coiled around themselves like serpents.

He'd forgotten her. Gone off on an adventure surrounded by other girls. And now he'd shown up again saying that he would *save* her. It was far too late for that. He was treating her like an idiot. What the hell was that? Just who did he think he was?

Also, even if he had *said* he was trying to save her, she knew better—he wanted to *buy* her in exchange for the Key of Gold.

That key was cheap, paltry trash. Was it all she was worth? Yes. But still...

He was treating her like an idiot. Treating her like an idiot. Treating her like an idiot.

This is no good.

When Orlaya felt herself spiraling out of control, she reined in her emotions hard. Just in time—she was only barely able to register that Goerz had stopped.

A voice suddenly called out from the darkness of the dungeon.

"Well, that was certainly unpleasant for you..."

The man who emerged was like a cutout of a human figure. A dark crimson cloak, worn over a green vestment—a priest.

Goerz narrowed his eyes, looking at the man like he might look at a stray dog barking at his feet. "Who're you?"

“Oh, no one of consequence. Nobody whose name you need to know...”

“Then die.”

Orlaya didn’t see Goerz swing the Sword of Slashing—she heard, belatedly, the sound of the blade cutting through the air.

Even when he encountered “friendly” monsters, Goerz never showed any mercy. He’d laugh, saying that the passive ones tended to have the most money on them.

“Oops...!”

The mysterious priest cried out that goofy exclamation. To Orlaya’s eyes, it looked as if he’d been bisected. The blade had definitely sliced through the space where the priest was, through his vestment, and yet...

“Heh heh. I was only being humble. If I offended you, then apologies, apologies...”

The priest was alive and well, a few steps back from where he’d stood before. He wore an infuriatingly affable smile.

Orlaya blinked. Just now, she thought she’d seen a holy symbol hanging from the priest’s neck—a shard of some sort of amulet.

“Are you a healer?” Goerz asked. “Or are you offering some kind of protective spell?”

“Ah, these were just some clumsy tricks of mine.”

“Both, then...” With a short click of his tongue, Goerz sheathed his blade.

Orlaya looked to the clan leader to see how he would react—a habit she’d developed that always helped her prepare for the worst.

Goerz was smiling.

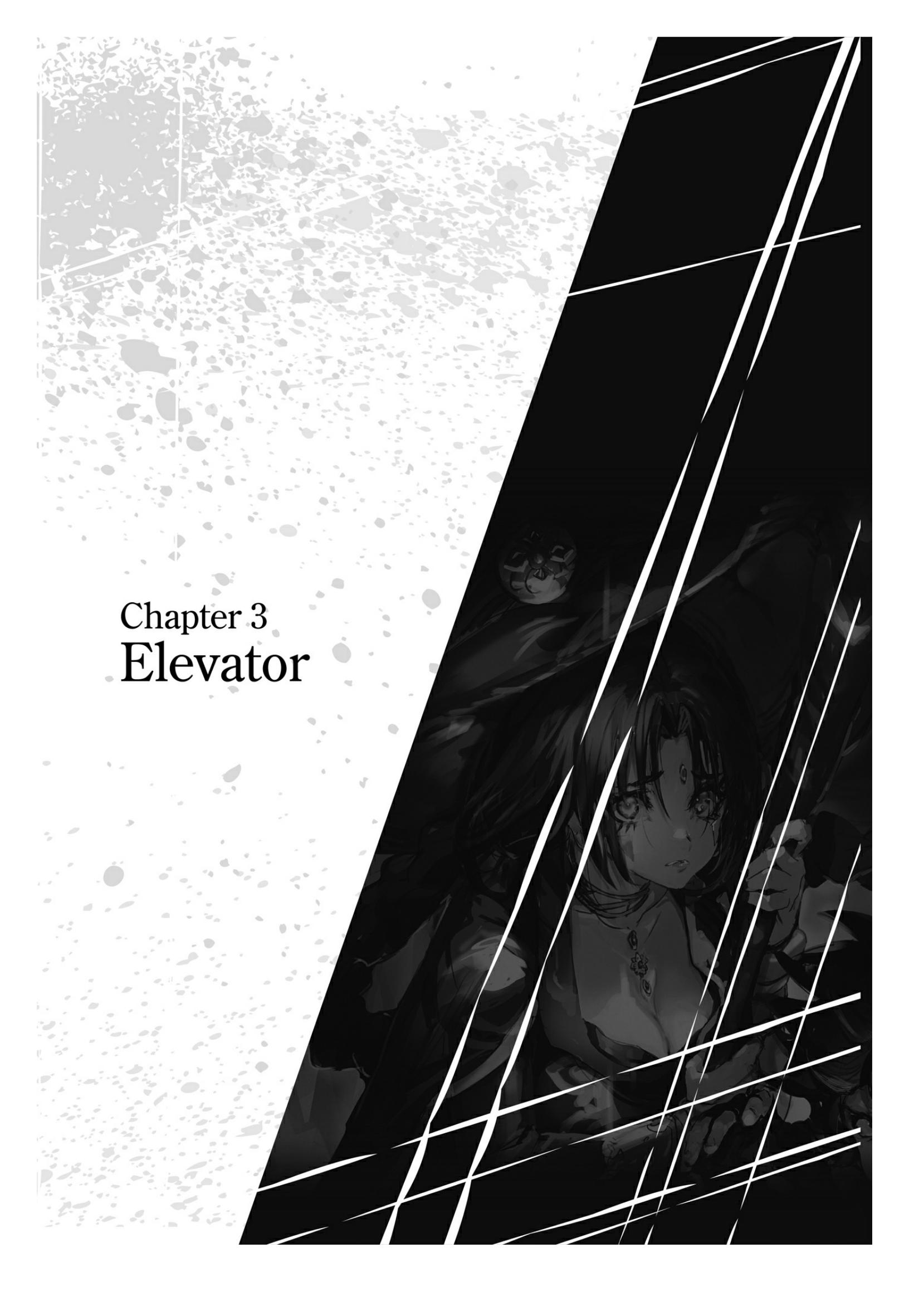
“Fine. Wouldn’t want to be thought of as a guy who doesn’t pay the viewing fee when someone shows him their tricks.”

“Thank you.” The priest bowed his head. “Yes, yes, you won’t regret this.”

Orlaya wondered, *Why is that priest looking at me?*

Raraja...

The girl bit her lip, irritated. That damned fool never should've crossed her mind. She shouldn't care what happened to him.



Chapter 3

Elevator

“Don’t you have anything *other* than your family?”

“Whuh?”

The girl turned around, a piece of hard bread hanging out of her mouth. With all the gluttony typical of a rhea, she made it vanish in an instant. Yet, despite her appetite, she was always sharing her food with him and going on about how it would be a problem if she put on weight.

Raraja had long since realized that this was just an excuse. He knew, but he didn’t point it out.

That’s just the kind of girl she is.

“What do you mean ‘other than my family’?”

“A goal,” Raraja grumbled. “If you’re just out here trying to strike it rich and support your folks, there’s gotta be ways to do that besides adventuring.”

“Hmm... Well, I *do* have a goal, in a way, but...” Orlaya’s mumbling trailed off awkwardly, and she looked down at the ground.

This was unusual for her.

In this gloomy alley behind the clan’s base, she’d been gnawing like a feral dog on slices of stale bread the guys had thrown out—bread that was hard enough to be used in place of plates. In between bites, Orlaya whispered, “Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Depends on what you say.”

“Boo. You’re so mean. Well, hmm... Okay.”

After hanging her head awhile, Orlaya began awkwardly fidgeting and playing with her fingers in front of her chest.

“There’s this fairy tale. With a knight and everything...”

“What?” Raraja said, laughing. He hadn’t promised, after all. “This is about a prince?”

“No, it’s— Okay, yes, it is, but still!” Her voice cracked. Even in the gloom, the boy could tell she was blushing terribly. “I don’t think a prince is going to come rescue me or anything!”

“What’s your goal, then?”

“I want to see a prince...a knight.”

He was a knight clad in sparkling, divine equipment—this equipment was more beautiful than any other in the world.

Orlaya seemed almost feverish as she told the story. Her expression was filled with a wonder that seemed childlike, even by rhea standards.

What had she called that knight again? Oh yes, it was...

§

“The Diamond Knight...”

This had been an idle conversation. An inconsequential scene from daily life that had been lost in the annals of Raraja’s memories. He’d completely forgotten it.

So why had he recalled it after all this time, as he’d lain in the hay of the stables? There was no need to wonder. But Raraja brushed away the obvious explanation. He didn’t want to make the inevitable connection between the Orlaya of then and the Orlaya now.

Nonetheless, his thoughts had a habit of leaking out as words.

In the darkness of the dungeon, larumas raised an eyebrow.

“The Diamond Knight? That’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time.”

Raraja hadn’t expected a response. He turned around and looked up at the man in black.

larumas hadn’t taken his eyes off Garbage and Berkanan. They were up ahead, trading blows with some giant toad-like creatures that were pressing toward them.

“Wahhh?! Eeeeeek!”

“Woof!”

There were many toads, but their only strength was in numbers—just like the fuzzballs. Berkanan seemed awfully flustered. Raraja just nodded to himself, thinking, *She’ll probably be fine.*

Focusing on larumas once more, Raraja asked, “You know about the knight?”

“As a story, yes.” larumas nodded. “There are two of these knights. One traveled into the hole of demons, never to return, and the other was an adventurer.”

“An adventurer?”

“Yeah. It was an awfully long time ago,” larumas murmured.

Long ago, a kingdom was taken over by a horrifying demon. The kingdom was protected from invasions by the goddess’s blessing, but it was powerless against any evil that arose from within—against a demon born and raised *inside* the country.

“What’s the point, then?” Raraja muttered.

larumas responded with a shrug and a forced smile. “The king was slain. The city was taken. But the young prince and princess escaped.”

The brother and sister became adventurers. They sought out legendary equipment in order to strike down the demon. Their days of adventuring continued for a long time. As the boy was coming into his own as a young man, their long-held goal was finally accomplished.

They assembled armor, a helm, gauntlets, a shield, and a sword. Altogether, these items became...

“The equipment...” larumas muttered.

“Of the Diamond Knight,” Raraja finished.

larumas shook his head. “But the equipment was only assembled for a short time.”

This battle between the siblings and the demon was remembered only through stories, passed down by word of mouth. The prince who gathered that ancient armor with the luster of diamonds... How strong must he have been? Surely his sister, a gifted spellcaster, also put up a worthy battle against the demon.

However, when the demon was finally cornered, it uttered an unspeakable curse that caused the land itself to tremble. A malignant hole was gouged into

the ground deep inside the castle—it swallowed up the demon.

And the prince.

Thus was the Diamond Knight's equipment lost, leaving only the curse and the princess behind...

It's a common story, thought Raraja. There're many other fairy tales and legends just like it.

However...there was probably more to this particular story. Raraja couldn't fail to notice that the light in larumas's eyes grew brighter as he went on telling the tale. The boy gulped. He'd seen this before. It was similar to when the man had told him the story of the amulet.

Yes, there was more to the story. The tale of the Diamond Knight didn't end there.

"The princess told people that they must retrieve the goddess's staff, which had fallen along with the demon."

Raraja considered what this meant for a moment. "Adventurers."

"Yes." larumas nodded. "Adventurers."

A score of adventurers challenged that cursed hole. How many braved those depths, filled with curses, hatred, and monsters, and lived to tell the tale? Even among those who returned alive, hardly any were successful.

But there was one.

Just one was able to assemble the Diamond Knight's equipment scattered within the demon hole, retrieve the goddess's staff, and return light to the surface.

In other words, they became a Diamond Knight.

"It wasn't just a legend, then?" asked Raraja.

"It really happened," larumas said, as though it were no big deal. "Not that I have any clue what occurred after that."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"How could I? It was ages ago. I doubt *anyone* remembers."

With that said, larumas noted that the battle against the toads seemed to have ended. Raraja looked over—Berkanan lay collapsed on the ground, wheezing, in front of the dead monsters. Garbage resentfully swung the Sword Cusinart around, frowning at how its weight felt in her hands.

All that was left was the treasure chest. It was time for the thief to do his part.

But just at that moment, Raraja had a strange idea. “Hey,” he said, his cheeks twitching. “It wasn’t you, was it?”

larumas fell silent for a moment. Then he let out a gentle sigh.

“It wasn’t me.”

That was his answer.

§

Was it because he was still dwelling on the story?

“Oops?!”

A poison needle.

Raraja scowled at the pain in his fingertip, groaning at the slipup.

The trap hadn’t been on the lock. It had been on the outside of the box, sticking out like a splinter. As soon as he’d pricked himself, it was already too late. His finger throbbed with a burning pain that made him feel like it was on fire.

He reflexively clutched the wound, covering it with his other hand as he jumped back and away from the chest, but there was no hiding what had happened.

“Messed up, huh?”

“Arf.”

He was met with an indifferent tone from larumas and an exasperated bark from Garbage. The redheaded girl’s clear blue eyes narrowed resentfully, glaring at him. She wouldn’t be getting a sword—when you failed to disarm a trap, the contents of the chest were naturally spoiled.

In the past, he would’ve loudly insisted that it wasn’t his fault. But this time,

he knew that wasn't true.

It wasn't an issue of skill either. He'd been able to discern that there was probably a poison needle. He'd only failed because his mind had been elsewhere.

Raraja couldn't take fault or apologize. He just hung his head in silence.

"Stand back and get some rest," larumas said to Raraja. He then turned to Berkana. "Look after him."

"Huh? Oh." Berkana had been listening nervously. Her head shot up, and her black hair bounced with the motion. "M-Me?"

"That's right."

"O-Okay... I'll do it."

With that said, Berkana slowly moved closer to Raraja. She leaned in. Her large shadow fell over him, and Raraja looked up at her awkwardly. He noticed her golden eyes wandering—they were full of discomfort.

After a long moment, she finally asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure," Raraja managed to say. Then, after much agonizing, he muttered, "Sorry."

"I'm not really mad..." Berkana mumbled as she led Raraja over to the burial chamber's wall. She must have been thinking that this would get them away from the dead toads and any other interference.

larumas was the only one trying to figure out where they'd go next. Garbage paced around the treasure chest in circles, as if hesitant to let it go, then proceeded to circle larumas instead.

Raraja sighed. "Sorry..."

"I already told you," Berkana said, her tone a bit sharp, "I'm not mad."

Berkana took an antidote and some bandages from her small bag that was actually still quite large. She hurried as much as her slow pace allowed and did her best—at least, as far as she was concerned—to treat his injury.

She hesitantly touched Raraja's finger, dripping the medicine over it, and then

wrapped it in a bandage. Her hands were far from skilled, but he could still see how earnest and careful she was being.

What am I doing? Raraja let out yet another sigh. *How many times have I sighed today?*

Maybe he'd gotten carried away. He'd joined a party, become a full-fledged adventurer, had participated in the slaying of a dragon, and...then what? What had he been able to accomplish on his own?

Look at him now. He'd done nothing. It hadn't worked out. And yet, Iarumas had said that as long as he was alive, he'd have another chance.

He'd gotten himself a swelled head, had run off on his own, had expended great effort—all to no avail. He could search the whole dungeon and he'd never find anything that could disprove those facts.

"You had something on your mind," Berkana suddenly remarked. "Was it that girl...?"

Raraja didn't answer right away. He couldn't. Berkana's eyes were right there in front of him—golden like the full moon shining behind the clouds.

"Probably..."

That was Raraja's only response. He didn't want to dodge the question. But he wasn't even sure of his answer. So, ultimately, he gave a vague reply.

"Oh, I see," Berkana murmured. "L-Listen, I... I... I..." Berkana cleared her throat before continuing. "I was thinking."

Why not just give up?

Berkana would be lying if she said that this thought had never crossed her mind. A voice whispered to her—told her to voice the notion to Raraja.

Why not give up? Why not forget the rhea? She's an awful girl. You don't need to worry about her anymore.

She should just say that to him—have him forget all about the other girl.

But try as she might, Berkana couldn't force the words past her lips. Because that—

—wouldn't be fair.

Berkanan was a big girl. Strong too. She got hungry faster than other people. If there was a fight and she laid her hands on the other person even a little, they'd all say she was cheating. If she tried to get a little more for herself because she was hungry, they'd say Berka was cheating.

Slow Berka. Dull Berka. Cheating Berka.

"I'm not a cheat," Berkana would always say. She wasn't.

I'm not a cheat.

"You should...talk it out with her...properly!"

"Huh...?"

The words Berkana forced out were loud and sharp. They made Raraja jump.

The boy blinked repeatedly, staring back at her in surprise.

Berkana felt her cheeks flush hot. But if she went silent now, she'd never be able to overcome that cunning, underhanded part of herself again.

"I mean, Raraja-kun... You haven't...really...talked it over with her," Berkana mumbled. "I was watching. I was there when it happened. You gave her the key. She took it. Looked at it. Called it trash. And that was it. That's not enough... Not enough for you to understand her, or for her to understand you."

Raraja was silent for a long time. Berkana wanted to run away.

Who did she think she was, saying all that? Surely he'd hate her for it.

She shrank into herself as much as she could. Lowered her head. Looked down. Shut her eyes and ears.

If she hid behind the brim of her hat, then surely they wouldn't be able to see her face. Wouldn't be able to hear her voice. She wouldn't have to be involved with anyone. She could fade right away...

Or so she'd thought.

"Berka..."

"Huh? Oh, y-yes?"

When he called her name—the short form of it—Berkanan’s head shot up. Her braided black ponytail bounced off to one side.

Raraja was staring right at her.

Berkanan’s eyes immediately tried to run away, but they were inexorably drawn back toward the boy.

After some time, in a small but clear voice, Raraja said, “Thanks.”

“Yeah...”

Berkanan nodded, her head bobbing up and down. It wasn’t as if she had no regrets about what she’d said, but...

Grandmother.

She was sure her grandmother would have praised her.

§

On that day, the area right below the entrance to the dungeon was once again filled with a motley crew. The presence of so many people was unpleasant enough on its own, but the awful smells that hung in the air made things so much worse.

Monster gore—sweat and grime—dust—dead adventurers left to rot.

There were those who’d been abandoned with wounds left untreated. Those who sat against the walls, endlessly moaning. Those who would be thrown into the temple’s morgue.

Orlaya had long since stopped wondering who had it worse—the people here, the dead, or herself. There was no appreciable difference.

She just stayed silent.

Though she would hesitate to call it a proper shop, this corner, divided off with rags and straw mats, was Orlaya’s place. Here, she lay against the stonework wall, legs cast outward, staring vacantly into space as she waited for time to pass.

Time was vague here in the dungeon. Orlaya felt as if she’d been here doing the same thing for a hundred years. The monotonous existence she led was

practically the same as a beggar's. But instead of bowing her head to passersby on the street, she bowed her head to adventurers, begging them to ask her for an identification.

At times they would beat her or humiliate her, and she would beg for forgiveness. All in order to live to see the next day.

Only one thing made her more blessed than any other beggar: she had access to food and water.

But actually, I'm not blessed. I might even have it worse.

A beggar didn't have the clan shaking them down for money.

Or maybe they did and she just didn't know about it. Were there gangs among the beggars that did the same thing? If so, then escaping this cage would only trap her in another; escaping this dungeon would only leave her in a dungeon of another sort.

It's not so different.

These idle thoughts kept chasing themselves around in circles in Orlaya's mind. And it was all *his* fault. If he'd just forgotten about her, she could have forgotten him too.

Those eyes...

She wished he wouldn't have looked at her with eyes like those. They'd almost made her feel as if she'd been the one in the wrong. Even though she was the one agonizing over things like this...

A small sigh escaped Orlaya's dried, cracked lips.

“Huh?!”

There was a sudden noise as the curtain that she was behind—the curtain which hid her—was pushed aside. Orlaya's head shot up. She felt as though she saw the black-haired boy. But she was wrong. The only hair Orlaya saw was a little lower than her eyeline, and it was a fiery red, framing two bottomless eyes, blue like clear lakes.

“Y-You're...” Orlaya's voice trembled. “Garbage?”

“Arf!”

The doglike girl had barged into Orlaya’s den. Orlaya knew who she was, of course. She’d known even before the girl had gone and slain the dragon.

“What? Isn’t that corpse hauler your new master?”

“Yap!”

“I never know what you’re saying...”

They’d once been in the same clan—although it was unclear whether this girl had any awareness of that. Orlaya remembered her as a meat shield, a body dragged around by the chain attached to her collar.

Emotion showed on Orlaya’s face. She scowled, clicking her tongue.

“What? Did your master or Raraja send you to find me?”

“Woof!”

They stared at one another, locked in a silent stalemate.

Orlaya broke first.

“Haaah... This is just stupid.”

As if this girl was anyone’s pet... *She’d never let anyone save her.*

Garbage had been like this in the clan too. The chain and collar hadn’t made her obey orders. No, she’d obeyed because that was what’d gotten her food. It was the same now. She could go wherever she desired, do whatever she pleased. She was in the dungeon because she wanted to be. That was all.

In the past, having Garbage around had reassured Orlaya—it was nice knowing that *someone*, even a monster’s leftovers, was beneath her. But now, those eyes unnerved her. Orlaya’s gut churned with the uneasy feeling that this girl was totally different from herself.

The girl’s blue eyes were inscrutable, revealing nothing of what she felt or imagined. Orlaya had always thought of the girl as a stray dog, or perhaps a lone wolf...

But...what about now?

“Seriously, what do you want?”

Garbage let out a whine. “Arruff...”

Scowling at the flecks of blood on Garbage’s cheeks and in her hair, Orlaya reached out to the girl and started rubbing the gore away with her fingers.

Garbage’s eyes narrowed with irritation. The bandages covering Orlaya’s fingers were soon stained a dark red.

Orlaya sighed yet again as she noticed the strange weapon that Garbage was dragging along behind her. It was different from the one strapped to her back and from the broadsword she’d once carried.

She was alone. No Raraja—no thief—with her. And she was covered in blood.

Orlaya was, sadly, not such a fool that she couldn’t read the situation.

“Don’t tell me you entered a burial chamber on your own and forced the chest open yourself?”

“Yap!”

“Just...incredible. You’re an idiot. A *really big* idiot...”

Orlaya groaned, not wanting to believe a girl like this was her customer. How had Garbage figured out that she identified items? And how had she known where to find her? It was surprising enough that she knew that items needed to *be* identified at all.

“Don’t tell me... You sniffed me out, or something like that? I mean, you’re not *actually* a dog.”

Orlaya couldn’t have known this—but she was right. Even Garbage could learn.

When the party discovered a sword in a treasure chest, it was never given to Garbage right away. The small, rough, beardy one had to touch it all over first.

Today, Garbage had entered the dungeon alone, cut up all the things that’d gotten in her way, and kicked the chest open. Then, as she’d been dragging the sword she’d found to the surface, she’d noticed a familiar smell.

Garbage was confident in her strength and her smarts. So, of course, she’d

recognized the smell as belonging to the little one with only one eye who was all wrapped up in bandages. She remembered the last time they'd seen her—the little one had been moving in the same way as the small, rough one did.

The girl didn't really understand it, but she figured that these small ones probably just liked petting swords. That had to be why the black one and the noisy one let them do it.

So, being the strongest and the smartest in the group, Garbage didn't mind doing the little ones the favor of letting them run their hands over her sword.

“Arf!”

“*There, touch it,*” she seemed to say as she thrust the weapon toward Orlaya. The rhea reluctantly accepted it.

“Do you have money?”

Garbage said nothing.

“Money...? Oh, forget it. I feel stupid just saying that.”

As she was muttering, Orlaya felt her cares slip away.

Whatever. I'll just do this one. How long had it been since she was last able to say that? Yet at this moment, she was able to think, *Oh, fine, and Identifying it for her isn't that big of a deal.*

Orlaya smiled just a little at this caprice of hers. “Don’t get miffed if it’s not what you’re hoping for...” She tossed out words that sounded like an excuse. She wasn’t even sure that Garbage could understand them.

Then, Orlaya touched the sword.

Yes, this weapon was a sword. Who had it been forged for, and how had they wielded it? Regardless, a sword found in the dungeon, no matter how masterful its craftsmanship, was just “a sword.” A weapon only got a name if there was something more...vaguely legendary it was connected to. Like the Sword of Slicing, the Sword of Slashing, the Were Slayer, the Mage Masher...

The diamond sword, Hrathnir.

It was like something out of a dream. She was recalling that name for the first

time in ages. That sword was a treasure—a blade wrapped in a vacuum that cut through anything and everything. She'd always thought that if there was anything like it, then it would be down here in the dungeon. And yet...

After some time, Orlaya's thoughts rose up again from the abyss of her mind. Her eyes widened in surprise.

In her hands was a blade that spun with a whirring noise as it shredded its wielder's foes. A bizarre sword crafted for murder.

"This is a Cusinart...!"

"Eek?!"

The reaction was dramatic. The moment Garbage heard the name, she tossed the sword aside and jumped backward. She let out a low growl, as though she were staring down the beast of the apocalypse.

Orlaya was taken aback by this incredible overreaction. "What? You don't want it?"

"Woof!"

"Okay, I'm taking it, then."

"Rarf!"

Orlaya couldn't help but smile. When was the last time *that* had happened? She'd smiled so unconsciously that she hadn't been aware she was doing it.

But the smile quickly faded. There were noisy footsteps outside, approaching. Garbage noticed first—her head shot up. Orlaya let out a low moan.

"You go out the back."

"Yap."

"It'll cause trouble for me if you're here!"

It wasn't that Orlaya's words got through to Garbage. But the girl didn't resist as Orlaya pushed her behind a rag in the back that served as a curtain. Garbage's compliance was the only reason she made it in time.

"Hey, Orlaya. How're today's earnings?"

Goerz appeared with a feral smile. He didn't care how Orlaya responded. He simply turned over the container and helped himself to the money. Orlaya could only hope that her meager earnings from identification were enough to appease him.

Then Goerz's eyes fell on the blade still lying on Orlaya's lap.

"What're you doing with something that nice?"

Faster than she could voice a complaint, he'd already snatched that masterful sword away from her. Her head was bowed, but her eye shot up, following it. She let out a groan.

"Ah..."

"What?"

He glared at her. Orlaya sat up straight and adjusted her posture.

"It's...nothing."

"All right."

Goerz casually unstrapped the Sword of Slashing from his back and then tossed it aside. He gave the Sword Cusinart a test swing. The moment his rocklike hands gripped the hilt, the sword forged by a master smith let out a sound like a high-pitched scream as it cut through the air.

The bizarre blade was spinning, prepared to slice and dice opponents it had still yet to meet.

Goerz flashed a toothy grin, like a shark.

"Nice. I like it..."

With movements that seemed out of place—almost magical, for someone who was built like he was—Goerz stored the Cusinart on his back.

Orlaya kept her head hung the whole time, as if waiting for a storm to pass. But she knew it wouldn't end that easily.

"That thing we were talking about's all sorted. You're coming, right?"

He didn't say "come with us," or "tag along." It wasn't a command, but a request. As though he were asking a favor. Knowing she couldn't refuse him,

Goerz always phrased things that way. He did it to impress on her that she obeyed him on her own—that she acted of her own free will.

And so, this time too, Orlaya bowed her head of her own accord. After a long pause, she said, “Yes, of course I will.”

“Good girl. Come on, then!”

With that said, Goerz strode out of her ramshackle place of business as freely as he’d entered it. He didn’t so much as look back at her.

He never doubted that she would follow him. It wasn’t trust. It was confidence that he owned her.

Orlaya slowly got to her feet, her curse-eaten body aching horribly. Finally, she glanced behind her—at the curtain in the back—and walked away, dragging her feet.

All that was left behind was the abandoned Sword of Slashing, and—

“Grrrr...”

—the doglike Garbage.

The girl scampered over to the sword on the floor and picked it up. After carefully scrutinizing it, she gave it a casual swing. She followed with a single snort of dissatisfaction.

“Well, it’ll do,” Garbage seemed to say. She shouldered the sword and then headed straight home.

When the noisy one was away the other day, they’d brought nothing back. It wasn’t clear whether Garbage thought she needed to set a better example. However, once he saw the sword that she’d returned with, Raraja’s eyes widened in surprise.

He later followed her trail, searching around the crowded section of the first floor for three days. But by the time he arrived at Orlaya’s miserable hovel, the place already had a new resident who looked up at Raraja in surprise.

Orlaya hadn’t been seen there since.

She had a bad feeling about this, but that was nothing new. So, yeah, it probably wouldn't go all that terribly...

Orlaya thought that every time they walked through the dungeon. Today was no different.

Goerz stood up front. Two adventurers, whose names she didn't know, flanked Orlaya on either side. As a party, they progressed through the underground halls.

Around and around. No matter where she looked, the terrain, the walls, and the floors were all the same. They might as well have been made of white lines on black.

Each time she noticed that, Orlaya would warn herself, *That's a dangerous way of thinking*, and shut her eyes tight. And when she would open them again, the dungeon would appear once more, never changing.

That's how she knew that she was still all right—still sane.

“Hello, hello, how good of you to come.”

The sudden voice brought Goerz to a stop.

In the darkness up ahead was that unidentified, dodgy priest. As always, he had the same shard-like amulet hanging around his neck...and he was smiling.

It was perhaps a bit late to notice it, but Orlaya realized that the design on his robes was of fangs. A Priest of Fang.

“Hey,” said Goerz. “It sounded like there was money to be made.”

“Yes. I can guarantee that you will find profit here, in this material world. Now, come this way...”

Having spoken, the priest led them to an abyss of darkness so deep that they couldn't see so much as an inch ahead.

Was it Orlaya who gulped? Or one of the others? It wasn't Goerz. That much was certain.

“All right, let's go.”

He followed the priest without hesitation, stepping into the darkness as

though he feared nothing, and vanished from sight.

Orlaya's feet didn't move. She trembled, cowered, and was unable to take a single step forward.

"Ah..." A weak groan escaped her throat. A tongue clicked behind her.
"Augh?!"

There was a dull pain as her frail body was shoved into the darkness.

Before she had time to register that she'd been hit with the hilt of a sword or something similar, a hand seized her slender arm. The pain was so intense that she thought her bones might break. She let out a muffled cry.

"We can't do this if you don't come along."

"Whuh...?"

The one who'd pulled her through the darkness was Goerz.

Still confused, Orlaya looked around with her one eye. They were back in the dungeon, but...

A little...room?

Yes, a little room. It was a small, cramped burial chamber with a pair of double doors. Even as Orlaya glanced around in confusion, the other adventurers crowded inside with them.

She looked in all directions, and—even if it wasn't intentional—searched for an escape route. But Goerz kept a firm grip on her arm. At some point, the Priest of Fang had taken up a position in front of the doors.

"You may think of this place as something akin to an altar that connects terra firma to the heavens..."

"Enough talk," Goerz barked. "Get on with it already."

"Yes. Certainly, I will. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

The Priest of Fang quickly operated several panels that were built into the wall of the tiny room. As soon as he did, the whole room shook.

Orlaya let out a little scream.

There was a floating feeling—like she was falling. Were they going down? She had no freedom to stumble, crouch, or cling to something.

The viselike grip on her arm almost lifted her up into the air.

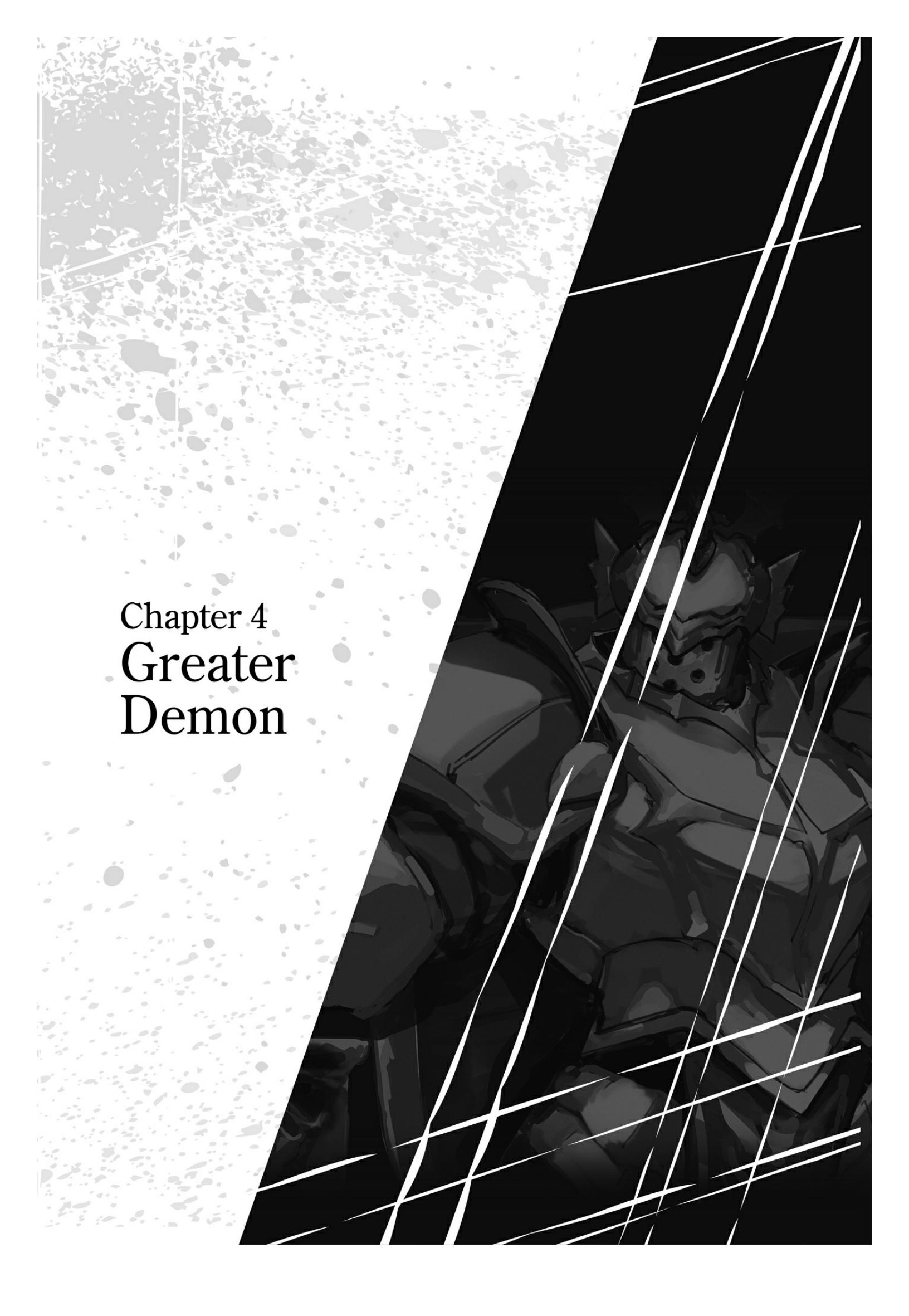
Orlaya had a flashback to an execution she'd attended when she was younger. It'd been put on at the pub and billed as an interesting show. The criminal had stood on a platform, and she'd watched as the bottom had fallen out from under him.

He'd plunged, but the rope around his neck had caught him, taking his life.

For some reason, the criminal in her memories wore her face—the one she'd had before becoming an appraiser...

Whoosh, thump.

That scene refused to leave her mind as she rode the elevator that was descending toward the unknown.



Chapter 4

Greater

Demon

“Things have kinda changed, huh?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, in Scale... No, in here, I guess.”

In the darkness of the dungeon, the All-Stars were listening to Moradin prattle on.

The burial chamber was heavy with the stench of death. For the top adventurers in Scale—those who’d made the most progress toward clearing the dungeon—burial chambers posed little threat. At least, for the moment. All six adventurers were aware that the situation could change in the blink of an eye.

It wasn’t just monsters they had to be wary of—the dungeon had plenty of other dangers too.

Like, for example, the traps placed in treasure chests. Within the All-Stars, only Moradin could deal with them. Well, technically Hawkwind could disarm them as well, but the black-clad man left the task to the rhea’s deft fingers.

The battle had ended. Moradin was facing the treasure chest. The other five had nothing to do. They could keep a watchful eye on the area, or they could listen to Moradin talk—that was about it.

Right now, the diminutive thief held all of their fates in his little hands.

“Could you be more specific, Moradin?” muttered High Priest Tuck, who was currently checking everyone’s injuries. “You’re not giving us much to go off of.”

“You say that, but it’s not like I’m able to put my finger on it either. Not precisely, anyway.” Moradin probed the chest noisily and continued his vague muttering. “It’s just different. Like something in the wind or a change of the tide. Until now, our exploration just seemed to go on forever, but...”

“Yeah.” Sezmar nodded, his dragon helmet bobbing in the dungeon’s gloom. “I sort of get what you’re saying.” The bighearted fighter let out a gregarious laugh that made the shoulder guards of his armor shake. “It’s been one thing after another lately. First the Monster Allocation Center, and then the red dragon. It’s been fun.”

“Not for me, it hasn’t,” said Sarah. She arched an eyebrow in dissatisfaction

and pursed her lips. “I want to master my spellcraft, not become the subject of heroic ballads.”

“You’re a beautiful elf, Sarah, but you’ll never get a man by acting all sanctimonious.”

“Moradin, I’ll kick you for that later,” she shot back. Her irritation made her ears stand upright.

The rhea snickered to himself. “Oops.”

Despite Sarah’s grumbling, she decided to save their squabbling for later. This was out of consideration for Moradin’s current predicament—she didn’t want to interrupt him while he was opening the chest.

“Well, what does the wise Prospero have to say about this?”

“Don’t ask me. Fortune-telling is not my area of expertise.” Prospero, a mage who was popular with the ladies for his pretty face, shook his head and let out a deep sigh. “But yes, there’s certainly been a...current, of sorts. It’s odd.”

Surprisingly, it was Sarah who agreed with that nebulous statement. “Yeah, you’re right.” She crouched down next to the treasure chest, resting her elbows on her knees and exhaling a world-weary sigh. “It started around the time larumas brought in Garbage-chan, huh?”

Her tone made it clear that it wasn’t *larumas* she was concerned about. No, she was worried about those around him. Her elven nun friend who looked after the black-clad corpse hauler. The redhead girl who followed him. The tall yet timid mage girl. The serious and passionate young Raraja.

Did larumas have what it took to look after them?

“I don’t know if he does...” murmured Sarah.

Sezmar chuckled. “For all his faults, he’s a fun guy, you know?”

“You say that about everyone, don’t you?” Sarah prodded the armored man with the end of her mace. She didn’t need to hold back with him. Sezmar’s armor clanked as he gave an exaggerated stumble.

Hawkwind crossed his arms, not wanting to get involved in this latest ruckus. That was more or less normal for him.

High Priest Tuck, the oldest among them, spoke next. His voice sounded somewhat sentimental. “Well, assuming there *is* some grand flow of events, there likely isn’t much we can do about it.”

“Murgh.” Sarah pursed her lips like she always did. “What? You want us to just give up?”

“That’s not it. When a fish swims in a river, the river does not dominate the fish.”

Regardless of whether Sarah took an interest in something or pushed back against it, she would always follow her heart. The old dwarf had always been fond of that trait, and it was why he tended to preach at the youngster.

“We simply need to swim as we see fit,” he continued. “Whether we’re swimming through a storm or against a muddy stream.”

Hawkwind suddenly let out a quiet laugh. “No fish hates the river, huh?”

This comment was unusual for the often taciturn man—though Sezmar would have said he was a fun guy too. Regardless, the party members had chosen to travel with Hawkwind—they accepted him and knew what he was like.

“I’ll bet the falling leaves resent the river, though,” said Sezmar.

Sarah snorted. “Well, unlike the leaves, we have arms and legs. That makes us different from the fish too.”

“There are fish that have lungs, as well as arms and legs,” countered Prospero. He leaned on his staff and watched the treasure chest. “Despite these differences, they aren’t dominated by the river’s flow either.”

“Fish that walk on the land? Yuck...” It wasn’t clear what she’d imagined, but Sarah made an unpleasant face and let out a groan.

Moradin felt comfortable listening to his companions banter like this behind him. Yes, he needed to feel a sense of purpose and urgency in his work. But at the same time, he needed to be able to take it easy—to move his hands unhindered.

The crowd behind him made him take his work seriously, but they also provided an atmosphere of security. Even if something happened, it would all

work out.

That's what Moradin thought. It's why he was able to disarm the trap and unlock the chest.

"Oops."

"What was that, Moradin? Did you die?" Sarah teased.

"Depends on what's inside."

Moradin placed his hands on the lid, and then...

He stopped.

Before he could say anything, Hawkwind was already crouching.

Everything moved quickly from there. The All-Stars smoothly fell into formation, brandished their weapons, and prepared for combat.

Sezmar drew his Were Slayer and glanced around. "Where are they coming from?" His tone was casual, like he was musing over where he'd like to go for a walk.

"The other side," said Moradin. The dual meaning here was fully intended. "Can hear their footsteps echoing. Dunno if there're a lot of 'em...or if they're just really big."

"It's *both*," Hawkwind said with certainty. "Get ready. They're coming."

"If it comes to it, one of us will cast LOKTOFEIT," said High Priest Tuck. "Me or Sarah—whoever has spells left."

"Um..." Sarah stared at him incredulously. "Y'know, that spell leaves *everything* behind...including our clothes!"

As the priests argued, Prospero began to chant true words. "Chuzanme re tauk (*O magic screen, shield against curses*)." They all felt the unseen barrier wrap around them, but Prospero didn't drop his grave tone. "I've cast CORTU, though I'm not sure it will be much help."

"Hey, it's better than nothing," Sezmar replied nonchalantly. From beneath his helmet, he looked toward the other side of the burial chamber. His eyes focused on the darkness of the corridor.

They could all hear it now. Beneath their feet, the ground rumbled. They licked their lips.

“All right, I see one now!”

And there it was—a demon.

§

The thing was dark blue. Its arms and legs, which were composed of exposed, bulging muscle, were as thick as tree trunks. Broken horns rested atop its skeletal head, and its pale eyes burned with fire. On its back were wings, and below those, a tail.

But more than anything else, what stood out about this abomination was its great height—its horns almost brushed the ceiling of the dungeon. Yes, it was as tall as the dungeon’s ceiling—an unfathomable height.

Even the six heroic All-Stars gulped at this. However, they delayed no further and immediately entered combat.

“La’arif tauk mimuarif peiche (*O six senses, fill the air*).”

The party had a rule about unknown monsters—before fighting one, they needed to first identify it. That was why Sarah had immediately cast LATUMAPIC. She instantly shouted the creature’s name.

“A greater demon?!”

It was a terrible fiend from the depths of the abyss. Now it stood before their eyes, ready to attack at any moment. This was a threat that should have only existed in myths, so the reality of the beast was hard to swallow.

Sarah’s legs shook, threatening to give out. Was this a trial or a game? In her heart, Sarah cursed the god Kadorto.

Okay, we can never know what we’ll encounter down in the dungeon—I get that. But still...!

“This can’t be happening, right?!”

High Priest Tuck chanted, “Bearif mimuarif tauk (*O reversed winds, come from beyond to protect us*)!”

“Moradin, watch our backs!” Sezmar barked. “Hawk, you take the right!”

“Got it!” Hawkwind responded.

His dark shadow raced across the floor of the dungeon, springing toward the demon. Hawkwind was like a bee flying around a large tree. First, he aimed for the right arm. Drawing the blade on his hip, he slashed once, leaving only a shallow wound.

But it slowed the demon for a moment, giving Sezmar precious time to consult with the rest of his companions.

“Sarah, did you say that thing’s a greater demon?”

“Be careful,” murmured Prospero, who was focusing on maintaining the barrier. “The books say they can control frost as easily as they breathe, and their hands are wrapped in miasma...”

“Hey, we’ve got your CORTU, don’t we?”

“For how long, I can’t say.”

“Then we’ll beat the demon before it can break through.”

Sezmar said this with all the seriousness of a child promising his mother he’d be home in time for dinner. Then, he charged, Were Slayer held in one hand.

“Take...this!!!”

Like a lumberjack felling a large tree, he burrowed the Were Slayer deep into the muscle of the demon’s leg.

“_____”

Blood gushed forth. The greater demon remained silent, merely opening its mouth with a look of irritation and flailing its arms around haphazardly.

“Whoa?!”

It swatted Sezmar like a fly, sending him soaring through the air. His silver armor rattled loudly as he collided with the ground.

“Sezmar?!” cried Sarah.

“I’m fine.” The fighter responded in good cheer, still squirming around on the

stone floor. “Thank the gods for their blessings.”

But his movements were weak, as was his voice. His armor was dented—he’d clearly lost some of his life.

No!

Sarah figured it out quickly. He wasn’t injured—he was paralyzed!

“The blessings of the gods aren’t infinite,” warned High Priest Tuck. “It won’t last long!”

“I know that!” Sarah immediately rushed to Sezmar’s side. She was quick, but elves had long since lost the swiftness they’d possessed during the age of myth. Even so, with the young maiden there to heal him, no wound—short of one that killed him outright—was even worth considering a wound.

Sezmar sluggishly rose to his feet. The demon’s arm came toward him once more.

“Tch! Bad showings from both Sezmar and Hawk today. Which means...!”

Moradin, who’d been asked to watch their backs, wasn’t going to overlook what was happening. The rhea were spoken of admirably. Even though rheas’ life spans had now been reduced to those of humans, their bravery had not similarly diminished. Moradin swiftly pulled a red oak staff from his back and pointed it straight at the demon’s nose.

“Eat this!”

The Rod of Flame bellowed a stream of fire that scorched the greater demon’s face.

This was one of the treasures they’d gained from the Monster Allocation Center. However, it was of no use to a fighter who stood on the front line, and the three spellcasters all had their own incantations.

Moradin puffed out his chest, having hit the demon with the kind of firepower that would reduce a normal monster to ash. Yet, when the rhea looked again, he noticed something—and his eyes widened. Despite the demon’s scorched face, fire was still burning in its eyes.

The rod had shot out a gout of flame as powerful as MAHALITO...yet it had

only blackened the demon's flesh. At least he'd done enough to buy them some time.

"The heck?!" cried Moradin. "Looks like we're in for some real trouble!"

Hawkwind tautened like a spring, preparing to strike from the void. He pounced, spinning with a blade in each hand as he sprang at the demon.

"Hi-yahhh!!!" Hawkwind's shout echoed as he tore through the flames.

"-----?!"

A voiceless scream. No one could believe their eyes. The demon's arm, which had been reaching out toward Sezmar, vanished into the void.

Hawkwind's strike had hacked off the treelike limb.

The black-clad man landed, then turned around to face his party. "It won't be possible to do the same to its head..." Hawkwind murmured. He knew that these otherworldly creatures were protected against death. "Prospero," he said sharply. "CORTU won't do any good. Dispel it."

"Are you crazy?! Greater demons *must* use curses!"

"Not *this* one."

Prospero didn't understand what Hawkwind was going on about, but he trusted the man's judgment. So, despite the font of knowledge in his head advising him to do otherwise, Prospero did as he was told.

"La'arif hea lai tazanme (*O flames, become a storm and blow violently!*)!"

CORTU was gone. In its place, Prospero cast LAHALITO and slammed a tempest of flames into the demon.

"-----?!"

Exposed to the full force of the blast, its massive body lurched for the first time, then stumbled.

Fourth-level magic. Would that kind of legendary spell work on a monster such as this? Moradin looked at Prospero.

Yet Prospero, who was among the very best mages in Scale, shook his head. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

"The spell doesn't affect demons! I'm just holding him back with hot wind!"

Ultimately, their attacks only served to buy time. For what, though? There was only one answer.

"Nice work, guys..." mumbled Sezmar.

"You just stay quiet!" Sarah wasted some of the time they'd bought to scold him.

The fighter got to his feet, and, well, he wasn't looking good. His white armor was dented and dripping with blood. But more than that, his voice lacked its usual vigor. He'd used a large amount of focus (hit points) to assume a defensive posture and was only still alive because he'd also been protected by BAMATU.

"I'm going for two in a row. Grit your teeth." Sarah placed her fair hand on his breastplate, not letting it bother her that the metal was stained with blood.
"Darui arifla kafzanme (*O life, your name is soft stone*)."

Sweat beaded on her brow. She prayed to the gods for the success of DIALKO —for the success of a miracle.

Strength suddenly returned to Sezmar's weakened limbs, and his stiff joints regained their flexibility.

Sarah took a deep, ragged breath as sweat trickled down her skin. This next prayer would take a heavy toll on her, grind away at her soul.

But so what?!

If that was what it took to save Sezmar, she'd grind her soul down to dust.

"Mimuarif darui (*O power of life that pervades all things, gather in this one*)!"

The maiden's prayer reached the heavens and called down the all-healing miracle of MADI. The breath of life came from all directions, whirling around Sezmar, pouring inside him and restoring his body.

His crushed flesh grew whole. Broken bones were knitted together. Lost blood flowed anew within his repaired veins.

Sarah watched Sezmar come back from the brink of death and then clapped

her palms on either side of his crushed helmet. She gazed through the visor at his obscured face, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Don’t be reckless,” she said. “I can’t heal you if you’re dead, and I don’t want any unnecessary expenses. Got it?”

“Sure!”

“Good! Go!”

Sarah, suppressing all of her feelings, gave Sezmar a slap on the back and shoved him in the right direction. She could heal his wounds and mend his bones, but she couldn’t do anything about the exhaustion of the soul. It was a well-known fact among adventurers that if a body took too much damage, it was difficult to resurrect. But the fearless Sezmar rose boldly, holding his Were Slayer in one hand.

He was alive.

In front of him was a greater demon sans one arm. Behind him were his trusty companions.

“How could I possibly lose?!”

Sezmar always pressed forward and never doubted himself—he knew these to be some of his strong points. He raced straight toward the greater demon, swinging the Were Slayer with both hands.

“Haaaaah!!!”

If the mark of an excellent sword was never betraying its master’s expectations, then the Were Slayer was an excellent sword. The tempered steel blade worked with its master’s strength to cleave through sinew and bone, ripping through the demon’s flesh until it tore out the other side.

“———?!?!?”

The greater demon’s silent scream shook the air and made the entire dungeon rumble. It had already been thrown off-balance by the force of LAHALITO, and now, it toppled over.

Another rumbling shook the dungeon as the demon collapsed upon the stone tiles. The All-Stars were not about to miss this opportunity.

Sezmar, covered in demonic ichor, shouted, “Get ‘em, Hawkwind!”

“Right!” At his leader’s command, Hawkwind lunged, blade in hand. Like a flying squirrel running along the branches, he leaped up the demon’s great body, closed in on its throat, and delivered the coup de grâce.

“Hi-yah!!!”

The demon’s boulder-like head fell to the floor. The way it rolled across the stone tiles seemed anticlimactic—almost comedic.

Everyone—except for Hawkwind—breathed a sigh of relief and looked at their fellow party members.

“Is it...over...?” Sarah slumped to the ground, exhausted.

Prospero let out a deep sigh. “I certainly hope so...”

Moradin scowled. “Let me just make it clear—I didn’t trigger an alarm, okay?”

“We know,” Sezmar said as he flicked blood from his Were Slayer. “That was clearly a wandering monster.”

The calm and collected High Priest Tuck wiped the sweat from his brow. After checking on Sarah, praising Prospero’s hard work, and clapping Moradin on the shoulder, he walked over to Sezmar.

“I shudder to imagine more of them roaming this floor...” the dwarf said with a glance at Hawkwind, who was examining the greater demon. He then took a look at Sezmar’s wounds.

It seemed Sarah’s miracles had been effective—he couldn’t find anything wrong with the fighter.

Not physically, anyway. If High Priest Tuck could find any fault in their leader, it would be with Sezmar’s *fate*. His was the fate of a young man who had trod into the abyss of the dungeon again and again—of one who’d strayed yet further from the realm of humanity. Even knowing that Sezmar wouldn’t have survived otherwise, High Priest Tuck felt melancholy at the realization. The end that awaited anyone who ascended to the peak of god or demonhood was nothing to be happy about.

“We’ve either been lucky up until now, or we got incredibly unlucky this

time..." muttered High Priest Tuck.

"Don't you think this is part of that 'great flow' you were talking about, High Priest?" asked Sezmar.

The dwarf nodded gravely. "Could be. We ought to return for now and recover."

"You said it..." Sezmar had no real reason to object—they would wrap up here and return to the surface. He turned to the man standing over the demon's corpse. "Hey, Hawk!"

There was no response.

The black-clad man still held his blade in both hands. His eyes were locked on some point deep in the darkness.

"Hawk?"

He's ready for battle.

The All-Stars all knew what that meant. Instead of responding with disbelief, they all reacted in a way that would allow them to survive. They took up their weapons and staffs with weary hands, peered into the gloom, and prepared themselves.

Rumbling noises. Vibrations. The overwhelming sense that something was out there.

All of it was coming for them.

"You've gotta be kidding..." Sarah said in an almost tearful tone. She spoke for all of them, praying with her whole heart and apologizing to Kadorto for the way she'd cursed him earlier. If this were a trial, they'd been through enough already. If it were a game, she pleaded that he'd relent. If it were a punishment, she bid him show forgiveness.

"I told you, didn't I...?"

Hawkwind, meanwhile, seemed unperturbed. He stared deep into the darkness—deep into the dungeon—at the things that were coming from within. Just like he always did.

A massive army...

“...It’s both.”

Moments later, the demonic horde descended upon them.

§

“I see... It’s little wonder you couldn’t find her body, then.”

“Why speak of it in the past tense?” asked larumas.

*“Well, it *is* an ongoing situation, after all.”*

Sister Ainkki let out a sigh.

They were in the Temple of Cant, sitting next to each other on a bench. The sister was giving him her usual lecture. Not by larumas’s choice—he’d been forced.

She’d only just now heard what had happened when larumas told her about the adventurer girl Raraja had been looking for.

Honestly.

Aine wasn’t upset over how long it had taken him to tell her or that the girl’s whereabouts were once again unknown. No, something else bothered her...

“That girl was brought back to live a better life. Why must she be so disrespectful of that?”

She was upset that a girl who’d overcome death was choosing to waste the new life she had been given. If this was how she was going to act, then she would’ve been better off staying in the city of death with God.

The people who’d brought her back were to be faulted, but so was she for answering the call. Surely it would have only been worth coming back if she had found the will to overcome her situation.

“So, what do you intend to do?”

“Raraja’s searching the first floor with Berkanaan.”

*“I was asking about *you*, larumas-sama.”*

“I wonder about that myself...”

As he murmured that, larumas looked toward the girl sitting in the sunlit courtyard of the temple. The redhead was peering down at two swords, a conflicted expression on her face. Every once in a while, she would pick one up, swing it, and then swing the other to compare. She scowled each time.

It seemed that the sword Goerz had presumably discarded wasn't up to her standards either.

Huh. She doesn't like the Sword Cusinart, and she doesn't like the Sword of Slashing.

Smiling imperceptibly, larumas muttered, "She's so picky."

"Oh my, there's no need to be arrogant, larumas-sama," Ainikki said. Her long ears stood on end—they were a reminder of her elven heritage, which was the source of her beauty. "What she's looking for is not simply a powerful sword, but *her* sword."

"Hmm."

"Who would be satisfied with something just handed to them?"

Especially an adventurer in this town.

larumas mulled over what Aine had said, then nodded. "There's some truth in that."

"There's all the truth in it." Sister Aine looked proud of herself. She puffed up a bit, vivaciously sticking out her full bosom. "Still, it's quite unusual."

"What is?"

"Oh my. You haven't realized for yourself?" The beautiful, silver-haired elf's eyes harbored an elegance that hadn't changed since her ancestors' time. They narrowed as she giggled. "larumas-sama is saying that he doesn't know what to do!"

Her voice was clear as a bell. What bliss it must have been for larumas to have it all to himself. Many men would've cursed larumas if they'd known that he was the only one who'd heard her laugh. But the man himself, the black-clad corpse-hauler, simply let out a deep sigh.

"Let me make it simple for you."

Aine nodded. “Yes.”

“I don’t know how to proceed because this Orlaya girl—and Goerz too—have nothing to do with exploring the dungeon.”

Don’t be absurd.

This man was of indeterminate age, and still, some of the addlebrained things that came out of his mouth exasperated her.

But she liked it.

If he was lacking in some way, that meant the value of his life—the value of his death—could still be increased. Sister Ainikki valued the process of trying to fill people’s gaps and deficiencies.

“If we all stuck to only the things that were directly pertinent to our lives, people would do nothing but eat, sleep, and copulate.” She held up a single finger as she mentioned sex, not giving a second thought to it. Aine was the picture of a nun—stubbornly but mercifully lecturing a boy who didn’t have his act together. “How is that a good life? Everything starts with things that aren’t related to us. With things that seem pointless.”

“So even things that are pointless *aren’t* pointless?” larumas mulled over these words, shaking his head. “Sounds like philosophy.”

“No, it’s theology!”

“Of course it is.”

If that was the case, it was beyond the understanding of a mere corpse-hauler like larumas. But somehow, the words themselves were convincing.

Seeing his reaction, Sister Ainikki smiled ever so slightly. “Is it not the same with adventuring, larumas-sama?”

“Well...”

How was he going to answer that one?

Before larumas’s thoughts could get to that point, the doors were thrown open with a loud bang.

“larumas, you here?!” A lone elven girl raced into the temple. The

worshippers and monks paid her no heed as she brazenly strode toward the back of the holy space. “I need your help with something!”

Sarah of the All-Stars ran up to larumas, looking none too happy about needing to seek his aid. Garbage raised her head a little, then yelped in distress and backed away when she saw the state Sarah was in.

Dripping with sweat—face streaked with tears—hair disheveled—white skin scratched and bruised.

Even so, her beauty was unmarred. Was it because she was an elf? Or perhaps...was it because she was naked save for the thin sheet of cloth she'd barely managed to cover herself with?

§

“Damn it, Garbage and larumas!”

Raraja shouted angrily inside the dungeon. Behind him, Berkana flinched and cowered.

Clink, clink!

A coin bouncing across the floor. The rhythmic sounds of two sets of footsteps.

They consulted the map occasionally. It was just the two of them exploring by themselves. This made Berkana feel uneasy...and also, a little happy.

“They must’ve...thought you could handle it, Raraja...-kun.”

She wasn’t so confident that she could bring herself to add “and that I could handle it.” The fact of the matter was that Raraja’s skills had improved so much that even a borderline amateur like Berkana could tell how much he’d changed. He checked all four directions as he progressed along the corridor, looking out for traps beneath their feet and carefully, yet boldly, moving along the path.

It wasn’t just that his abilities had improved—he was steadily learning how to advance through the dungeon. It was a kind of experience that couldn’t be gained by simply fighting monsters.

Although...

"Nah, there's no way that man thinks I can handle it. It's probably closer to 'Yeah, go ahead. Do whatever you want.'"

It seemed to Berkana that Raraja hadn't noticed his own growth. He had nothing but complaints.

Not that I blame him...

That rhea girl, Orlaya, had gone missing again. Goerz too.

It was an all-too-common story in Scale, but not for Raraja.

"I want to see her and talk to her again. Help me, please," Raraja had begged.

Considering the desperation of his request, Iarumas *had* given him a rather offhanded response. And as for Garbage... Berkana smiled weakly, staring at Raraja from behind.

I think that one was Raraja-kun's fault...

What had he done wrong? It'd involved the sword she'd brought back. The sword the blood-soaked Garbage had held out proudly, as if saying, *"How's that?"* The moment he'd realized it was a Sword of Slashing, Raraja had snatched it out of her hands without a second thought.

"Where'd you find—?!"

Obviously, Garbage had howled and pounced on him. She'd been happy to *give* it to him, but she refused to let him snatch it. Never in her life had she taken that kind of treatment lying down.

They'd gotten into a tussle—punching, biting, kicking, throwing. Even with their size difference, a thief could never match a fighter who'd slain a dragon.

After reclaiming the sword, Garbage had snarled at Raraja. She'd turned her head aside in contempt.

And now, as a result, it was just the two of them: Raraja and Berkana.

Thinking about their objective, Berkana felt a dull pain rush through her ample chest. Even so, she was thrilled that Raraja felt he could rely on her. She kept lumbering behind him.

"Do you have...any idea...where to start looking?" Berkana asked.

“Uh... No.” This was a sore spot for Raraja, and he scowled, not wanting to admit it. “I don’t. But I’ve still gotta look.”

“Yeah...”

The conversation died after that.

Berkana hated it, so she desperately whipped her head around, looking timidly past the crossroads.

“Um, have you considered asking Ainikki-san to cast KANDI...?”

“She charges money, doesn’t she?” Raraja grumbled, reeling in the coin. “I don’t mind paying, but going and relying on her for help when I can’t do something... It’s just not right.”

“Yeah...”

Berkana gave a small nod—large to anyone else. Besides, KANDI could only locate the *dead body of a party member*. Berkana wasn’t brave enough to mention that fact. Perhaps she shouldn’t have brought up the spell in the first place.

Suddenly overwhelmed with regret, Berkana tried to move the conversation on to something else.

“W-Well, how about, um...asking around on the first floor?”

“I might’ve, if we didn’t stand out so much.”

“Urkh...”

“No, I didn’t mean—” The boy clicked his tongue. “It’s not you, Berkana. It’s me.”

That’s why, ultimately, Raraja had been left with no choice. The pair searched all over the dungeon, as if trying to fill out a grid.

Slow and steady. One step at a time.

Dungeon exploration was built upon this kind of mind-numbingly endless labor. To have done it by himself for so long, Iarumas must have been...

What, I wonder?

Berkanan didn't dislike the man clad in black, but she'd always found him inscrutable. He wasn't a bad guy, though. He must've had his reasons for not joining her and Raraja today.

Suddenly...

"Wait!"

"Eek!"

Berkanan's huge body trembled as Raraja shouted for her to stop. She ran behind him with plodding steps, trying to hide. Or at least, she *thought* she was hiding.

Raraja moved up to the corner, pressed himself against the wall, and crouched down. He drew his dagger. Berkanan clumsily gripped the Dragon Slayer she was using in place of a staff.

Should she move up to the front? Or should she cast a spell? She pulled down the wide brim of her hat.

"Wh-What's that...?" she stammered.

"I dunno...but something's coming!"

They didn't have to wait long.

"Argh, how dare they! What insolence! What brazen behavior! Grounds for execution, no doubt!"

A high-pitched screeching voice. Footsteps that sounded like they were slapping against the ground. The light of a square lantern, only faintly visible.

Through the gloom, they saw an old man with a hunched spine that made him look like a flea. This was probably the result of the massive bag he carried on his back. The man was yelling and throwing a fit.

"Using that thing without the king's authorization! Honestly, what—!"

"Old man...?" murmured Berkanan.

"Ooh!"

The dink's eyes shone when he saw Berkanan. This was an old man she'd been previously acquainted with—Bank. However, his presence was more

bizarre and erratic than it had been the last time they'd met. She let out an involuntary squeak.

Raraja stepped up as if to protect her, though he was much smaller than she was.

If only I were shorter... The thought crossed her mind, but she quickly shook her head, driving it away. “I-It’s dangerous, you know? Coming to the dungeon...all alone...”

Raraja scoffed. “What are you even doing here, old codger? I thought you hung around the tavern acting as a moneylender.”

“Heh heh... Well, what a coincidence. Young man, young lady...”

The bizarre shine in his eyes seemed to cloak itself, fading from view, and his wrinkled old face twisted with an obsequious smile.

Despite all of this...Berkanan could kind of tell—perhaps they had just witnessed the old man’s true nature?

“Well you see, I felt a strange presence in the dungeon, so I came to have a little look for myself...”

“To have a little look?” Raraja scowled. “We’re not out in the farmers’ fields here.”

“Heh, heh heh. It’s not so different. After all, this *is* the place where adventurers ripen...”

“Then you harvest them for profit, huh?”

“Eheh heh... Well, something like that.” Bank bowed his head repeatedly, not bothering to conceal his grin.

The old man’s behavior was odd, but that wasn’t what frightened Berkanan. No, she was looking past Raraja and behind Bank. Looking into the darkness.

The weird and terrifying tales her grandmother had told her as a child raced through Berkanan’s mind.

The terror that struck the town of Almarl. The sorcerer Hargis. The curse of the ancient emperor.

“U-Um.” Her voice cracked. “What did you mean, a strange presence...?”

“Kind young lady and young man.” The small, flea-like old man did not answer her question. Instead, in a sharp tone, he said, “Run away now. You shouldn’t be here.”

“What?” asked Raraja.

“Yes, yes. And I should go too. I wouldn’t want to let you young people die. No, I wouldn’t want that.”

As he said this, Bank pressed something into Berkana’s hand.

“Erm...?”

It was an old, filthy cloth, so grimy she couldn’t even tell what its original color was.

But what did Bank mean? There was no need to ask. From deep within the darkness, there was a rumbling. The ground shook. No, this was...

“Foot...steps...?”

“Let’s run for it, Berkana! Old man!”

“Huh? Eek...?!”

Raraja moved faster than anything else. He grabbed Berkana’s hand—and the old man’s—and then turned heel and took off sprinting.

At least, he thought he was pulling both of them along. But then he realized that the only hand he’d managed to take hold of was Berkana’s soft one.

“Hey, old man?!”

“Old man?!”

Even though she shouldn’t have, Berkana turned to look back at Bank as Raraja was pulling her away.

Behind the old man in the darkness...there were blazing eyes.

Those... Those were...

“Eek...?!”

Berkana was too terrified—her legs refused to obey when faced with

otherworldly monsters. Her teeth chattered. Her vision blurred. She wanted to scream and to cower.

This can't be happening. This can't be happening. This can't be happening. No, it just can't.

Seeing her in that state, the old man cackled.

Raraja clicked his tongue. "Hey, get up!" he shouted, hauling Berkana to her feet.

His palm—small but firm, strong and warm—was the only thing that helped her pull herself together. Berkana let out a wheeze that was somewhere between crying and a scream, then stumbled away, tripping over her own feet as she ran.

"Now, go! And carry out your task with all due haste!!!"

The old man's laughter chased after them wherever they went.

§

"So, who died? Hawk or Sezmar?"

"Hey now!" The attractive blond man let out a gregarious laugh. "That's not very nice, Mifune."

They were back in Durga's Tavern. Sezmar was bare-headed, lacking his signature dragon helmet. He wore ordinary clothes, and his beloved Were Slayer wasn't hanging from his waist.

Obviously, it was the same for the others—all six members of the All-Stars, starting with Sarah, who'd borrowed a habit from Sister Ainikki.

They'd completely lost every scrap of their equipment.

Hawkwind was the sole exception. He didn't carry a single blade on him, and yet he alone remained as imposing as ever.

"Sarah looked distraught when she came rushing in, that's all," Iarumas said, speaking in a relaxed tone as he faced the six of them.

Garbage was, as usual, on Sarah's lap. Despite all the hugs she was getting, she was docile and kept her mouth shut. Sarah interpreted this as the girl being

considerate of her, so she petted her red hair.

“Woof...”

The bark was surly. But Garbage was going to put up with it, and the elf appreciated that. Sarah had been more shaken up than she’d initially thought—enough that a girl who’d earned a moniker like Garbage had been able to notice it.

As she calmed down—thanks to Garbage’s help—there was one other thing that started to bother her. The habit that she’d borrowed felt loose around the chest and tight around her hips...

Oh, for the love of...!

Sarah’s jealousy of her friend flared, and she decided to take her foul mood out on the black-clad man in front of her.

“Oh, I looked distraught, did I? Are you implying that I’m a dullard? That I wouldn’t cast LOKTOFEIT until somebody *died*?”

Moradin saw what Sarah was up to. He snickered, then interjected, “Actually, the one who cast it was High Priest Tuck.”

“Hey!”

The rhea thief never missed a trick—he was wearing a set of fine clothing that he’d procured from who-knows-where. On closer inspection...was that a dagger on his hip?! Fitting behavior for a thief.

“Still, it’s true—we were in a tight spot,” Moradin continued, waving away Sarah’s sharp glare. “We could only cast DIALKO so many times. And we were up against a horde that used paralysis and poison.” He was probably being sincere in everything he said, including his final comment: “Besides, they didn’t have chests anyway...”

Beside him sat High Priest Tuck, the one who’d cast the return spell LOKTOFEIT. He let out a deep sigh. Although he usually looked the part of an armed priest—built like a rock and clad in a helm and plate armor—as he was now, he also looked like an old man.

“Sorry,” High Priest Tuck murmured. His face was wrinkled with exhaustion. “I

weighed whether we should retreat against whether I should cast LOKTOFEIT, and I erred on the side of caution. That happens when you get old.”

Could they have safely retreated? Perhaps, but it would’ve been a gamble. On the other hand, LOKTOFEIT was a guaranteed trip to the surface for all of them. However, the price for that magic was by no means a small one. The spell only rescued their bodies. Everything else got left behind.

In short, the All-Stars had lost all of their equipment in the blink of an eye.

“Hey, we were looking at potentially getting wiped out,” Sezmar reasoned. “It costs money when one of us dies, and they could be lost forever. You made a good call.”

He laughed the loss off like it was no big deal. They were alive, and that was what really mattered. When it came to looking on the bright side of life, the free knight was certain there was nobody better at it than him.

“And anyway,” continued Sezmar, “I’ve got a buddy I can hire to retrieve our equipment.”

“I wouldn’t mind doing it.”

That was why they’d come to larumas. Sister Ainikki had been delighted by this turn of events, but she was unfortunately still busy with work. She’d objected at first, but the All-Stars and larumas left the temple and relocated to the tavern.

larumas of the Black Rod looked at Prospero from beneath his cloak, not hesitating to lean back in his chair and relax.

“You say there were greater demons?” he asked.

“Yes.” The handsome mage nodded gravely. “I have no doubt—those fiends were indeed greater demons.”

Their name was recorded in the history books, and they were no less threatening than the fearsome archdemons. These beasts were beings not of this world—they were residents of the demon world, or some other world that people called that. Even for adventures who’d slain demonic deities and ascended to legendary status, greater demons were still dangerous foes.

“High Priest Tuck made the right call...”

The dwarf’s expression relaxed a little when Prospero murmured that. High Priest Tuck was at peace with his decision, but his friend’s consideration still touched him.

Iarumas, meanwhile, crossed his arms. “Hmm,” he grunted. “A whole horde, huh?”

“Yes. I earned a lot from them,” muttered Hawkwind. The man stood at a distance from his companions, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. His brave face showed just the hint of a smile. “After all, they couldn’t cast spells.”

“What...?” Iarumas’s eyes widened.

“That’s right...” Prospero failed to notice Iarumas’s reaction, and when he continued, his voice was full of disbelief. “Greater demons cast spells as easily as they breathe. Yet these ones pressed on us with brute force...”

“That’s how we got out of there alive, though,” Sezmar pointed out.

“But are we *sure* Prospero didn’t just get it wrong?” asked Sarah.

“I didn’t...”

“Maybe he did,” Moradin chimed in, “but I’m pushing the theory that they were fake greater demons!”

“Hrmm...”

The All-Stars bantered jovially back and forth. It seemed that one decisive defeat wasn’t going to dampen their morale. And once they got their equipment back, they’d set out for the dungeon as a party once more.

But their camaraderie was of no concern for Iarumas at the moment. No, the most important thing was...

“There’s a horde of greater demons that can’t cast spells, huh?”

“Yes, indeed.”

That. There was no way he could miss the significance of it. He tensed up, feeling a current running through all of his nerves. Something in his lost

memories, or perhaps in his instincts, told him that his prey was close at hand.

Indeed, Larumas was feeling a powerful desire to kill the dungeon master and take the amulet. That instinctive sense of certainty easily dispelled any hesitation that he might've still had. His soul, his nerves, his very being—they were all like an honed blade. It was only a question of where and how that blade would be swung.

And then—

“Hey, Larumas! There’s a swarm of big-ass monsters!”

“Th-They were...greater demons...!”

With hurried—and heavy—footsteps, two out-of-breath youths rushed into the tavern. They must have run all the way from the dungeon. Raraja and Berkana headed straight to Larumas’s table, their faces twisted with looks of desperation.

“I already know.”

“Ooh...”

Those words alone were enough to make the boy crumple.

“Whoa, whoa,” Moradin said, his eyes wide. “You guys ran into them too?!”

“It’s impressive that you made it out alive,” remarked High Priest Tuck.

“That old man...” Raraja said between gasping breaths. “It was the dink! He helped us get away...”

“I see, I see. Well, have a seat.”

The high priest pulled aside chairs for the two of them, and they both sank down into them. There was enough of a height difference between High Priest Tuck and Berkana that they could have been child and parent, yet the dwarf was the one treating her like his daughter.

Prospero pushed a pitcher of water toward Berkana and Raraja, and Sarah poured them two cups. Hawkwind did not get involved—he seemed to distance himself even more at the mention of the dink.

Sezmar watched each of his party members’ reactions and then smiled at his

friend.

“This could end up like the situation with the red dragon, you know?”

“I’ll kill them before then,” larumas answered bluntly.

Sezmar shrugged. That was the end of it. If this man said he’d do it, he surely would. No more needed to be said.

“So long as you don’t forget our equipment, fine by me.”

“Yeah.”

Garbage trotted over to larumas. It seemed she’d taken the chance to escape while Sarah was fussing over the other two. She looked up at the man in black. It was almost like she was saying *“If you have them, then I can go now, right?”* Aloud, the girl gave a short “Arf.” Then, as if to show off her lackey’s accomplishment, she held up a scrap of cloth and pressed it toward him.

larumas did something rare for him—he gasped.

“What is this?”

“Huh? Oh, that?” Berkanaan nodded. Garbage must have taken it off her at some point. It had been a ragged scrap of cloth, even before she’d clenched it in her hand the whole time they were escaping from the dungeon. Although it was so filthy that it was impossible to tell its original color, it looked like it had been decorative—a ribbon of some sort.

“I met that man, Bank, in the dungeon and...he gave it to me? I guess? Yeah, he gave it to me.”

“The old dink was acting crazy,” Raraja grumbled, having finally caught his breath after getting a drink of water. “Rambling about the king’s permission and our task. He was totally off his rocker...”

“You can’t blame him,” said Berkanaan. “There *were* greater demons...”

Raraja resisted the urge to say, “I don’t think that’s got anything to do with it.” His eyes were fixed on Garbage, who had snatched the cloth from Berkanaan and was presenting it to larumas.

“Why that little...” *She gets all upset about me taking stuff, but it’s fine for her*

to do it? Raraja cast a dubious glance in Garbage's direction.

Seemingly unfazed, the girl showed off the cloth and then trotted back over to Berkanan.

"Yap!"

That means "well done," I guess?

"Erm... I... Uh, yeah..." Berkanan put on a silly grin. "Thanks...?"

"Aroooff!" Garbage gave a yelp of satisfaction and then pushed the cloth back toward Berkanan—returning it. After, she snorted and reached out over the table, looking for something to eat. Moradin laughed with wry amusement and pushed a large plate toward her.

Not that any of this was all that important.

"Be happy," larumas told Raraja, a strange passion creeping into his tone. "We've found the person you're looking for."

"You mean it?!" Raraja leaned in to hear more.

"Yeah."

"Our enemy's the elevator," he murmured, a dangerous glint in his eye.

"Ele-what...?"

"In the back of the Monster Allocation Center."

Ooh... Raraja winced. They'd been there once before.

The endless supply of monsters. That suspicious priest. The conspiracy of the Priests of Fang. A desperate battle.

That abyss on the third floor was what adventurers now called the Monster Allocation Center. He'd been there himself, and then again with Berkanan. At this point, it was overrun by a horde of demons.

But that was no reason not to go.

"There, huh?" the boy asked.

larumas nodded. "How about we set out as soon as you're ready to go?"

"Huh...?"

What was larumas's questioning tone meant to convey? Perhaps, "You're coming with us?" or "What's Orlaya even doing there in the first place?"

larumas smiled faintly at the muddled questions he'd churned up.

"There are only so many people who would want to *cultivate* greater demons."

§

It was a mass of meat.

In front of the hole that led to the depths, a swollen mass of meat—a pillar of flesh—rose up to seal it off. But this thing wasn't a guardian by any means. The girl who'd been buried in the fleshy pillar was there to greet the beings from the abyss—as an offering of sorts.

"Ur...gh..."

No longer able to utter coherent words, she simply groaned. She felt nothing in her limbs, or even in her lower half that had been buried in the pillar. She'd been entombed in its flesh—devoured, swallowed. How would they toy with her now? She no longer had the willpower left to think about it.

"Grrrrrr..."

Suddenly, a sound shook the dungeon. The elevator.

Great shadowy figures crawled up out of the shaft that connected to Hell—fiends from the other world, skinless, with blue, pulsating muscles.

Greater demons.

Their infernal eyes stopped on the pitiful girl who had been offered as a sacrifice.

No, that wasn't completely accurate. It wasn't that they had registered her existence; it was more like they'd tried to move forward and had happened to notice the pebble lying at their feet. That was all.

Thus, they opened their bestial maws, and a vortex of cold air formed. The final warning before MADALTO was unleashed. Controlling the true words of a spell came as naturally as breathing to such high-level demons.

“MA DAL— (*Mimuarif daruarifla—*).”

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

The demons were cut off. Interrupted. The girl’s mouth, tongue, and throat no longer served any purpose but to chant those words.

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

She hated it. The true words burned her mind with each utterance. They scorched her nerves, ground away at her soul.

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

However, the girl’s body was no longer under her control. She was only the mouth of the pillar she was embedded in. Her will was no longer her own. That was why, though she cried and vomited, her face covered with every bodily fluid imaginable, she could not resist.

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

Silence. Silence. Silence.

Again and again, she spoke the true words of MONTINO.

They said spells didn’t affect demons, but that wasn’t entirely true—spells just didn’t work *easily* on them. There were ways to make them work. Any number of ways.

“Ah.”

Her throat spasmed. *I hate this. Make it stop. I don’t want to chant that spell. Save me.*

She could scream all she wanted, but her cries would go unheard. Her mouth, throat, and tongue were no longer her own.

“Hea mimuarifnuun (*O world, heed my command*).”

A prayer to the gods. Words that could transform the world. They ground

away at her entire being. The intense pain, like her very existence was being filed down, made the girl scream and writhe.

HAMAN was a spell that brought about literal miracles. It was a small matter for it to rob demons of their spell protection and their ability to speak.

In exchange, the girl's very existence was being consumed.

“_____”

The greater demons, now unable to speak, stayed there for some time. Then, they slowly began to move. Their footsteps echoed as they left the chamber. It was as if they were being led somewhere.

To the surface—to the first level of the dungeon.

But the girl did not have time to watch them go.

“Agh...gah... Hah...?!”

Suddenly, the mass of meat pulsated around her. Even though she should have lost all sensation, the girl suddenly felt something pouring inside of her.

I hate this. Stop it already. No. No. Nooo...!

Her pleas went unvoiced. But even if she had screamed them out, no one would have listened.

It poured into her—not something physical. Something that existed on a more fundamental level.

Each time she cast a spell, each time a part of her was filed away, the *meat* made up for it, filling the missing parts back in. It was a horrifying sensation, as if her very existence was being overwritten.

But more frightening was the fact that it wasn't entirely unpleasant. She was reaching a new level—the awakening of the soul. This was the indisputable proof that she'd gained new power.

The magic wore her down repeatedly, lowering her level, and the meat filled her back up, raising it.

The repetition of that process denied her any agency. Degraded her into something mechanical. Her mouth opened wide. Meaningless groans leaked

out, along with dripping saliva. Even her sole remaining eye was losing its light.

“Demons will open gates to another world, inviting in more and more of their kind...”

However, even witnessing her miserable plight, the Priest of Fang smiled with glee. In his hand, he grasped a shard of something—an amulet. As he lit up the magical power that burned within it, the priest continued talking with a feverish passion.

“But once their spells are sealed, the demons they summon will be the same —”

“So they can’t cast spells,” interrupted Goerz. “How does that work?”

The priest could not hide a disgruntled snort at having his intoxicating moment interrupted by this boorish man. “Who can say? I am sure the rules of the other world are beyond our ability to imagine.”

Goerz turned to look at Orlaya, who had become a miserable—or perhaps, a simply pathetic—pillar of flesh.

There was no hint of pity or compassion in his eyes—only a slight lust for the small girl’s frail body, which was writhing with a passion that was too much for her. Perhaps he also wore the “Aw, look what I did” expression of a child who had crushed a bug.

Well, I made my money back.

How had he met the rhea anyway? He was always catching brats who wandered in from the sticks—ones who didn’t know left from right. If anything surprised him, it was that he’d occasionally see their remains at the temple after they’d died serving as meat shields.

Looks like someone brought in the merchandise I left behind.

Normally, Goerz would have left the girl to rot, but one of the monks must have misunderstood something. He’d said, “*This is a rare girl with the potential to become a bishop. Surely God will allow her to be resurrected.*”

Goerz didn’t have book smarts, but he wasn’t the kind of fool who’d let a profit like that slip away from him. He could just steal something for free—after

all, that was the best way to guarantee he didn't take a loss. However, he didn't mind sometimes paying a small charge if he had to.

The girl's resurrection had cost a considerable amount, but she'd returned without being reduced to ashes. And that look on her face! She'd been flooded with wonder and delight, followed by despair and terror when she'd seen who had paid the tithe.

After that, well, he'd disciplined her as she cried and screamed. He'd used her to identify items, even if they were cursed. Then, finally, he'd done this. All said, Goerz considered this to be a tidy profit for something he'd just found lying around.

"Well, just glad she's of use to you," said Goerz.

"Yes. Yes. It was hard to find both a mage and a bishop, you know." The Priest of Fang showed no interest whatsoever in Orlaya's history. He carried on murmuring emotionally, always wearing that nauseatingly pleasant smile of his. "I am truly grateful to have found someone who had an expendable bishop."

"Well, I'm glad for you." There was no feeling in those words. Goerz dug wax out of his ear and blew it away. "So now you're gonna send the greater demons you've gathered to the surface, huh?"

"Indeed. Embarrassing as it is to admit, a single creature did prove insufficient..."

Goerz chuckled. "Aha ha." *I'll bet these guys were responsible for all that ruckus with the red dragon.*

Because the dragon hadn't been enough, they'd now sent a horde of greater demons. These fools were thinking like children. Were their backs to the wall? Were they just not considering all their options? Or was this the only thing they could do?

Well, it doesn't matter.

Goerz didn't care. Harassing Iarumas and Raraja—that was all he was here for.

Other than that, he was just glad to sell Orlaya off for profit.

“So, how would you like to be rewarded?” asked the priest. “A position? An honorary title...?”

“Not interested,” Goerz said dismissively. “While the demons are raising hell up top, we’ll have things down here all to ourselves. I’ll make better money here than serving in some foreign court.”

Besides, if he rose up in the world on a recommendation from these priests, he’d always be stuck under their thumb. Anyone who tried to make Goerz bow his head could just go die. It wasn’t even an option he would consider. And anyway, these were the kinds of guys who had to resort to summoning greater demons. They probably wouldn’t be around for long anyway.

“Oh, and don’t worry about *them*.” Goerz patted the sword on his back, not betraying any hint of what he was really feeling. “Even if they do get past these greater demons you’re so proud of, I’ll kill ‘em for you myself.”

The priest nodded. “Yes... Yes. I appreciate the offer.”

That concluded their business negotiations. Goerz had offered up Orlaya, the Priest of Fang had summoned demons, and Goerz got the treasure.

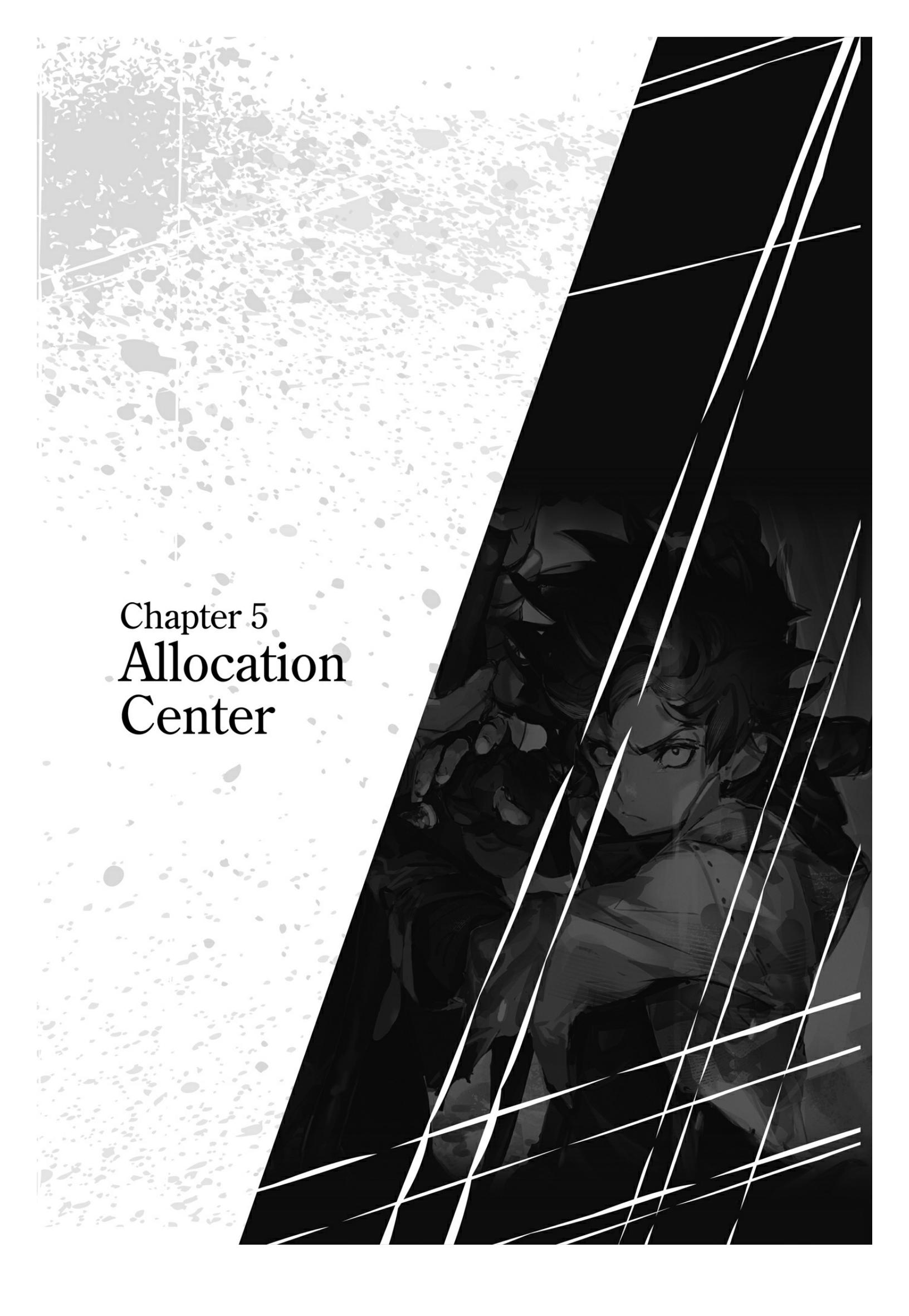
The man flashed a toothy grin, satisfied that it was a win for everybody, and then spoke up once more. “Still, that amulet’s really something, huh?”

“Yes. This is the deepest secret of magecraft. A symbol of absolute authority that was once wielded by a great wizard...”

“Hmm...”

The priest spoke passionately of the amulet, almost as if it were his own power he was boasting about.

He failed to notice Goerz’s eyes fixated upon it.



Chapter 5

Allocation

Center

Chapter 5: Allocation Center

“Well, shall we get going?”

At this point, Raraja wasn’t even surprised to see Sister Ainikki standing in front of the dungeon with a big smile.

“Did you hire her?” he asked larumas.

“We were at the temple when Sarah rushed in.”

“Once I heard there were greater demons, I couldn’t just sit still!”

Considering those long ears of hers, there was little doubt that she’d heard everything Raraja and larumas had just said. Still, she was giddy.

Well, that’s just how she is. She was eager to come along when we fought the fire dragon too, so it’s little wonder she’s here now. She’s strong and reliable, and besides, our party doesn’t have a priest.

It was better to have her along than not, so Raraja resigned himself to the fact that she’d be coming.

“It’s good to be working with you, Garbage-sama, Berkana-sama.”

“S-Sure, it’s nice...working with you too,” Berkana replied falteringly.

“Arf,” Garbage barked.

Berkana had adventured alongside the sister before—obviously, so had Garbage. The women exchanged pleasantries as larumas checked his equipment. Figuring everything would be fine, Raraja started attending to his own equipment, but then...

“Yap! Yiiip!”

Suddenly, Garbage’s bark took on a different quality, and Raraja couldn’t help but look at her. The redhead—that leftover monster snack—was barking at the old sword slung over Ainikki’s back. She reached out toward it, jumping up and down. Was that her way of begging for permission to touch it?

Garbage had ultimately decided that she didn't like the Sword of Slashing. Currently, she was carrying the Sword Cusinart again, but she was thoroughly dissatisfied with it too. Her barks probably meant something along the lines of "You've got a sword too, huh? Let me borrow it."

However...

"Hee hee. No, Garbage-sama. This is *my* sword." Sister Ainikki offered a serene smile, gently refusing her request.

To Raraja's eyes, the sword on Aine's back looked old and rusted. Back when they'd set out to slay the dragon, she'd mentioned that she should've brought her sword. Was this the blade she'd been referring to? Well, even if it was, she was also holding her usual spiked mace for some reason.

"It wouldn't feel right in your hands..." Sister Ainikki murmured. "You have your own sword."

"Woof..."

Garbage didn't understand the words, but nonetheless, she backed down with a dissatisfied growl. Was she being understanding? Did she not want to steal her minion's stuff? Or did she just not want to oppose Ainikki? Raraja couldn't tell which it was.

"Are you going to draw it?" Iarumas asked plainly, having finished inspecting his own equipment and items.

Did he know what kind of sword it was?

Sister Aine put her hand on her cheek in a gesture of hesitance or indecision. "I suppose...it depends on the situation."

"All right." Iarumas nodded. "We'll have you stand on the front line."

"Certainly." Her response was graceful and solemn. Bowing her head to Garbage, she said, "It is a pleasure to work with you."

"Arf!" Garbage replied.

"Berkanan, you stay in the back," instructed Iarumas. "Garbage, Ainikki, and I will be on the front line."

“Huh?”

Berkanan blinked in surprise. She looked left and then right. The motions felt subtle to her, but they looked huge to those watching. She couldn’t believe it. Half in disbelief, she pointed to herself and asked, “It’s...okay for me to stay back?”

“Yeah,” larumas confirmed.

Raraja saw a flash of relief cross Berkanan’s face.

“Since, if you were in the front row, you might die.”

Her expression, which had blossomed like a flower, instantly wilted.

“Now then,” larumas continued, not paying Berkanan’s reaction any mind, “I’d like to discuss the situation we’re facing.”

The group was huddled together in a corner near the dungeon’s entrance. Garbage looked ready to charge straight in, so Raraja held her by the scruff of the neck. If larumas was going to the trouble of telling them something, then failing to listen only increased their chances of dying. If lending an ear was all it took to raise their odds of success and survival, then that was definitely the best thing to do.

I can’t afford to fail this time.

“We’re up against greater demons.”

Raraja clenched his fists at those words.

“However, as things stand, they aren’t as dangerous as *normal* greater demons.”

“They aren’t? Even though they’re like *that*...?” Berkanan murmured, her voice almost tearful.

Raraja didn’t blame her. He understood. Those demons were terrifying...

But not as terrifying as a dragon.

Though, if a dragon was what he needed to pull out as a comparison, then the demon threat was similarly severe.

“They can’t cast spells. I don’t know if they were struck with HAMAN or

MONTINO, but they've been sealed somehow."

"MAHAMAN's another possibility," Ainikki added helpfully.

"Well, it doesn't really matter which." Larumas literally did not care.

Raraja didn't even know what these spells were, so he leaned over to whisper to Berkanan. Of course, even with her crouching, he had to stretch all the way up to reach her ear.

"What's HAMA...whatever he called it?"

"Erm, it's a spell that causes miracles... Even though it's a mage spell...it's almost legendary..."

They kept their voices as low as possible.

Things of legend did exist in Scale, and if an adventurer survived long enough in the dungeon, it was indeed possible for them to achieve legendary feats.

Perhaps a mage who could work miracles wasn't so strange. Or was it? Raraja suspected that there weren't many mages like that around—he would've heard the rumors if there were.

"Legendary, huh? Well, it's more or less certain, then—*those* guys are involved." The expression on Raraja's face was similar to the look of a hunting dog that had found its quarry. It was an expression that Larumas had worn in the past.

He recalled the amulets—those shards of *something*. The shady assassin priests wore them around their necks.

Raraja glanced at Garbage without intending to. She wasn't privy to his thoughts, so she just glared at him as if to say, "*Let's go already.*"

"Anyway..." Larumas returned to the topic at hand. "Greater demons have a natural tendency to call more of their kind, but a demon with its spells sealed can only summon demons that, likewise, can't cast spells."

In short, there was a horde of demons that couldn't cast spells. That could only mean...

"Someone summoned a few just to have them multiply?" murmured Raraja,

or perhaps Berkana.

Heedless of who had spoken, Iarumas nodded. “That’s right.”

It was an unsettling thought. Greater demons were horrifying monsters—the stuff of fairy tales. But somebody was deliberately increasing their numbers? It seemed unbelievable. Why would they do that?

Raraja’s confusion must have been readily apparent.

“It’s so they can be hunted,” Iarumas explained, as though it were no big deal. “Slaying them is a good way to make a profit...but we’ll refrain this time. Our objective is different, after all.”

“Such a shame...” Sister Ainkki seemed to mean that genuinely.

After considering several different possibilities, Raraja decided to simply cast his doubts aside. Beside him, Berkana seemed lost in thought, while Garbage yawned indifferently. Raraja had learned that he should follow Garbage’s example in times like this. He had to think about what he needed to do and then execute his strategy. If he had everything he required for his plan, it would be enough.

“So, what do we do...?” Raraja wondered aloud.

“We’ll cut our way straight through the horde of demons toward the Monster Allocation Center. We’re hunting down the leader.” For some reason, Iarumas found this amusing. His lips curled upward.

“Just like when we were searching for the Dragon Slayer...” Berkana patted the sword hanging at her hip.

Perhaps because they were facing demons this time, she felt no magic radiating from the sword. It lacked motivation. But the memory of slipping past the red dragon to search for this magical blade was still fresh in her memory.

The secret was simply to “pray,” wasn’t it?

“With their magic sealed, the greater demons are nothing more than huge, powerful monsters,” said Iarumas.

“That’s still pretty dangerous...” muttered Raraja.

"There are, however, a few things to pay attention to. Greater demons are almost immune to magic, and their hands can inflict poison and paralysis."

"You mustn't forget that they also resist death," Sister Ainikki added vexatiously. "Because they are beings from another realm, their souls refuse to go to God!"

After a long pause, Iarumas said, "You heard her." With that, the discussion of their foe was complete, and he turned to logistical matters. "I've prepared potions. They can heal us if Aine's busy or if she goes down." The bag he held out to them rattled with the sound of bottles. It was heavy and filled with nothing but potions.

Raraja nodded. "Right."

"O-Okay," Berkana mumbled.

Raraja was used to the back row, so this was normal for him, but it had been a while since Berkana had fought in the rear. She took the bag from Iarumas with a tense look on her face—but Raraja also detected a hint of relief in her expression.

Well, of course she'd feel that way.

There was a difference between being relegated to the back row and being assigned healing duties in an emergency. It was gratifying to have a role to play.

Especially since there won't be chests to open this time.

In that sense, Raraja was in a similar position to Berkana—he needed to properly play the role he'd been given.

"We don't know what's in the Allocation Center. Though, that's not so different from any other burial chamber we might enter."

In other words, things were the same as ever. They frequently traveled through the dungeon as a party, cutting their way through monsters and bursting into burial chambers. If Raraja could just think about this delve like it were any other, he would feel better about the whole thing. Or, at least, the boy had to tell himself that. Otherwise, he wouldn't be able to do it. But even once he'd convinced himself, caution was still warranted.

Raraja lightly slapped Berkana on the back (“Eek?!”) and then stood up. Iarumas and Ainikki both got up too, their armor rattling as they did.

Now it was just a matter of doing what they’d set out to do. Raraja stared into the abyss of the dungeon and finally released his hold on Garbage.

They moved forward. Raraja followed the girl’s tiny back.

“Still...” he murmured. “Iarumas, you talk like you’ve seen greater demons for yourself.”

“I have,” the man said, shrugging. “Probably.”

§

Iarumas had said that the secret to avoiding wandering monsters was to pray. However, mortals had practically no way of knowing whether their prayers reached heaven. Indeed, there was only one way to find out—they needed to see whether a dead body was turned to ash, lost, or resurrected.

“Whaaa?! Th-There... There’re a whole bunch of them?!?”

The party raced across the third floor of the dungeon, and they were fortunate to happen across a gang of greater demons early on.

“How many are there?!?” asked Sister Ainikki.

“I’d say around six,” answered Iarumas.

“Marvelous!” exclaimed the sister, readying her shield.

“Yap! Arf!!!”

Garbage pounced.

Iarumas crouched down and surveyed the situation, then quickly gave some commands. “We don’t need to follow Sezmar’s example and take them on. Break past and shake them off.”

“We aren’t safe in the back row!” whined Berkana.

“Come on—let’s go!” Raraja hurried her along, staying at the very rear to protect her back. He held his dagger at the ready. Though he had no idea how useful it would be, having his trusty blade in hand made him feel better.

Even if that's not what it's for.

“Woof!”

Garbage was struggling with the Sword Cusinart, which still refused to behave the way she wanted it to. It was plain to see why she wanted to search for a sword that suited her better.

“Awoooooo!!!”

The Cusinart blade sliced ineffectively against a greater demon’s massive arm. Due to the limb’s thickness, the skinless mass of muscle was tougher than an average monster’s scales—there was no way she could hack straight through it.

“Grrrrrr!”

Garbage snarled resentfully as she thrust her blade into the ground and then threw herself into the air, yanking it back out again when she landed on the other side of the arm.

“Take...that!”

Merciful in her mercilessness, Ainikki stepped in and let her spiked mace roar. The impact echoed far and wide, though it didn’t sound like flesh being crushed. The enormous fiend lurched to one side.

The demon might not have felt a thing, however, the powerful physical strike was enough to throw it off-balance.

Iarumas immediately started running. In an instant, he had closed the distance to the greater demon’s feet. He used the black rod in his hands to land a powerful blow on its legs.

His blade flashed. One. Two. Three. He unleashed rapid strikes without pausing to breathe.

But how much impact did the blows have on such a massive demon? Very little.

As things stood, their party of five couldn’t possibly go toe-to-toe with these demons the way the All-Stars had. And yet, because they’d struck the beast and thrown it off-balance, they had created more than ample opportunity to break past the creatures.

“———?!”

The greater demon fell with a voiceless cry, taking other demons down with it.

In that instant, Garbage weaved between them, following behind larumas and Ainikki.

“Grrrrr!”

Garbage enthusiastically leveled her sword at the greater demon’s throat, but larumas snatched it away.

“Later,” he muttered.

“Yap?!”

She protested loudly, but he wasn’t listening.

“Really now,” Aine said in an exasperated tone. The only difference between her and larumas was that she was considerate enough to turn and glance behind her.

“Come, hurry along now, you two!”

Even so, she had no leeway to do anything more than look back. Her habit and silvery hair swished through the air as she turned, taking off at a run.

“Wha, wha, whaaa...?!”

Berkanan hurried after her, letting out an almost comical cry as she tried not to get left behind. She was swinging the Dragon Slayer around in an attempt to at least intimidate their enemies. Raraja stuck close behind her, paying attention to their surroundings.

“———?!”

Ah, damn it! He mentally cursed as he spotted something he’d rather not have seen. One of the greater demons had lifted its arms. As it raised its nonexistent voice, a gate opened, and from that gate emerged a dark blue monstrosity.

Was that just going to go on and on? Were the demons going to bring in more and more of their own kind?

“We can’t possibly deal with that!”

“Huh? Uh, whuh... Huh?!”

“Don’t look back. Run, run!” Raraja scolded Berkana, who was paying too much attention to him. He made her face forward and urged her to sprint. Raraja pumped his legs too, following the long, dark ponytail that bounced off her butt.

There was no time to waste on these fiends. They had just one goal right now.

§

“Oh.”

“Is something the matter?”

The upper levels had suddenly become noisy. Goerz peered upward, then shook his head.

“No, nothing,” he told the priest. He wasn’t patient enough to go through the effort of explaining things to a guy who couldn’t pick up on this subtle change in environment. Though, honestly, it would’ve never occurred to Goerz to do something for another person anyway. To him, all that existed was himself and the present moment.

Is that Larumas and his gang?

The priest had already told him about that moron Sezmar’s failure. Raraja—and the big girl, Berkana—had raised quite a ruckus too.

He didn’t mind a woman like that occasionally. After all, he’d been with a little one a lot recently. Regardless, since it was going to take some time for Sezmar and his party to regroup, it meant that Larumas was up next. And if the silver-haired elf who hung out with them came along, all the better. Goerz would enjoy that, but...

She’s a real pain.

Goerz was a beast of a man. That’s why he was naturally able to weigh their abilities against his own. Beasts didn’t act without forethought—they were frightening because they were able to think in ways consistent with their instincts.

Goerz looked over his pack—adventurers who were either like him or easy to use. He'd brought along eight people in total. There were fighters and thieves, but also depraved priests and failed shamans.

Iarumas would be worn down as he cut his way through the greater demons, so Goerz would throw these guys at him first. Would it be enough? He didn't know. Not that he cared how many of his clan he lost...

"Goerz-sama, it would seem that the miserable cur has entered the dungeon." The Priest of Fang spoke in a soft voice that was filled with a sense of smug superiority—he sounded as if he were bragging about being the first to notice.

Goerz arched an eyebrow. "Huh?"

"I thought it might be best if you were to go and meet them in battle..."

"We've gotta let the greater demons wear them down first, dumbass."

Goerz didn't know how to deploy successive units against an enemy, but he was aware of the folly of sending out small groups of fighters. At the same time, he understood that there should be more to his strategy than just throwing everything at them all at once.

A front and back row. A primary and secondary force. These were concepts he'd learned naturally as the head of a clan.

What a rank amateur, Goerz thought, scowling at the priest.

The Priest of Fang made no attempt to hide his displeasure at the insult he'd received, or at the way Goerz looked down upon him.

As he glanced at the man, Goerz had a flash of insight. "Anyway, as long as we take out Garbage, you're not gonna complain, right?"

The priest paused for a moment, then nodded. "No... I suppose not."

"Guess you're fine with *this*, then."

It happened in an instant.

Goerz removed the sword—forged by the master smith Cusinart—from his back. He leveled it at the Priest of Fang, then ran him through. Goerz's blade

emitted a high-pitched whine as it tore through robes and guts, bisecting the man.

Blood splattered in the gloom.

“Wh...at...?!”

The priest’s death cry sounded conflicted—like he was demanding to know why this had happened but was also confused at the absurdity of it. His body collapsed in a pool of his own blood.

Goerz shrugged, then kicked the fresh husk off into the corner.

“Yeah, you probably should’ve seen this one coming.”

He hooked the amulet on the end of his blood-soaked Cusinart, lifting it up. Even at this distance, he could feel the overwhelming radiance of its cursed power—its magic.

This thing’s awesome.

Feeling the vitality that coursed through him, he could see why the Priests of Fang were so full of themselves. Goerz grinned like a shark. If there was one thing the Priest of Fang had miscalculated, it was this. He had misjudged Goerz. After all...

“If a monster’s got treasure, I’ll kill it, *even if it’s friendly.*”

Goerz was an *evil adventurer.*

§

“Woof!”

“We don’t have time to bother.”

Was that a response to Garbage’s bark of protest, or was it directed at the greater demons? Perhaps it could be taken either way. Regardless, Iarumas kept running through the dungeon, a slight smile on his face. It was the smile of a beast instinctively aware that it was closing in on its prey.

As they progressed, the greater demons grew in number and density. Gangs of them showed up—six at a time. The party had no breaks between one battle and the next. It really ground down their focus (hit points).

“Eek... Eek... Eeee...!”

“Damn it... Not again...!”

An exhausted Berkana swung her sword around, while Raraja cursed. Although neither was actually injured, this kind of long-running battle was new territory for both of them. It was plain to see that they were tired and dripping with sweat.

Sister Ainikki took in everything going on around her—she sighed.

“This could prove somewhat difficult.”

She wasn’t referring to their journey through the dungeon—she knew they would make it to their destination. No, she was concerned about what would happen when they faced the enemy leader in such an exhausted state.

Her beautiful face, which turned to glance at the two in the back row, didn’t have so much as a single drop of sweat on it. Ainikki was no ordinary priest—she mercilessly bashed down greater demons with her mace. However, she was only fighting like this because she was exclusively focused on trying to break past the gangs of demons.

If only I could use BAMATU...

The spell would protect all her companions with the power of the gods. Unfortunately, a spellcaster had a limited number of spells of the same level, and BAMATU was on the same level as the miracle that cured paralysis as well as the one that woke those lulled into a stupor. Considering the foes they were facing, her party could very well need to dispel these conditions—she had to conserve her spells.

BAMATU’s protection wasn’t perfect either, but if they battled the great horde of demons without the protection of the gods, they would inevitably face a glorious death.

Aine wouldn’t shy away from death, but she also had no intention of abandoning the chance to make her life more valuable. However, to rob the young of that same opportunity in order to protect herself—it was unthinkable.

Without realizing it, the silver-haired nun’s hand began reaching for the sword

slung across her back. Even in the face of death, the sister's voice was clear as a bell and full of pride.

"I will take up the rear. All of you press on ahead, and—"

"That won't do."

Ainikki's ears perked up.

Iarumas stared at her. "I can't have you dying on me."

"Yap?!"

Iarumas passed Garbage off to Sister Ainikki, then jumped all the way to the back of the group.

"Iarumas-sama...?!"

"I'll buy some time and catch up later. You look after the kids."

She was perplexed for a moment. This wasn't at all like Iarumas. Yet at the same time, she had no idea what he was thinking, which was *exactly* like him.

The blue eyes beneath her veil briefly met the dark eyes under his cloak.

"If I mess this up, pick me up on your way back," he murmured.

"Honestly now!" Her cheeks flushed slightly with confusion and indecision, but she shook them off and shouted, "Let's go, everyone!"

"Arf! Yiiip!"

"Huh? Oh, s-sure...!"

Now that she was free from Iarumas, Garbage eagerly charged in, slamming her blade into the next demon. Aine followed immediately after. She swung her mace into any defensive gaps and tried to clear a path.

Berka ran with thudding footsteps, casting a hesitant glance back in Iarumas's direction. She understood her situation—running would be far more helpful than anything else she could do right now. The man in black inclined his head ever so slightly, affirming this to her. It was okay. Berkana hurried to catch up with the rest.

As for the last party member...

“Iarumas!”

As Raraja ran past, he threw a few bottles to the man. Iarumas caught them with one hand, eyes widening slightly beneath his cloak.

“Take these! Even if you get paralyzed, you should still be able to drink them!”

By the time the man heard him, the boy was long gone, vanished into the darkness of the dungeon.

Iarumas smiled.

Really now. Just how much longer was he going to be able to keep treating them like newbies? This was a genuinely welcome surprise.

“—————!”

“Don’t rush me. I don’t want to spend a lot of time here either.”

The demons lunged at him, roaring without their voices. He’d felt this before—the familiar pressure of impending death.

He drew his sword from the black rod and rested the blade on his shoulder. Then, he formed magical signs with his left hand, murmuring, “Seenzanme peiche (*O untouchable armor, help me to stand*).”

Suddenly, Iarumas’s body became blurry, indistinct.

The spell was SOPIC—equally as good as BAMATU for self-defense. It was also a second-level spell. There was, however, one issue with it.

“This one only works on the caster...” Iarumas’s small, wry smile hung in the air. It was a lone, ambiguous outline in the dungeon’s gloom.

The only other worthwhile second-level spell a mage had access to was MORLIS...

“I’m going to take up a bit of your time.”

§

“Arf!!!”

Garbage kicked in the door to a burial chamber. Raraja rushed inside after her.

“Goerz!” he shouted.

In the unchanging murkiness of the dungeon, the boy was able to make out eight—nine? ten?—figures. As Raraja counted the indistinct outlines, he crouched low and readied himself for a fight. If he remembered correctly, one of their clan members was a failed mage...

“What, larumas ain’t coming?” asked Goerz. He stood in a relaxed manner at the back of their formation.

The faint stench of blood—that was something that had long since seeped into Goerz’s very being, but the smell hanging in this burial chamber was fresh.

Had he already killed one person here? Or maybe even two?

Raraja had something more important on his mind.

“Where’s Orlaya...?!”

“Huh?” Goerz arched an eyebrow as if he didn’t understand the question. The gesture seemed to ask, “Who’s that?” Though it was an insolent display, he wasn’t doing it to provoke Raraja—did he even know her name?

Finally, before Raraja could snap, Goerz said, “She’s right there, isn’t she?”

He gestured to the tenth shadow with his chin.

Yes, it was a shadow...but hardly that of a person.

In the darkness, it looked like a mere black blot, but as Raraja’s eyes adjusted to the gloom, the truth was revealed.

A mass of meat. A pillar of flesh. A column that seemed to have grown out of the void, its ends strangely indistinct. Sinew or viscera that couldn’t be positively identified as muscle or entrails.

And at the center of these interwoven strands of meat, at the very core, something was vibrantly white.

A single girl, consumed by the flesh—a rhea, her body eaten away by curses, with just one cloudy eye remaining.

“How...revolting...” Ainikki furrowed her brow. The girl seemed neither alive nor dead. This was blasphemy. Not only had they robbed this girl of life, they’d

robbed her of death as well.

However, Goerz just gazed at the mournful elf with a lust he wasn't even attempting to hide. His bestial eyes raked over her body like she was his prey, and then they shifted to Berkanan.

The big girl shuddered, stiffening as she shrank into herself. That reaction only served to arouse him further.

"Fine, Iarumas ain't here, but it's all good. Whoever takes the women down can go second."

It went without saying—everyone knew who would take the first turn. Still, that offer brought depraved smiles to the adventurers' lips.

If they just followed him, they'd have a good time. Always had—always would.

You can all eat shit.

Raraja, the thief, felt the opposite way. He crouched low, his dagger held in his right hand. He'd thought of all sorts of things he might want to say—things he *ought* to say—but he had no words for them now.

It irritated him, *infuriated him*, that he needed to waste time on these guys at all.

Out of my way.

"You're so dead!"

"Yeah, let's do this." Goerz smiled. "I'm gonna kill you."

§

"Awooooooo!"

Garbage rushed in, the very first to pounce.

She remembered his smell from all that time ago. From just recently too. And his eyes—and the way he looked at her.

It wasn't that Garbage was vengeful. No, it was just...

This guy was looking down on her. And to the redhead girl, that was an

intolerable slight.

Howling like a ferocious wolf, Garbage reached for the sword on her back and sprang at the eight enemies arranged in a battle formation.

The Cusinart slid free. Goerz laughed when he saw it.

“I’ve got one of those too!”

Goerz let his own sword do the rest of the talking—it swung upward toward her. His blade collided with Garbage’s, emitting a high-pitched whine. Sparks flew.

“Yiip?!”

“Ha ha!”

As the girl scowled, Goerz used his power to launch her thin body. The redhead girl’s slender, delicate form spun through the air. Twisting through the motion, she landed on all fours.

“That’s some way to greet your owner.”

“Woof!”

That sword. Garbage didn’t like it.

In terms of raw skill with a blade, she was Goerz’s equal. In fact, she was likely more naturally talented. However, when it came to the cruelty needed to face humans instead of monsters, Goerz had her beat. He also outclassed her on another front—Goerz had fully mastered his own Sword Cusinart.

Perhaps if the fight had been one-on-one... But it wasn’t. Neither Garbage nor Goerz was alone.

“Berkanan-sama, cast your spell!” Sister Ainikki shouted.

“R-Right...!”

Nine-on-four. In terms of pure numbers, they were at an overwhelming disadvantage. Spells were the only way to overcome that. Yet even the balance of spellcasters was against the party—Goerz and his clan knew this.

Two mages, two priests—four in total.

Goerz could do whatever he liked with his group—and hey, even if they died, who really cared? The clan could just chuck them in the temple morgue and have them resurrected later.

That nun in the other group, Aininiki, had already drained so much money from him. He figured that now, it was his turn to take advantage of her. He'd use that beautiful body of hers as he pleased...

Berkanan hesitantly raised the sword she used in place of a staff and began chanting the words of a spell. "Erm... Kafaref..."

Of course, their enemies would never give her the luxury of time.

"Get her!"

"If you're gonna fry her, fry her good and proper! I don't want her to survive if that means we'll be stuck doing some half-cooked wench!"

"Look at the size of her. There's no way she's not coming out undercooked."

"Shut up. Just cast MONTINO and silence them like always."

"But I wanna make that nun cry."

"I'll take what I can get—as long as it's not Garbage."

The men said whatever they pleased as they readied their weapons, chanted their spells, and set their sights on Berkanan.

"Yaaah!"

Sister Aine shouted as she stepped in to save Berkanan. One downward swing of her mace stopped a fighter in his tracks. His blade creaked in protest but did not break. The fighter locked eyes with the silver-haired elf over their clashing weapons.

"Gotcha!!!"

A dagger surged in from the side—the blade of a thief who'd crept up to them.

"Urkh?!" Aine jumped back and away from harm. Several long strands of her silver hair were severed and left to dance in the dungeon air.

Two fighters, two thieves. Their hearts raced as they thought about ganging

up on the lone nun and tormenting her.

No matter how battle-hardened an adventurer became, there was a limit to their concentration. Elves were delicate creatures—they could be effective moment by moment, but since they lacked stamina, they hit their limits sooner than a human.

These eight experienced men could tell that the same applied to Berkanan, who was a mage.

So first, they'd take the two women. The men would beat and torment them until they went down—that was what fighters did. They might not have been on Goerz's level, but they were a pack of animals used to this sort of thing.

Naturally, they didn't even *see* Raraja. Their focus was on Ainikki and Berkanan—the two spellcasters. Not the thief.

After all, he was just larumas's little hanger-on—a brat with no redeeming qualities living off the scraps left for him. Who knew if they'd even registered that his name was Raraja. He was a meat shield that they had once used as a disposable chest opener. Nothing more, nothing less.

And here's what you get for thinking that!

One round of combat went by. Both sides chanted spells, tried to interfere with the other side's casters, and defended their own.

Out of all of them, Raraja was the swiftest.

Posture low, dagger in one hand, empty other hand digging through his bag—in this state, who even noticed him?

Berkanan did. Her eyes were always on the young boy.

Ainikki didn't. But this was the man in black's party. She trusted that they would all be doing something to counteract their enemies.

Garbage didn't care. No matter what Raraja was doing, she'd just give him a good, hard kick if he messed it up.

One of the enemy mages noticed the boy. But he gave the others no warning—that would've interrupted his chant.

And so, there was nobody to stop Raraja.

“Take this!”

Out of the bag came a roll of parchment—a scroll—which he unfurled. It unleashed the true words that had been carefully inscribed.

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

Suddenly, tongues of fire scorched the dungeon’s darkness.

The scroll had contained a first-level spell, the most basic of basics in this land: HALITO. Nonetheless, it was magic—the fearsome power that rewrote the principles of the world. This secret art, passed to Berkana from her grandmother and then entrusted to the young boy, worked its power without fail.

“Arrrgh?!”

An enemy mage, caught off guard, was wreathed in flames that cooked him alive. If he’d had a fighter’s focus (hit points), he might have been able to endure it. But as a mage, he was engulfed.

Berkana, who had outlasted even a dragon’s flames, was truly an exception to that standard.

Having watched one of their own perish in a pillar of fire, the other clan members couldn’t help but feel unnerved. And that was when—

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

—Berkana raised her voice in a desperate chant, hitting them with KATINO.

“Ngh!”

“Ahh?!”

Instantly, the burial chamber filled with a thin, white mist. Of course, it was a clumsy spell cast by a girl beneath their level. They could easily resist its effects. Though they might get a little drowsy, they weren’t going to pass out.

There was, however, another problem.

“Hiii...yah!!!”

Sister Ainikki's swings were relentless and difficult to dodge. Those merciless blows—or were they merciful?—crushed skulls through helms, reuniting their owners with God.

“Haaah!!!”

“Bwugh?!”

Trailing blood and brain matter, the mace smashed through a thief's ribs and pulverized his heart. Leather armor did him no good. In his final moment, he caught a glimpse of the elf's beautiful features—gore-spattered and smiling.

As he died, the thief thought, *She's horrifying.*

“Be at ease! As you have lived full lives, you have nothing to fear in death!”

In the City of God, all are secure, and all are at peace.

Five heavy blows, delivered without mercy—or were they? Aine gave absolution for their evil lives and sent their souls to Kadorto.

Meanwhile, Garbage was recovering from Goerz's attack, which had sent her flying. By the time she was ready to pounce again, the tables had turned.

“Arf!”

She seemed to be taunting him, perhaps saying, “*How do you like that?*” Though, obviously, the girl didn't understand the situation.

Her bark must have been infuriating. And yet...

“Ha ha!”

Goerz was laughing.

§

“Goerz!” shouted Raraja.

“Yeah, I knew sending those guys at you wasn't gonna do much. See?”

Goerz had weathered one spell from Iarumas and a scroll from the brat, and he managed to wear Ainikki down a little. Getting to this point sure hadn't been cheap. He wasn't convinced that he'd gotten a good return on the eight pets he'd used.

Goerz ignored Raraja's shout. He whispered to the void, seeming to seek agreement from it instead of anyone present. Even in this situation, Goerz had no intention of recognizing Raraja.

"You seem rather composed..." Sister Ainkki said, stepping forward to stand in front of Raraja and Berkanan. Her features, still beautiful even when bathed in blood, became sharper. She leveled her mace at Goerz. "Do you comprehend the situation?"

"Well, if it isn't the long-eared whore from the Temple of Cant. If you can't wait for me to finish up here, then just go touch yourself on your own. I'll get to you soon enough."

"That's quite a novel method of pleading for your life..."

Her tone was confident, but she knew the situation as well as he did. The man could be this insolent despite being chased down to his lair, surrounded and outnumbered. That either meant he lacked the brains to see his predicament, or...

He has a trump card. A hidden advantage that could overturn this situation.

There's something fishy about this...

Out of the four adventurers, Raraja was the only one who knew.

Goerz's smile? His utter confidence in his ability to win? Those were fine. The boy had seen those more often than he'd ever wanted to. But something was off.

Those hungry eyes—the flames that burned inside them. They were even stronger than usual. *Something* was different.

Raraja recognized the color of the flames. They burned in Larumas's eyes too.

No...

The shard hanging around his neck!

"Where'd you get *that*!?"

"In the dungeon... Duh!"

Garbage bared her teeth and growled. "Grrrrrr!!!"

Sparks flew.

Not caring one bit about their conversation, Garbage had interpreted this as an opening. She pounced.

Goerz easily swatted her away with his Sword Cusinart, swinging it with just one arm. As for his other arm, it was reaching for the amulet around his neck.

“This is bad!” yelled Raraja.

“Berkanan-sama!”

“Huh? Oh, r-right!”

Hearing Raraja’s warning, Ainikki rushed to the front row, and Berkanan quickly grabbed her sword. Should she move up? Cast a spell? That moment of indecision—a product of inexperience—delayed her action.

“Arf!”

“Hi-yah!”

Meanwhile, Ainikki moved in unison with Garbage, striking Goerz with her mace.

“Tch, some nun you are!”

Goerz easily endured the blow. That slimy grin was still plastered to his face. Their weapons didn’t even lock—his one-handed swing simply knocked the mace away. Such strength was clearly unnatural.

“Guh...?!” Ainikki grunted at the throbbing pain in her hands as she stepped backward, retreating.

“Woof!” Garbage jumped forward.

An experienced fighter was able to engage in many rounds of combat in the span of a single breath. And the blade in her hands, as unfamiliar as it still felt, was nonetheless a Cusinart. It moved faster than Raraja’s eyes could follow.

However...

“Yappy little mutt!”

“Eek?!”

As they'd traded blows, Goerz had planted his foot deep in her stomach, sending her flying. With a yelp, Garbage's slender body went spinning through the air. When her slender form collided with the ground, Garbage instinctively curled into a ball to protect herself, writhing in pain. Seized by convulsions, she wretched repeatedly, vomiting up the bile that rose in her throat.

She struggled to rise to her feet in spite of this. Goerz leveled his Sword Cusinart at her.

"Eek!" cried someone, likely Berkanaan.

Garbage was prone and glaring at her opponent. She emitted a low whine.

"Garbage...!"

"He said he'd be satisfied as long as I got rid of the monsters' leftovers. Can't have you hauling her back to the temple."

As Raraja tried to race to Garbage's side, his body seized up, contrary to his own will. Goerz was glaring at him—no, that wasn't it. Goerz wasn't looking at Raraja. His eyes went past the boy.

To the other side of the burial chamber. To the stone walls and beyond.

"What is he...seeing...?"

Ainikki shuffled her feet little by little, closing the distance between them. She couldn't charge in heedlessly. Not at this distance. Goerz would have little trouble decapitating Garbage if she did.

Resurrection was not impossible in the dungeon. And for one as noble as Garbage, surely the gods would allow it.

But there's no guarantee.

Sometimes, a body turned to ash. And what if those ashes were scattered? Or the soul itself was lost? The miracles of the gods were called miracles because they were not so easily obtained.

Other things could also prevent a resurrection. For example...

"Oops."

The moment that word left Goerz's bestial maw, Garbage found herself

enveloped in pale light.

“Yiiip?!”

The girl barked in pain, or surprise, and a moment later—

“Into the rock you go.”

—she’d vanished.

“Garbage?!”

Raraja recognized this. It was the light of teleportation, the same as when he’d broken the Demon’s Stone.

Now he’s gone and done it...!

They could pray for a resurrection all they wanted, but without Garbage’s remains, it would be impossible. That was obvious.

Loss—despair—disbelief.

“No way...” Berkanan murmured, stunned.

“Haaaaah!!!”

Sister Ainikki alone had a different reaction. She’d borne witness to the loss of many adventurers. And in that instant, the way she saw it, an obstacle had just been removed.

Aine struck a devastating blow. It was as if the hammer of God were carving footprints into the stone floor of the burial chamber.

And yet...

“Ha ha! Nice one, Sister... I’m gonna have fun with you!!!”

“Wagh?!”

Once again, Goerz’s Cusinart easily turned the blow away. This was clearly abnormal—unnatural. Was it the power of the amulet?

Knocked back, Ainikki stumbled and lost her balance, yet still somehow managed to maintain a safe distance from her opponent. Treading into her range without a care, Goerz used the tip of his blade to strip Aine of her breastplate.

“Ah?!”

“Knew it. You’re as stacked as I thought. It’d be a damn shame to send these babies to Kadorto!”

“What drivell!”

Ainikki reflexively covered her chest as she glared at him. Goerz licked her all over with his eyes, making no attempt to hide his lust.

There was no questioning what this moment was—an opening.

“Berka!”

“Huh? Oh, r-right!”

Berkanan hadn’t yet shaken off her confusion, but Raraja’s shout snapped her out of it. She swung her sword.

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

Her voice itself seemed to tear up as she chanted the spell that she trusted most—the one she’d learned from her grandmother.

HALITO.

The fireball left a searing trail as it tore across the burial chamber, striking Goerz and exploding in all directions.

“Boo!”

“Eek?!”

The man emerged from the flames unfazed. He even taunted them. A strained cry escaped Berkanan’s throat.

“I-Is my...HALITO...r-r-really no use...?!”

“Heh, it’s all about spirit (hit points). You think I’d die from something like that?”

“It’s not like it didn’t affect him!”

Raraja had been watching the whole sequence of events carefully, and that was the conclusion he’d drawn. Garbage would have to wait. There was nothing they could do about her situation. What’d happened to her had shocked them

all, but right now, she just...had to wait.

First, Raraja thought about Goerz, then Orlaya, Berkana, Ainikki, and then Larumas. Then he thought about Garbage's earlier attack, the back-and-forth with Ainikki, and Berkana's magic.

Each of their attacks had created an opening—they'd definitely whittled down Goerz's stamina and focus. As proof of that, Berkana's HALITO had hit him right in the face, hadn't it?

Still, the guy hadn't gone down. He wasn't even showing signs of weakening.

As he watched, the burns on Goerz's cheeks healed. The same was no doubt true of the man's vitality.

Why? Well, the answer to that question hung around his neck.

That shining shard—the amulet.

"Heh heh, this thing's something all right..." Goerz stroked the amulet, speaking as if intoxicated. "I could go at it all night with as many partners as I want."

"Guess I've just gotta nab it, then... That's all," Raraja murmured as though trying to convince himself. He tensed for action.

The boy didn't know *how* he was going to do it, but he knew that he was going to. And so...that was all there was to it.

However...

"Don't be ridiculous. I won't let you take it." At that moment, Goerz looked at Raraja for the first time since he'd entered the chamber. His eyes burned with hostility—they were filled with hatred. "This is *mine*. All mine. I'm not giving it to anyone!"

Yeah, Raraja had felt that something was off. This was it.

Goerz was a beast of a man. And when a beast obtained overwhelming power, he wouldn't hesitate to use it to crush his foes. This man lived in the moment, solely for himself. There was no way—yeah, no way—that he would normally obsess over something like an amulet.

The moment, himself, and the amulet. Those were the only three things propelling Goerz now!

"It's consumed him, huh?" remarked Ainikki.

Goerz went on muttering, heedless of her words. "Fine, I'll play with you. You're dead, Raraja. So dead... But..." He stared at the boy. "Raraja, I'm gonna kill you last, just to see the look on your face."

He held up his hand...toward the eight bodies littering the floor. Before anyone had time to wonder what he was doing, some unseen gale stirred up a whirlwind inside the burial chamber.

Berkana shuddered at the size of it and pulled down on the brim of her hat.

"Th-This is...magic?! Er, I know this... I know it...!"

She thought back to the many great magics that her grandmother had told her stories about. The tales had included depictions of magical energy *moving*. She'd never seen this phenomenon herself, but she remembered it.

The corpses that were caught up in the whirlwind, their flesh and blood, formed non-Euclidean patterns in the air.

A magic circle. A gate. An entrance to another world. A hole.

In short...

"SOCORDI?!"

There was an almost explosive rush of colorless magical energy, and then it materialized.

Tall enough to scrape the ceiling of the dungeon. Body skinless, with muscles all exposed. Jaws reminiscent of a wild beast.

As its accursed power rose, the creature let out a roar.

"GGRRRRRRROOOOOOWWWL!!!"

"A greater...demon...!"

Whose voice was that, trembling, as they uttered the name of the beast? The demon's roar became true words, twisting the principles of this world, and the burial chamber turned into an icy hell. There was nothing restraining this one. It

was a perfect and unstoppable creature from another world—a greater demon.

And yet, in the middle of the absolute zero blizzard that was raging through the Monster Allocation Center...

“I can only screw one woman at a time, so there’s no reason not to let him have some fun too, right?”

Goerz smiled as he stood before his miserable playthings.

“All right, now let’s play, Raraja-*san*!”

Raraja bit his lip hard and braced himself.

Chapter 6

Magic

Sword



“Uh...”

Garbage groaned as she writhed on the stone floor, covered in her own vomit.

Yes, on the stone floor. The moment the blinding light had engulfed her tiny body, she’d been thrown down against the hard ground.

There was an awful dizziness, as though she were drunk—not that the girl knew what being drunk felt like. But it was a lot like what she’d felt in the big room with all those adults after she’d sniffed their strange water.

She’d felt the same way the time the noisy one had smashed that stone.

“Eeak...”

She put a hand on her belly, which ached from being kicked, then rolled up her clothes. Her abdomen was red and swollen. Hesitantly, she touched it with the tip of her finger—it felt feverishly hot. She shuddered as pain shot through her body.

She’d have to give the evil one a good kicking later.

Swearing this to herself, Garbage slowly rose to her feet.

The place where she’d found herself was cramped and stifling, like a tiny burial chamber. Early memories came flooding back to her—in the beginning, she had also spent all her time in a small stonework room. A room where those smelly guys who came to visit would look down at her, sneering.

Now that she thought about it, Goerz—although she didn’t know that was his name—had been the same way. She recalled that look of smug superiority on his face and in his eyes... All because he’d been the one holding her chain.

She didn’t like it. That was the only reason Garbage had swung her sword.

“Awooooooo!”

As she realized that she had been trapped in a closed-off burial chamber, Garbage let out a long howl. There was no response. Her cry echoed repeatedly off the stone walls, then evaporated.

“Woof...”

Garbage scrunched up her nose and snorted a little. Honestly, those people. They were all hopeless without her around.

The big, dark one showed some promise, but apparently, he couldn't kill the big blue things. The noisy one had been off doing something on his own recently, and so of course, the big, timid one had gone with him. As for the silver-haired long-eared one... Well, the girl didn't mind indulging her once in a while.

Garbage was confident that she was the strongest of them all. She didn't mind being by herself, but she figured the others would be in real trouble without her around.

That was different from the way she'd thought before—a clear change inside of her. However, the redhead Garbage didn't recognize it as a change. She probably didn't even notice it. She only ever lived as she pleased. And if someone ever tried to decide for her, tried to say that she'd changed due to someone else's influence, well...she'd bite them without hesitation.

Anyway...

Her situation now was the same as it had once been in the past. But this time, she would take different actions.

This time, she would try to get back.

Garbage sniffed twice and twitched her nose a little. The smell hadn't changed. This was still the third floor of the dungeon—not that she had any concept of floors. She'd gone from a huge room with a high ceiling to a tiny, cramped room, and then she'd gone down a number of stairs.

That was the extent of her understanding, but it posed no problem.

Garbage peered around in silence. Now that she'd calmed down, she found that this burial chamber was larger than she'd initially thought.

It had appeared small at first. Was this because it was divided into four sections by the remnants of old walls? Or did the piles of decomposed remains scattered here and there seem to crowd the space?

There had once been a battle here. She wouldn't show any respect to these

ancient warriors.

She began to walk. Old bones and rotten, abandoned equipment cracked under her feet. Occasionally, she would see a sword and gleefully pick it up, but...

“Arf...”

Of course, these were all dull swords, their blades fully rusted and missing large chunks.

Garbage would quickly lose all interest in each sword and cast it aside. The discarded blade would break to pieces on the stone floor, scattering shards of rusted metal as she trotted away.

Eventually, she spotted a pale light shining in the gloom of the dungeon.

A sword.

A sword in the stone.

Its silver blade had been thrust into the ground.

The pale glimmer of it had an almost phosphorescent quality that fluttered like a pulse.

The sword seemed...alive.

“Yap...”

Oh, so there was something decent here after all.

Garbage casually tossed aside another sword she had just picked up and slowly approached this glowing one. However, as she reached for the hilt, the redhead girl felt every hair on her body stand on end. She jumped back.

Was she afraid of a sword? Hardly. That couldn't be it.

She had sensed the presence of another being.

Something's here.

It was one of the countless bodies littering the floor of this burial chamber—a man in armor. He rose to his feet with a rattling noise as rust fell away from him.

Garbage was terrified.

§

Here in the dungeon, there were a lot of big things and other stuff she didn't really understand. But this was the first thing that had moved when she was sure it should've been dead. (Because for her, the zombies and undead kobolds were moving all along!)

Instinct caused her to recoil, but only for a moment. An instant later, rage flared up in Garbage's blue eyes.

She would never suffer the existence of a being that inspired this feeling in her.

Drawing the vexingly lightweight sword that was strapped to her back, she pounced on the armored figure—the swordsman.

“Gling?!”

After one exchange with the ancient warrior's old blade, the Sword Cusinart snapped in the middle.

What went wrong? Had her abuse of the sword been beyond the expectations of the Cusinart smiths? Had Goerz's Cusinart been superior enough to weaken hers? Or perhaps...from the very beginning, her Sword Cusinart had been as dissatisfied with its master as she had been with it.

Not again.

Garbage scowled, reacting quickly. Without hesitation, she slammed the pommel into the armored man's helmet. She scowled even harder when he kept moving, unfazed.

Why couldn't she find a single decent sword?

Her expectations for weaponry had been greatly lowered. She just needed something to swing. And if the blade before her wouldn't come out of the ground, she'd break it and swing what she could get.

That was all Garbage was thinking as she reached for the hilt of the silver sword.

“Yiiip?!”

The sword almost seemed to jump out on its own—it found its place snugly in the palm of her little hand.

Garbage scrutinized the sword. The portion that’d been buried in the stone was larger than she’d expected. The blade was as long as she was tall.

It was nothing like the other rusty swords. This one shone bright in the gloom of the dungeon.

She ran her finger along the blade, and it left a thin red line on her skin. How sharp must it have been to cut her with just a touch?

She glanced at the swordsman. The man in armor seemed to be struggling to move. He was still far out of range. She gave the sword a test swing.

Whoosh went the sword as it sliced through the air.

“Whah!”

Garbage’s eyes widened. Perhaps it was heavier than it looked because the sword seemed to pull her along with it.

How dare it do that. Garbage bared her fangs.

“Grrrr!”

Do as you’re told.

With a growl, she forcefully pulled the blade back—just as she had done in the past with her broadsword. Her body spun around with the momentum, and the blade let out a buzz as it mowed through the air.

A numbing tingle of excitement ran through her entire body.

Yes, this was it. This was what she’d wanted.

It happened in an instant. With a bestial grin, the girl launched herself like an arrow.

“Woo! Ooooooo!!!”

Her slender, flexible limbs contracted like springs, and she used her momentum to swing the blade. It was a rough style—one she had learned in

order to survive. Nothing so sophisticated that it could be called swordsmanship. But it was fast, sharp, and lethal.

The blade struck the nape of the swordsman's neck, easily breaking his rusty chain mail and severing his spine.

The girl was a colorful wind. She seemed to dance with the blade.

"Awoooooooooooooo!!!” she cried victoriously as the rotten remains fell to pieces.

§

"Yap... Yap!"

Garbage was truly delighted. She swung the shining sword around with gusto. It felt like it was going to slip out of her hands and fly off, but that had been true of her broadsword too.

This one showed promise. Garbage put it in the sword belt strapped to her back.

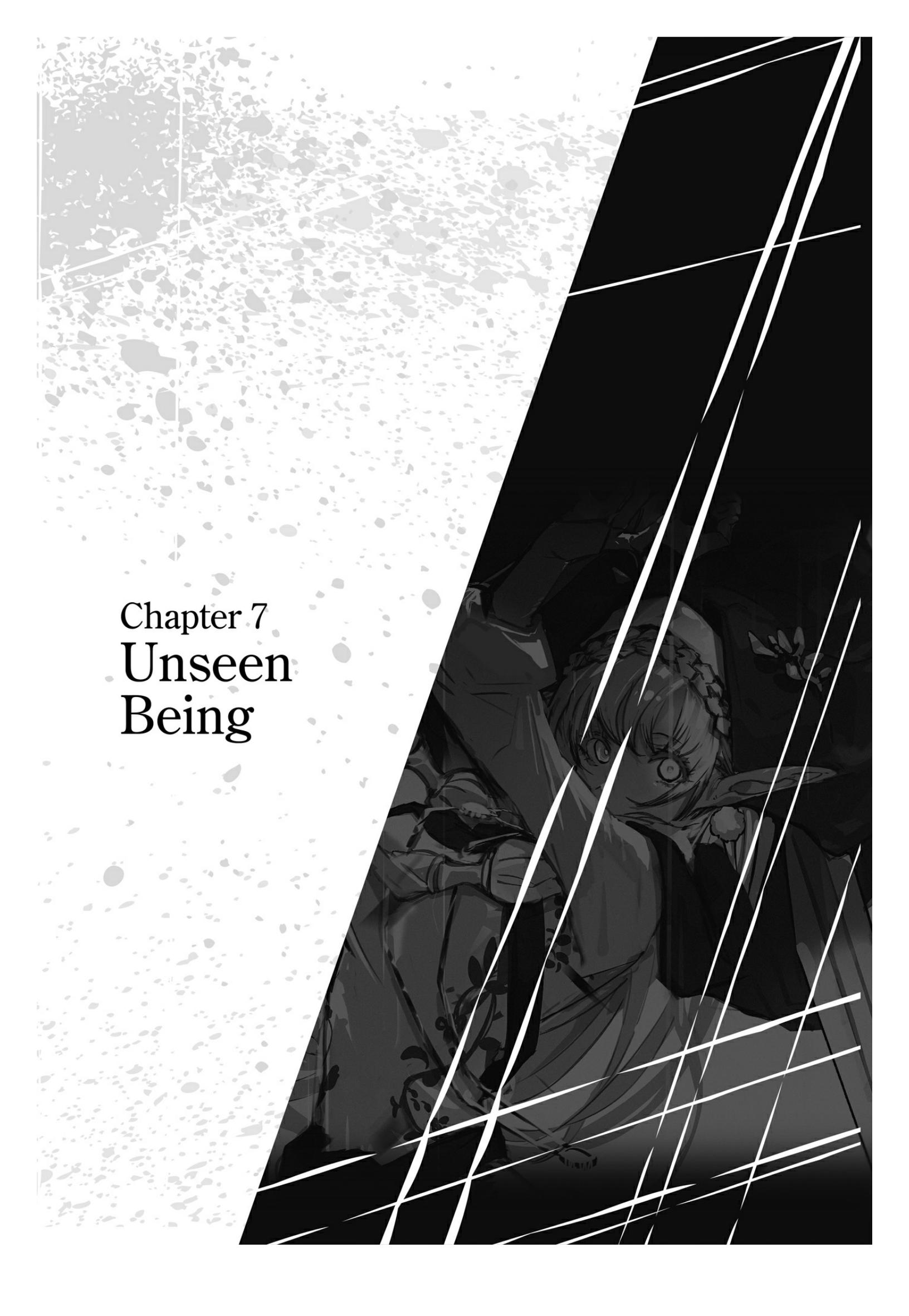
Now that she had a sword, nothing scared her. At this point, nothing about the painful blow from earlier, or the man in armor, remained in Garbage's head.

She just wanted to get back and pulverize that guy.

She'd always been true to her own desires. And she always would be.

With nothing left to weigh on her mind, she strode boldly around the burial chamber, found the door, and kicked it open.

Then, she bounded off into the darkness.



Chapter 7

Unseen

Being

A greater demon summoned from another world—a beast neither sealed by magic nor bound by anyone.

“Wah...ah...ah...!”

“Urgh?!”

When faced with the true power of this monstrosity, the two young adventurers, Berkanan and Raraja, felt chilled to the bone...and not just because they were terrified.

“MA (*Mimuarif*) DAL (*Daruarifla*) TO (*Tazanme*)!!!”

The greater demon’s roar sent a wave of intense cold slamming into them. Raraja reflexively curled into a ball, gritted his teeth, and tried to keep on breathing.

As for Berkanan...

“E-Eek...! Ah, ah, ahhh...?!”

She’d grown up in the desert, so she had experienced scorching, sun-drenched days and arid, freezing nights. She didn’t even know what a blizzard was.

Frost rapidly formed on her healthy skin, causing it to pale as the blood drained away. She stopped in her tracks, not because she was left in a daze, but because her muscles were freezing solid. Left unable to do more than chatter her teeth, the flame of her life looked ready to flicker out.

“This won’t do!”

Sister Ainikki was the only one left who could still move. She rushed forward to stand in front of the greater demon, shielding the two youngsters behind her. Her habit was buffeted and torn by hail. Even her freshly shed blood began to freeze.

But Aine didn’t waver. She quickly raised her voice in prayer—in a heartfelt plea to the god Kadorto.

“Mimuarif pezanme re feiche (*O great shield, come quickly from beyond*).”

Did her voice, begging for the great shield of MAPORFIC, reach the deity? This

invisible force field stretched from the heavens all the way to the bowels of the land—even into the dungeon—and slightly blunted the power of the blizzard.

“Yeah, I figured you’d do that,” Goerz remarked. “Well, it doesn’t need to work on them. Just you.” He watched Sister Ainikki’s act of devotion like he was a spectator at a game of wizball. “So, what now? If you want me and this monster to do you at the same time, I’m down with that.”

Aine didn’t respond to such an obvious provocation. She smiled and gently stroked Berkanan’s cheek. The girl’s breathing might’ve been a touch ragged, but she had survived.

Aine slowly rose to her feet. As she did, Raraja was only barely able to look up at her.

“Sis...ter... Ai...nikki...!”

“Raraja-sama, give Berkanan-sama a potion. Yes, everything will be fine.”

I may not look it, but I’m strong.

Raraja watched as she turned to face the greater demon all by herself. A single ruined blade was strapped to her back. Aine’s hand reached for it.

Sister Ainikki, that zealous devotee of the god Kadorto, hailed from the far north. Freezing cold—the sharp chill of snow and ice. These were things she had grown up around in a land bludgeoned by the north wind. The cold was brutal, and the white nights had stretched on seemingly without end. She’d never found that frightening. She knew the true terror of living in a world of white and black.

Her clan had struggled against such things for generations. And like so many of her clansmen, she, too, had left her homeland on a solitary voyage. For her god, and to slay demons, she’d traveled to the end of the earth—to the south.

To the dungeon.

Death comes equally to all that live. And so, what reason is there to abhor it? It is nothing short of a blessing from God.

The place to which all must ultimately arrive cannot be terrifying. Only with death can there be life, and the value of life gives value to death. They sit on

opposite sides of a scale—they must be equally precious.

Violence that leads to death must not be wielded lightly. But when bloodshed is necessary, it must be enacted without hesitation and with a strong sense of purpose.

This was why Sister Ainikki's heart was free from the slightest shred of fear or regret. There was only one thing that she wished could have been different: she would've preferred to have been born not as a changeling elf, but as a human.

But even that...

She smiled faintly, almost feeling gleeful as she gripped the hilt of the executioner's sword that was slung over her back.

“Bearif iye kafi nuun gainuk lazanmere (If you have the courage to sacrifice, restore this blade to life)!!!”

The sword burned red and white, flashing with an intensity that obliterated the white darkness of the blizzard—her blade burned away all the frost, snow, rust, and everything else ensnaring it.

Sister Ainikki gripped the sword and moved forward, becoming a colored wind that blew straight toward the greater demon.

“Hiiiiyahhhhhh!!!”

She swung the blazing blade. Not even a greater demon could resist its radiance. The unleashed sword flashed through its skull, its ribs, all the way down to its groin.

“—————”

With its roar extinguished, the blizzard vanished. This was a clear sign of what Aine had done.

A rush of blue blood splattered. An instant later, the greater demon fell apart, bisected. Blood turned to mist—flesh intertwined with this haze of ichor and vanished.

The beast would return to the demon realm. Ultimately, these bodies were no more than temporary vessels for the demons, and their deaths were just as impermanent.

It was not easy to deliver true death to an outsider.

“Ngh, ah...!” Berkanaan wheezed as she accepted the potion from Raraja.

Suddenly, the Viking blade fell from Ainikki’s hands. As soon as Raraja saw that Berkanaan had gulped down the potion, he raced to the nun’s side.

“Sister Ainikki!”

He didn’t really know what had happened. What he did know was that the attack she’d just unleashed had been incredible.

His bag still contained more of the potions of DIOS they had prepared in advance.

“I’m...fine...Raraja-sama. I’ll be...all right...”

Ainikki did not take the potion. Her once beautiful white hands were terribly burned. No...not burned. At that very moment, they were turning to ash and crumbling away.

Naturally, her ashen hands could wield no blade. They couldn’t even open a potion bottle.

The sword was now covered in the ash that had once been her arms. It was also ruined, as if the brilliance it had shown before had been an illusion.

Raraja was shocked. He could only watch, potion in hand, as the scene unfolded before him.

Should this blade, which could deal temporary death to even a greater demon, be feared for demanding such an immense cost? Or was it to be honored and paid its price for being able to drive off the fiend?

Either way, Goerz’s next words seemed like blasphemy against Aine’s devotion.

“Yeah... Good work there.”

That same depraved smile was still plastered on his face. He approached. With one hand, he gripped the amulet hanging at his chest.

Raraja rose to his feet—stood in the man’s way. He was shielding Berkanaan, who was still on the verge of death, and Ainikki, who no longer had any means

to defend herself.

The evil fighter whistled. His Cusinart rested on his shoulder.

“What? You wanna fight me, Raraja-san?”

“Yeah,” growled Raraja. “It’s one-on-one now, Goerz!”

“Ah, taking me on by yourself?” Goerz sneered. “You’re the one who’s cornered here.”

“Not by himself,” interjected a new voice. It sounded terribly amused. “It’s now two-on-one.”

§

The man’s bloodstained boots clacked against the hard floor as he entered the burial chamber. In one hand, he held a black rod—no, a saber of foreign design, soaked in dark blue ichor—while his other hand held a potion. He quaffed the contents of the vial and cast it aside. The glass shattered on the stone tiles.

“Iarumas!” Raraja shouted the man’s name, his voice a mixture of joy and surprise.

“I see you haven’t been wiped out.”

Why did it sound like the man was saying “*Well done*”?

Unable to take his eyes off the enemy in front of him, Raraja could only sense the man in black behind him.

“Iarumas...-sama...”

“Yeah.”

Iarumas glanced at Ainikki, who had fallen to her knees, and then looked at Berkanan, who had collapsed on the floor. Then, he noticed the absence of Garbage.

“Hmm,” he mused. “Was her soul (levels) sucked out?”

“He sent her somewhere!” Raraja growled. “With that *amulet* of his!”

“Oh, is that all?”

Raraja's eyes bugged out. *What does he mean, "Is that all"?*!

"Ainikki, you can cast KANDI, right?" asked larumas. "We can't get her out if we don't know where she is."

A vague, mixed expression crossed the nun's face—she seemed both troubled and relieved. "Yes," she replied with a nod.

Did this mean that once they knew where Garbage was, they could save her?

Raraja took a deep breath—the air was still bitingly cold—and then exhaled. It cooled his head a bit.

larumas was the same as ever. Which meant...

Things aren't that bad.

The dungeon was always dangerous. That was also the same as ever.

With that thought in mind, Raraja was able to force a smile. He adjusted his grip on his dagger, lowered his stance, and glanced around the chamber. The boy evaluated everyone's positioning as he thought about what he should do next.

There was Goerz...and Orlaya.

"larumaaas..." In contrast to his enemies' levelheaded approach, Goerz glared at the man in black with an odd intensity. "You sure are cold, huh? I just erased your little pet, y'know?"

"You teleported her into the rock, sure, but that's not enough to erase her." larumas's eyes burned with the same intensity as he returned Goerz's glare. He then shrugged. "There are multiple ways to remedy that."

Raraja backed away slowly, his eyes always on Goerz. Suddenly, he heard a voice from behind him.

"He's been...swallowed up..."

Ainikki. She had somehow managed to sit up despite having lost both arms.

Raraja crouched next to her, doing what he could to support her soft body. Then, taking a potion from his bag, he brought it to her lips.

He couldn't have done this before—it would have given Goerz a fatal opening.

But the situation had changed.

larumas is here. That must be why.

Ainikki accepted the potion with an exhausted smile and a slight bow of her head.

Gulp, gulp. The potion slid down her white throat. Then—*whew*—she let out a subtle sigh.

“The power...of that magic item...has taken his heart...” she murmured.

“Only a rhea wouldn’t submit to a thing like that,” larumas proclaimed, boasting on behalf of the race he felt was the most praiseworthy. He fell into a relaxed battle stance with his katana. “The amulet’s power... It’s why everyone else ends up *like that*.”

No one wanted to hand over the amulet to the king. Why would anyone surrender such a thing in exchange for the elite guard’s Chevron of Rank? Just like the man who’d stolen the amulet from the king and then spent the rest of his life hiding in the dungeon with his treasure, people who possessed the amulet became horrifying monsters—a second or third Werdna.

“That’s quite a thing to say, huh, larumas?” Goerz spoke in the same casual tone he might use when chatting with a friend. He let the Cusinart, which he held in one hand, fall to his side.

But all of that nonchalance was just for appearances. The air between him and larumas was tense and only drawing tighter. Each of them assessed the other’s moves, seeking opportunities and trying to figure out their opponent’s striking distance.

Their conversation was merely a cover for that.

“You know you want *this thing* so bad you can’t control yourself,” said Goerz.

“Yes.” larumas nodded. “You’re absolutely right.”

What now?

Raraja ground his teeth as he watched the two of them. He knew that trying to get involved at his level wouldn’t achieve anything. If he could manage to draw the enemy’s attention, like he had in the battle with the red dragon, that

would be great. However...

Perhaps this was his chance.

Right now, while Goerz was unable to take his eyes off larumas, the boy could circle around behind his former clan leader.

Orlaya...

But was that all right?

Sister Ainikki and Berkanan—they were still in no state to stand. And while their party was only facing Goerz at the moment, the dungeon behind them was still swarming with greater demons.

Should Raraja remain on guard against them? Should he simply stay put, maintain a defensive posture, and observe the situation?

larumas wasn't saying anything, and not because he couldn't afford to—he probably didn't need to.

What should I do?

Potential options floated through the boy's mind like bubbles. Each one popped.

No, no, no...

“Go.”

The maelstrom of thoughts rushing through Raraja's head came to a stop with one word, one touch—a big hand tugged on his sleeve.

Berkanan.

Even with the potion lending her vitality, her wounds would not all heal in an instant. Her blood-drained face still bore the painful marks of frostbite, and yet still, she urged him on.

“Go, Raraja...-kun.”

Her voice was a whisper—a prayer.

“Easier said than done,” he murmured.

“We'll be...fine here. I'm with her too...” said Ainikki, giving the hesitant boy a

gentle push. “You don’t need to be concerned for us.”

Raraja nodded. “I’m counting on you!”

With that, the boy took off at a dash.

Berkanan watched him go, using her sword to steady herself. She thought about the dungeon, the demons, and what she could do—what she ought to do. Would grandmother praise her for it?

“Don’t be reckless,” Ainikki cautioned in a soft voice. “The adventure isn’t over until you make it back to the surface.”

“Yeah...”

Berkanan knew that. The girl gave a small—actually large—nod in response. What she ought to do now was recover as much as she could, preserve her spells, and prepare for a potential ambush. She knew that these things should take priority. She really did. And yet...

“Even in the back row...” Berkanan moaned. “I still keep getting hurt!”

§

The battle between larumas and Goerz, like all battles in the dungeon, began in silence.

They slowly approached one another, trying to gauge their opponent’s range, read their actions, and find an opportunity.

Then, when they were close enough that their blades were sure to collide...

Shh!

larumas was the first to move, closing in smoothly. One, two, three swings of his saber.

“Oops!”

Using his Cusinart blade, Goerz turned the attacks aside as though they were child’s play. The bizarre spinning blade sank its teeth into larumas’s saber, whining loudly as it threatened to tear the weapon from his grip.

However, larumas had no intention of playing into that game so easily. Instead, he used his strength to lift his opponent’s sword, freeing his own blade.

Sparks flew.

As their blades came away from each other, the two were thrown off-balance. larumas pulled his sword close to his side, while Goerz went for an overhead strike.

Round two—they lunged straight at each other once again. larumas was the one who came out on top.

“Oh?!”

A slight divergence of larumas’s strike was all it took. His line of attack streaked up Goerz’s upper arm and sliced the limb in two.

Blood spurted. Goerz’s severed arm—the one that had been holding his sword—flew into the air. larumas’s blade scythed through Goerz’s torso on the follow-up.

With his body bisected, Goerz’s eyes bulged, and...

“Just kidding!”

He stuck out his tongue, laughing.

Spraying blood bubbled up, forming new flesh and reconnecting his severed abdomen. Goerz quickly pulled himself together and was as good as new—his torso sat atop his waist once more.

“Ha ha!!!”

Goerz’s arm was still severed, though it was connected to his body by a rope of blood. He swung his own flesh around like a whip.

larumas dodged this inhuman attack by a hair’s breadth. However, the spinning Cusinart blade cut through the edge of his hood, sending several strands of hair flying. He leaned back hard, kicking Goerz’s arm as he did a backward somersault, then quickly got to his feet again.

larumas’s expression...betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

Goerz grabbed his detached arm and pressed it against his stump. Flesh knitted and reconnected until it was whole. The man then looked at larumas and shrugged.

“Oh, come on. Act a little more surprised, would you? I’m pretty shocked myself.”

“You have the amulet. I expected at least this much.” larumas gave a slight nod, having confirmed the situation around him during the moment he was performing his backward somersault.

Behind him, Ainikki and Berkana were still recovering. Raraja was nowhere to be seen.

That was for the best.

larumas smiled. Now, he could focus on the amulet.

“What’s wrong?” Goerz asked. “Cast a spell. You know them, right? You’re a mage, after all!”

“I don’t recall ever calling myself one...”

larumas rapidly closed the distance between them, repeatedly swinging at Goerz with his saber. However, now that Goerz had become aware of his own powers, he abandoned the entire concept of defense.

Slash! Blood. *Slash!* More blood. Over and over, larumas’s blade sliced into his flesh.

But Goerz understood that he had become invincible, so he did not stop. Even as his body was slashed to ribbons, he let his wounds heal on their own and swung the Cusinart, trying to slam it into larumas.

“Ha ha! I’m *undying* now, larumas!”

Not even larumas had perfect focus (hit points). After one or two rounds of combat, he had picked up many small cuts. Pain and blood loss sapped his focus, driving him steadily toward the precipice of death.

Because of that, Goerz wasn’t surprised to see larumas reach for his bag. In fact, he even wanted to cheer when he saw the man pull out a potion.

“I’m not gonna let you use that!”

Goerz swung his nearly severed arm around on a rope of blood in an attack so fast that it seemed to break the speed of sound.

Iarumas didn't hesitate.

"Oh yeah?"

He threw the potion bottle right at Goerz. Cusinart met crystal in midair, shattering the bottle. Liquid rained down on Goerz alongside shimmering shards.

Goerz didn't care. It was only a potion of DIOS. What did it matter to him if—"Arrrrrgh?!"

Instantly, Goerz screamed. His entire body was racked with searing pain. Looking at the spots where he'd been splashed, he saw that his flesh was inflamed, *melting*.

Obviously, this wasn't going to be enough to destroy his undying body. No, not even the lowliest of monsters would have died from such a thing. But it did bring pain. It repelled him. That was all.

"That was Sister Ainikki's holy water," Iarumas said. He carried some on him at all times and used it to create a barrier whenever the party stopped for rest in the dungeon.

But so what? It was not nearly enough to stop Goerz. All the fighter needed to do was focus on the amulet—his flesh immediately swelled up, filling with blood, and his wounds healed.

When Goerz next attacked, a bizarre light burned in his eyes.

"As if that'd be enough to kill me!"

If this man hadn't relied on the amulet so heavily—if he'd stayed true to his nature as a beast—perhaps he would have fared better.

But there's no point in dwelling on it.

In the dungeon, results were everything. There were no what-ifs. Whoever won, won.

"You think I don't know how to kill an undead king?"

Iarumas's empty hand began making *familiar* signs. He raised his voice, chanting the only true words that could destroy the undying.

“Zeila woarif nuun (*O all who are deceased, dissolve before this radiance*)!!!”

There was a beam of light like a paintbrush—it blotted Goerz out of existence as it burned him away.

He didn’t bleed this time. The body that should have been there...was completely lost.

“Wha...?!”

Goerz didn’t understand. He didn’t know the spell that had taken his body from him—couldn’t have known it. However, the knowledge stored in the amulet whispered the answer to him.

“Damn you!” Goerz spat. “You can cast ZILWAN?!”

“Indeed,” larumas boasted as the magical light dispelled Goerz’s body. “I can.”

To those who lived a finite existence, this spell was simply light, with no other effect. But for those who were undying, the light spelled *instant death*. Servants of God could have dispelled Goerz’s undying curse by simply praying, and yet—“I’ll have you know that this is a *sixth-level* spell,” larumas grumbled.

—for a mage to do the same thing required an incredible amount of training.

Despite larumas’s bitter tone, he wasn’t that bothered. He knew that behind him, Sister Ainikki was smiling with satisfaction.

Goerz, who lay bisected on the ground, torso severed for good this time, would have cursed that smile.

“What’s...so different?!” he roared, clawing at the stone tiles with both arms, the Cusinart still held tight in one hand. “What makes you and me so *different*?!”

larumas looked down. His cool gaze showed not a hint of emotion.

He saw only the amulet.

“Spells, I suppose.”

“You’re no different from me!” Goerz roared. He couldn’t understand.

larumas is using a bunch of brats to make progress in the dungeon. Even if he

takes in a stray dog and makes nice with the silver-haired elf, what he's doing isn't fundamentally different from what I'm doing. This guy doesn't care about others. They're all just his tools. Everyone and everything—all stepping stones to reach his goal.

And when it comes to weapons, I've got a Cusinart. It's way better than his saber. I ought to be stronger. There's no reason I should've lost.

His eyes were fixated on the amulet. Same as mine. What was the difference between the two of us?

What?!

"You don't give a damn about anything but the amulet either!"

Iarumas spoke calmly. "I recently learned that even meaningless things aren't meaningless."

Was Sister Ainikki listening? Perhaps with her long ears, she might have heard him. Well, not that Iarumas minded. It was simply a matter of fact that she had taught him that lesson. Besides...

Sparing too many brings purity, while killing too many corrupts.

"When it comes to killing techniques, you need just the right amount of impurity."

That was the secret of neutrality.

§

It's so bright.

She was exhausted and wished she could just sleep forever.

All this noise—all this light. It irritated her.

She just wanted them to leave her alone. All of them. Everyone was so selfish. She wouldn't bother them, so she wished they'd do the same.

And yet, the noise, the light, it all continued, until...

"Orlaya...!"

She absently raised her single eye.

Raraja.

He was calling her name, clinging to her.

He seemed desperate. That kind of pissed her off.

“I’m fine. Leave me alone.”

“Like hell you are!”

Raraja started swinging the dagger in his hand.

He stabbed, slashed, and tore at the pillar of flesh, trying to pull Orlaya out of it. The cold steel running across her skin and the sharpness of the blade—Orlaya felt none of it. It was just strangely irritating.

Bitingly, she demanded, “Why are you doing this?!”

“Because we haven’t even talked yet!”

That wasn’t a coherent reason.

Raraja forced aside demonic meat, reaching out toward Orlaya’s slender body. He grabbed her violently, with brute force. Flesh and bone creaked. But the sensation of pain never washed over her. There was only an awful, nauseating...frustration.

“You have no idea...how I feel...!” she shouted.

“Because you won’t tell me!”

“I...!” Orlaya’s voice went so shrill that it sounded like she was going to spit blood.

He didn’t know anything. She’d waited for him, but he never came.

The inside of her head was in disarray, and she didn’t even know where her heart was anymore. Yet still, Orlaya went on shouting, without even knowing what words would come out.

“It’s not like I want you...to save me...!”

Yeah.

That would be far too miserable.

He’d save her. Smile. She’d thank him, and they would...what? Live happily

ever after?

No. She would hate that.

She didn't want to be some trophy, like a princess out of a children's story. There were tons of things she wanted to do—had wanted to do.

She'd wanted to earn money. To send some back to her folks. To make them feel secure.

She'd wanted to explore the dungeon herself. To use all sorts of tricks, find her own companions, and then...

Someday...she'd wanted to find the Diamond Knight's equipment.

Raraja had gone and done all of that. Alone. But also, with a party. He'd brought Garbage with him. Brought that other girl with him. Brought larumas the corpse hauler too.

And now, Raraja stood before her, acting like he was a *real* adventurer. Like he was the one who would save her.

She was just his trophy. No more and no less.

What would that change? It would be no different from when she'd been an appraiser. He would abandon her in the tavern—or on the dungeon's first floor. And all the while, she would wear a flirtatious smile, bow her head, and act grateful.

She didn't want that for herself. She'd never wanted to end up like *this*.

No. She would hate that. No. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Nothing had gone as she'd hoped.

This was all too much. She had nothing to live for.

Tears welled in her eyes. Frustration and misery threatened to tear her heart to pieces.

She just wanted to fade away.

This... This...

"I hate this...!"

“Well, then!” Raraja shouted over the top of the crying Orlaya. “Come adventuring with me!!!”

A loud noise echoed across the chamber as Orlaya’s pale body was ripped from the demonic flesh. The muscle fibers wrapped around her arms and legs unraveled—the meat fell away from her body.

Her frail limbs, eaten away by curses, lacked the strength to stand. Power had been poured into her, grinding away at her being and completely exhausting her soul.

All that Orlaya could do was cling to Raraja’s chest and weep.

Raraja wrapped his arms around her delicate shoulders—and then, finally, he noticed that she was naked. Her body was covered in reddish-black scars left by curses. He touched her gently, like she was something breakable.

“I mean, you’re the one who suggested it,” he murmured.

That we go on an adventure together.

Orlaya didn’t respond. She simply continued to sob into Raraja’s chest.

§

And so, it was all over. Or was it?

§

“Fuck...you...!”

Goerz’s throat would soon be no more, yet he sputtered the curse anyway. Larumas hooked his katana under the amulet hanging around Goerz’s neck.

“I’m not...gonna accept this...! I’m...not!!!”

His vengeful shouts were frightening enough that even Larumas paused for a moment.

No...not a pause. To be more precise, the responding pressure the amulet exerted was physically pushing back against Larumas’s blade.

A strange voice that couldn’t possibly have belonged to Goerz erupted from the man’s lips.

“SO (*Seenzanme*) CO (*Chuzanme*) R (*Re*) DI (*Darui*).”

At first, it looked like a shadow—a shadowy wind.

A gale from another world, bizarrely high-pitched, blew from Goerz’s body, forming a whirlwind. He was no longer Goerz the adventurer, but merely a gate to some other place.

“Hurry!” shouted larumas. “Get over here!”

“O-Okay...?!”

Despite his confusion, Raraja’s body seemed to understand the situation—certainly better than his mind did. He scooped up Orlaya’s tiny body and ran so fast that he was practically tripping over himself to escape.

The shadow’s claws sliced through the space that the boy’s body had occupied only a moment before. Nothing had happened to him, and yet the aftermath of that swing chilled Raraja to the bone. It was a cold unlike that of MADALTO—this horror was able to freeze even the soul itself.

“Wh-What is that thing?!”

“The damn fool! Has he called an unseen being?!” larumas muttered, responding to Raraja’s question with a nonanswer. “Don’t let it touch you. It’ll strip away your soul (level drain).”

“Urgh?!”

Raraja was very glad that he’d decided to carry Orlaya in his arms instead of taking the time to put her on his back. That had been the right move. larumas and Raraja took Orlaya with them as they retreated to where their two companions were waiting.

As they did, the darkness—the shadows—the demonic wind—all grew in intensity. A form was beginning to appear in the void.

It was birdlike, yet also insectile. Like a demon with two wings on its back. But the most terrifying thing was the creaking sound of the pressure it exerted on the world itself.

They couldn’t even move. Once such a being appeared, they could only bow down and wait for death.

“What...is...that...thing...?” Berkana trembled violently, forcing the words out one at a time. “It...scares...me...!”

“A demon from another world...”

Ainikki narrowed her eyes and groaned. A demon like this existed in the lore of her homeland as well.

No, this wasn’t a mere demon. It was more horrifying—more massive.

“A demon lord. The undying king of demons...”

Iarumas gave a small nod. He moved slowly to stand before the demon lord, katana in hand.

Seeing this, Raraja set Orlaya down on the stone floor and went to stand by Iarumas’s side. His hands were quivering. His legs quaked, threatening to give out beneath him. He couldn’t imagine that his knife would be able to do anything useful.

Iarumas glanced his way—looked at the thief who stood at his side.

“You’re a front-liner now, huh?”

“Shut up,” spat Raraja, hoping that his words didn’t come out shaky. “Do we stand any chance?”

“Who knows? I exhausted myself on the way here.”

“The sister said it’s undead...right? Can’t you use that light spell, like before?”

His demeanor no different from usual, Iarumas quietly explained, “I could cast it, yes, but that thing is a demon. Spells won’t work on it. We’ll need to resort to force.”

After a moment’s pause, Raraja mumbled, “Oh yeah?”

“It has no concrete form. But if a blade works, then I think I can kill it.”

Raraja glanced down at his dagger. He looked at Iarumas’s katana. They were both ordinary steel. He recalled the blazing blade Ainikki had wielded. Not even *that* had been capable of killing a demon.

Raraja had no clue what he ought to do. His skill level, his equipment, and everything else he might need—all of it was lacking. But nonetheless...

He was all in.

“Well, take it easy. Even if we lose, we’ll only die...” larumas’s encouraging words seemed to falter on his lips, and he suddenly grew serious. It seemed he’d momentarily forgotten the accursed power that resided in the monster’s arms. “Ah, no. We could end up permanently lost this time.”

“I’m not gonna die!” Raraja growled.

“Hmm. Good.”

That was a compliment, Raraja thought, though he wasn’t sure how he knew that.

larumas was smiling. Raraja was too. But the boy’s smile was definitely forced.

Behind him, he could hear Ainikki and Berkanan slowly rise. They were both badly wounded. But so were Raraja and larumas.

Berkanan let out a groan that sounded like that of a whining child. She was trying to muster up what strength she had left.

“I’m counting on you,” Raraja said to her. “Come up with something clever we can do.”

“Sure...”

He sensed Berkanan nodding, the Dragon Slayer held at the ready.

“I will too,” Ainikki said in a firm voice, speaking to larumas. Her breastplate had fallen off, her habit was in tatters, and she’d lost both hands...but none of that infringed on her dignified beauty. “Spells might not work on it, but I have plenty that I can still cast on *us*.”

“LOKTOFEIT would be an option,” larumas suggested.

“Sara wasn’t enough for you? Do you want to see me naked as well? Could you perhaps consider your words a little more before inviting me to do such things?” The silver-haired elf pouted, then apologetically murmured, “And sadly... I haven’t learned it.”

“Go figure.”

It looked like they wouldn't be surviving this without a fight. Everyone understood that. They readied their weapons to face the death closing in on them.

The shadow swelled. The demon emerged. An infernal wind, a demon lord, an unseen being.

Then, at that very moment—*she* appeared.

§

“Awoooooo!!!”

§

A single ray of light.

A white wind that brought death.

A redhead girl.

The sword in her hands shone as she dashed across the burial chamber with a high-pitched howl.

It was nearly as long as she was tall—its blade was ancient and sharp.

The sword looked like it was the one swinging the girl's thin arms and slender body around, but the opposite was true. Her body twisted through the air, as though she were dancing with the blade. She wound it all the way back, then struck.

Her moves were unrefined—wild. They traced a beautiful arc that polished, proper swordplay could never have hoped to match.

The sword seemed to get sucked inside the demon—it cut smoothly, in a single straight line, from the top of the shadow to beneath it.

She'd slashed all the way through.

“GAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH?!?!?!”

That indistinct shadow—the demon lord which had no flesh in this world—let out a cry that was, unmistakably, of an agony so great that the monster was left shaking.

The girl nimbly touched down on the floor of the burial chamber.

“Arf!”

Garbage snorted as if to say, “*What have you people been doing?*”

Raraja was speechless. No one uttered so much as a single word.

Iarumas—his eyes were wide. In shock. In admiration. And perhaps...jealousy.

Radiance burned itself into Orlaya’s single eye. The sword in that girl’s hands, the one Garbage had found and made her very own...

Orlaya knew it. The rhea had dreamed of it many times since she was little. She’d sought after it. Given up on it. To her, the blade had been nothing but a dream—a fantasy that would go on forever, unending. This was what she had believed.

So yes, Orlaya knew that sword—and the title given to the legendary hero who had wielded it.

That king, the king who worships gold, will no more see his treasure room.

That king, the king who worships power, will have none within his tomb.

That king, the king who worships these—that king, he will find doom.

In front of you now, in that king’s doom, the answer you seek doth loom.

Yes, indeed. The answer was in front of Orlaya now.

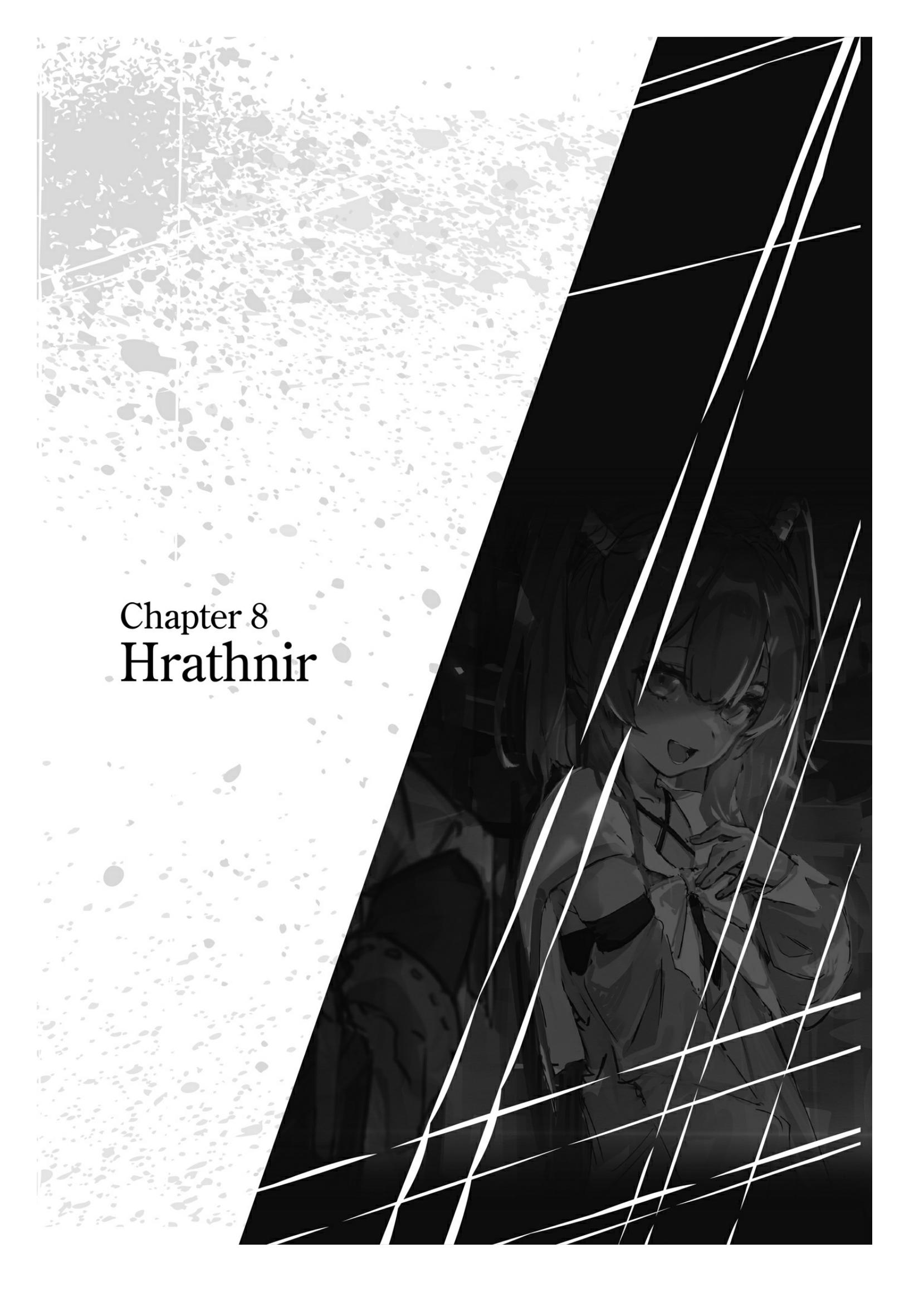
This girl. She was the one.

“Ah... Ah...!”

Orlaya’s trembling lips whispered a name.

A sword clad in the void, the noblest blade in all the world.

It was called...



Chapter 8

Hrathnir

“Is that...what you are...?”

It was the first time Raraja had heard such genuine awe in larumas’s voice. The man in black looked shocked—stunned, even—as he stared at the redhead girl. She’d shouldered the greatsword that had unleashed that silvery flash, a look of triumph on her face.

“The Diamond Knight...”

“Arf.”

Garbage’s bark sounded exasperated. She had no idea what the name meant.

As she trotted over to join the front row, the others wondered how she’d survived. What had happened after she’d been teleported away? How had she gotten the sword? They had loads of questions, and the girl would answer none of them.

Garbage glanced at the hunk of meat on the ground—it was no longer possible to tell that it had once been Goerz. Then she looked at larumas. Raraja. Berkanan and Ainikki.

Finally, she looked at Orlaya. Her gaze then returned to Raraja.

Those eyes—like bottomless blue pools—stared at the boy.

“Wh-What...?”

“Yap!”

“Ow?!”

He’d expected a kick, but when the impact came, it wasn’t to his shin.



Garbage had opened her little hand wide and slapped Raraja's back. He glared at her, but Garbage flashed him a toothy grin.

Was she congratulating him? He had no idea, but...

"Listen, you! This isn't the time!"

I'm all battered and bruised here, he wanted to protest, but it wouldn't have done any good.

Garbage barked at him with a scowl, completely ignoring whatever he said.

"Hee hee..."

Was it Berkana who let out an involuntary chuckle? Or Ainikki? Perhaps it was both. The sense of impending tragedy had long since evaporated. Only a comfortable tension remained.

The usual feeling, thought Raraja. He was starting to feel like things might just work out. However, he just thumbed his nose, trying not to let that optimism show.

"_____"

The unseen being was still not moving. There was no way that mere mortals could fathom the thoughts of an otherworldly monster, a demon lord, but...

Apparently, once something managed to deal it a painful blow (damage), it was cautious enough to wait and see what its opponent's next move would be.

Iarumas stared at Garbage and her new sword for a while, then let out an exhausted sigh. "She will take center. Everyone else support her. Garbage—do whatever it takes to land a blow with that sword."

"U-Um...!" Berkana spoke up hesitantly. It seemed like she wanted to get closer to Garbage, but she just fumbled the Dragon Slayer around for a bit and then pulled down the brim of her hat.

"I-I think...um, probably, if it's just one attack... I can...take...it..."

She always trailed off like this when she was proposing something.

Iarumas's response was succinct, as usual. "Then move up to the front."

“J-Just one, okay? I think...one will be fine...”

“That will be enough.”

Berkanan nodded frantically, her head bobbing wildly up and down. She gripped the Dragon Slayer.

What does that leave for me to do?

Raraja looked around. In the dungeon, the front and back rows had room for three people each. No matter how massive an enemy they faced, the strange size of the dungeon always made it feel like that was the fixed number of people who could fight at once.

I guess in this situation, I go in the back row. I'll fall back, and then what?

“Rara...ja...” Suddenly, a faint voice called his name. “Come...here. Hurry...”

Orlaya.

Though she was exhausted—everyone here was, but this girl had it the worst—her single eye was peering at Raraja. It seemed to pierce straight through him.

Raraja hesitated. Larumas didn’t.

“Go,” the man told him.

“You’re sure?” Raraja packed a lot of implied questions into those two words.

“She’s your companion. Look after her.”

“Right...”

It didn’t sound like Larumas was saying that Raraja would be of no use in the fight. So the boy nodded and headed over to Orlaya. He didn’t know what he ought to do, but he was being trusted with something—with looking after Orlaya. In that case, he’d do what he could. And as soon as he settled on that thought, there was no time left to hesitate.

In his thoroughly exhausted state, Larumas called out to Aine.

“Ainikki, we’ll need your support.”

After a moment’s pause, she said, “Count on it.” Even without arms, the

silver-haired nun was still beautiful. Her long ears swayed as she smiled. “Support is an important combat role. I expect you to show your gratitude later.”

“With money?” he asked.

“Alms,” she corrected.

The two shared a dry, hollow laugh. They had an understanding.

Lastly, larumas looked at Garbage.

“Get him,” he told her.

“Woof!!!”

With that single bark, Garbage sprang up, signaling the start of the fight.

§

“GROOOOOORRLLL!!!”

The adventurers had acted, and the demonic shadow made the next move.

The dark wind whooshed past, branching into countless hands. Their claws closed in on Garbage all at once.

With a loud growl, the girl flipped through the air. Her sword swung left and right, howling like a whirlwind as it blew away the demonic shadow. However, that largely blunted the momentum needed to slay the unseen being.

“Grrruff!”

She couldn’t get close to it. Garbage let out a low, dissatisfied growl as she landed within range of the demon.

“Garbage-chan...!”

A large body leaped forward to shield the girl—Berkanan. She was the tallest member of the party. Tall enough that even a demon lord from another world took notice.

It turned its attention from Garbage to Berkanan. The shadowy hands rushed toward the big girl like a dark haze.

Berkanan was scared. Her legs wanted to run. Her hands quivered. The

Dragon Slayer she clutched was just as lacking in energy as ever.

But... I've killed a dragon. It was an accomplishment as big as she was. That thought remained inside her heart, like a spark on kindling that gave rise to a crackling fire.

"Mimuzanme gainre'einfo (*My body is a heartless statue of iron*)."

In an instant, her body turned to steel.

That was no metaphor—MOGREF literally turned the caster's body into metal.

It didn't rewrite the world or have an influence on others. It was among the lowest-level spells in the dungeon—which still placed it alongside HALITO.

The shadowy claws rained powerful blows on Berkanan's metallic form, sending her flying. Normally, the blows would have killed her instantly. Or, if her body narrowly managed to survive, they would've stolen her soul.

However, an iron statue couldn't die, and it had no soul to steal.

Obviously, her spirit was under a strain like no other. There was, however, a payoff—she'd totally wasted her opponent's turn. The time that Berkanan had bought them was almost miraculous...and *she* would not let it go to waste.

"Rara...ja...!"

Orlaya desperately forced herself to sit up. Raraja supported her almost unbelievably light body. Her flesh was bare. Even in this situation, he still felt incredibly hesitant about touching her directly. It made him tense up.

But Orlaya dismissed the boy's struggles with a snort. "Support...me...! Do it...properly...!"

"What're you gonna do?!"

"My eye...can't see so well...anymore...!"

Was it because of the curse? Exhaustion? Or because she'd been given as a sacrifice to the demons?

The vision in her sole remaining eye was awfully blurry. Even *his* face was blurry. Despite that, she felt she had to do something. Orlaya's sense of duty

compelled her into action.

Letting him save her, thanking him, and then having that be the end of it... She would've rather died.

"Take...aim...!"

Raraja took a deep breath. In, then out. "Fine!"

He lifted Orlaya's thin, twiglike arms from behind and directed them toward the enemy. It reminded Raraja of days back in his hometown—of pulling on the bowstring when he'd been brought along to help with a hunt.

Orlaya was the bow and he was the archer...? No, that was nonsense. *She* was the one who'd decided to do this—was the one doing it. He was just here as her assistant.

"I dunno what you're planning..." Raraja smiled. "But go for it!"

"I...will...!"

God.

Orlaya had never believed in a deity. Had never thought she could rely on one if it existed. Everything she did was because of her own strength—nothing else in this world could be counted on.

But right now, for just this one moment, she prayed to God.

She wouldn't beg for help—she would only ask that God not get in her way. She prayed for this, even if it meant offering up everything she had in return.

"Hea mimuarifnuun (*O world, heed my command*)!!!"

The girl's soul-grinding prayer caused a miracle. Her HAMAN changed the world.

Pure white light. The curse that Orlaya unleashed as Raraja supported her pierced through the demon lord. Every law of physics was rewritten, and for a moment, nature bent to her will.

"A-Aaaaaah!!!"

It was a will that no longer had a voice. Orlaya couldn't believe that *she* could defeat a demon.

But...in the time she'd languished—a period that had seemed to last for an eternity—she'd repeatedly practiced this.

She couldn't seal the demon lord's magic. She didn't have the power left for that. But...

“Get...blasteeeeed!!!”



With that cry, the demon's unseen armor—the spell protecting it—audibly shattered.

Iarumas knew what that meant.

He leaped forward to strike, but not with the katana in his right hand. No, he raised his empty left hand, and...

His fingers formed the signs of a spell.

"Ainikki!"

"Right!!!"

The holy maiden who served the god Kadorto would never let an opportunity like this pass them by.

"O God! O Kadorto, ruler of life and death! Free this one from its cursed yoke! Save its soul!"

"Zeila woarif nuun (*O all who are deceased, dissolve before this radiance*)!!!"

It wasn't even a spell, and yet Ainikki's earnest prayer created lightning more powerful than Iarumas's ZILWAN. Two shots of powerful holy energy struck that ghoulish lord, that undead fiend, the unseen being, grinding it down.

"BAAAAAAZLLLLZZZZZ?!?!?!"

It let out a hideous cry. A dying scream. And yet, the demon was not defeated.

White shadows—black light. The shadow writhed, shuddered, shook, and swelled up.

Orlaya's eye could no longer see. And yet, *and yet...*

Aah, I always knew it.

The last thing Orlaya saw was—

It's so pretty...

"Awoooooo!!!"

—the sparkle of Hrathnir, cutting through a hundred lights to slay the demon lord from another world.

§

Silence. Like everything had died away.

Some time passed. Berkana blinked.

“Ungh...”

Her entire body felt tense, and she had a throbbing headache. Iron didn’t move—didn’t think either. It took some serious effort for her to recall that she was a living being. To sit up.

Then, she looked around to check the situation.

“Is it...over...?” she murmured.

“Probably, yeah...”

It was just an ordinary burial chamber. Raraja was there right next to her. Berkana’s heart gave a small twinge when she saw Orlaya slumped against him, resting on his lap. But she had decided to put her concern for the girl ahead of whatever pain she might have been feeling.

“That girl, um...” She searched for the name. “Orlaya-chan... Is she all right...?”

There was a pause before Raraja answered. “Just sleeping, I think.”

“Oh, I see...”

“How about you?”

“Huh?”

“Berkana.”

“Ah...”

I’m so selfish, she thought. But she didn’t have the wherewithal to try to keep up a facade at this point. Her expression collapsed into a small smile.

“Well... I’d say I’m fine, but...” Yeah, she didn’t have the energy to keep pretending. “I’m super exhausted,” she finally admitted.

“Me too,” Raraja responded with a smile.

Over on the other side of the chamber, Garbage barked as she gave Goerz’s

corpse a good kick. That was probably payback for before.

“You can’t do that,” Ainiikki scolded.

Garbage didn’t exactly listen, but it seemed like that one kick was enough to satisfy her. The way she trotted off and started exploring the chamber was so true to form that Raraja didn’t know whether to be impressed or exasperated.

As far as Sister Ainiikki was concerned, all people went to Kadorto’s side once they died. She would pray for Goerz’s peaceful rest and perform a simple funeral for him.

Raraja found this hard to understand, but that didn’t mean he had any intention of getting in her way.

Iarumas likely felt the same. He let Ainiikki do as she pleased and then approached Goerz’s remains.

Ainiikki, who was kneeling next to the body, looked up at him. “What will we do about the greater demons on the way back?” she asked.

“They’re beings from another world. With the source of their power cut, they can’t remain in this world for long.”

Having said this, Iarumas thrust the tip of his katana into Goerz’s throat, which was no more than a lump of flesh at this point. He hooked it under the chain and tried to pull up the amulet.

The shard no longer emitted any light. That ominous pressure the amulet had exerted before was gone—vanished as if it had never existed. The thing was silent now, no more than a shard.

Iarumas stared at it, unamused, then tucked the item into his pack.

Ainiikki breathed a sigh of relief. She’d been worried that it might possess him. It wasn’t clear whether Iarumas noticed her concern or not. He let out a relaxed laugh.

“Now then, there’s still one thing left to do.”

“What?” Raraja groaned on behalf of the entire group. “We’re done, aren’t we?”

“Don’t be silly,” larumas told him. “We have to collect Sezmar and the others’ equipment and then head back.”

“Urgh...”

Raraja slowly rose to his feet. He set Orlaya gently on the ground, then Berkanaan took hold of the girl, a strained smile on her face.

Garbage couldn’t be counted on to search, Ainikki had lost both of her arms, and Berkanaan and Raraja were both in bad shape. larumas would have to find the equipment himself.

“We’re a sorry bunch, huh?” remarked Raraja.

“It happens,” said larumas. “This is just how adventures go.”

§

There was one more person, forgotten by all.

“What a...debacle...this has been!”

The man was crawling across the stone dungeon floor, his priestly vestments stained a dark red. He was a Priest of Fang—one of the secrets of the kingdom of Lylgamyn.

Though he had been bisected by Goerz, he’d clung to life—barely. This was likely due to the power of the amulet. Although it had ultimately been stolen from him by Goerz, the priest had still been its owner up until the moment that occurred. The amulet must have kept him alive despite the otherwise fatal blow.

It mattered little at this point. No matter what the results of his efforts were, if he returned to his people having lost his amulet, only death awaited him.

Even so, he had to make his report. And for that reason alone, he kept crawling.

“Curse her, curse her... Curse that mongrel bitch!”

He cursed as though he were spitting out his own blood. Even knowing that it was sapping what life he had left, he couldn’t stop himself. However, he needed to quell his rage at least somewhat—if he died in a fury, he wouldn’t be able to

rest in peace.

But...

“By the way, I wanted to ask a question.”

The priest gasped. “Huh...?!”

At first, he thought it was the reaper himself speaking. The shadowy figure of a man appeared before him. A man clad in a black...kimono.

He held no weapon and showed no sign of magical power. There was nothing about him that should have made the priest wary.

So why was this unarmed man so frightening?

“Why are you so fixated on that girl?” the man asked. “She’s merely an embarrassment to the royal family. It’s not as though she carries the blood of the emperor.”

“A facile question... She is a cursed child, a bringer of calamity!” the Priest of Fang roared. He steeled his heart against the terror the man in front of him inspired. “Like Princess Margda or Queen Beyki! The queen’s sister Sorx became a witch! And as for Princess Dalia...!”

It was the story of Llylgamyn’s history.

This kingdom had faced many calamities, and each time there had always been a woman at the center of the chaos.

Princess Margda in the time of Davalpus. Queen Beyki in the cataclysm. Sorx in the suffering of Queen Iris. And finally, Princess Dalia...

A bastard princess—one born at the same time the dungeon appeared—could be nothing but an evil child inviting curses on the land. Trampling on the mercy they had shown by not simply killing her, she had come to the dungeon.

And so...

“If that girl is allowed to live, it won’t be long before some irreversible calamity befalls us!” the priest screeched.

“I’d like that,” said the man. He let out an amused chuckle. “It would make for a fun adventure.”

“Wha—?!”

The Priest of Fang said no more.

The reason for his silence? Well, it was exceedingly simple.

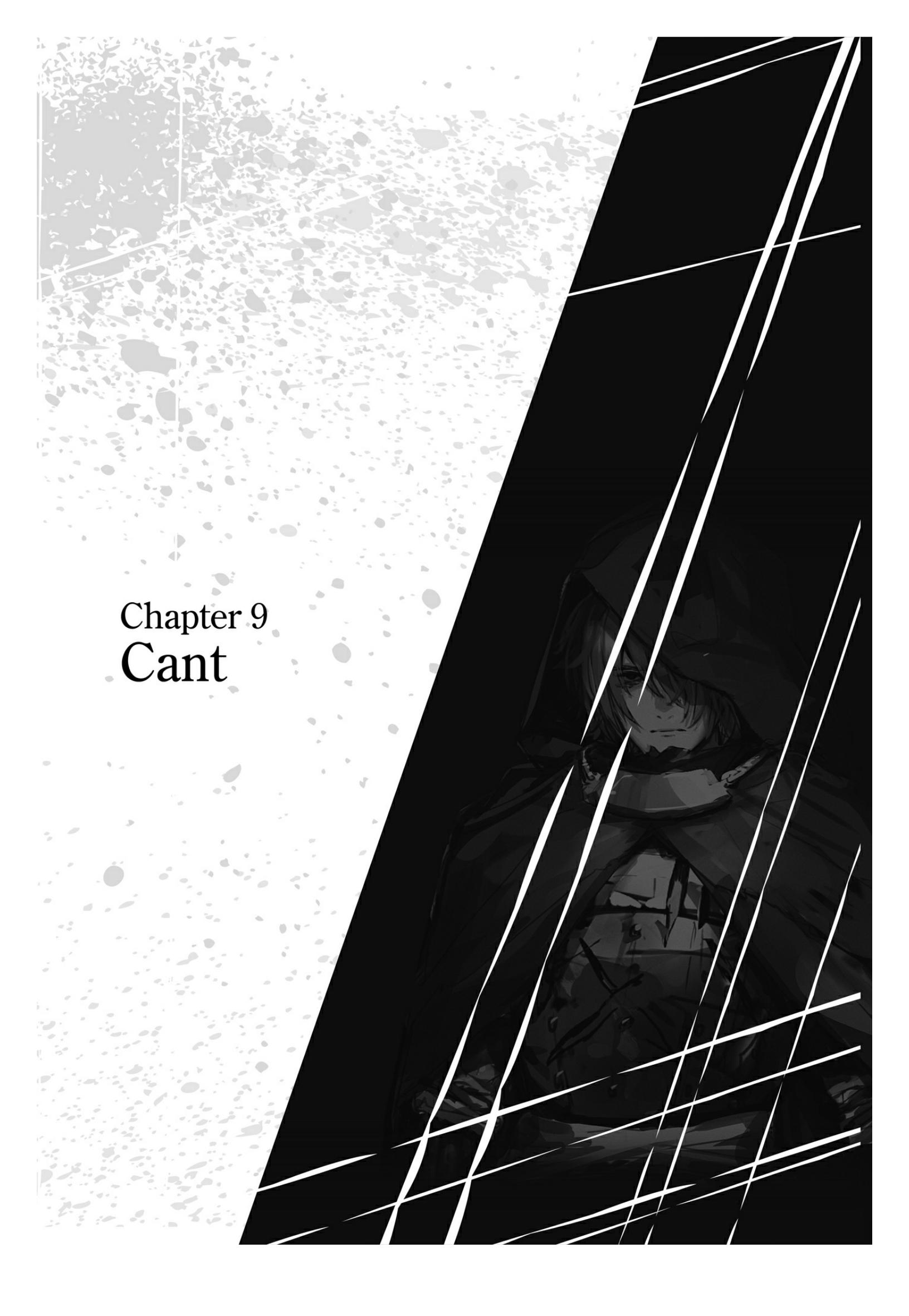
His head was parted from his body, rendering further speech impossible.

The hawk of the wind that brings death—Hawkwind—had decapitated the priest with a single chop of his hand, eliminating the target without leaving so much as a splash of blood. Satisfied with his handiwork, the man gazed into the darkness of the dungeon.

“The flow of things does seem to have changed.”

That was all he said before everything sank into the darkness.

It was over.



Chapter 9

Cant

“Hey, did you hear?”

“If it’s about Goerz biting it, then yeah.”

“Nah, it’s about the third floor.”

“They say there’s an elevator in the back of the Monster Allocation Center.”

“An elevator? What’s that?”

“And it connects to an unexplored area? Seriously?”

“But they say there’ve been greater demons spotted. We’d better be cautious.”

“That’s gotta be bullshit. First a dragon, now *demons*? I don’t buy it.”

“And greater demons at that. Is there anyone out there who could face them and live to tell the tale?”

“Well, I heard even the All-Stars turned tail and ran...”

“But they were all too eager to be the first to run off to the elevator.”

Durga’s Tavern was packed full of adventurers again today. They couldn’t have known what had happened in the dungeon only a few days prior, but fragmentary rumors had emerged and spread like wildfire.

Smack-dab in the middle of things was Berkana, quietly shrinking into herself to avoid attention—at least, as far as she could with such a large, voluptuous body. The effort was largely wasted. Not only did she have a body that drew more than just male attention, but she was also the famed Dragon Slayer.

Berkana pulled down on the brim of her hat. It wouldn’t change the fact she was being stared at, but if she didn’t acknowledge it, she would have an easier time relaxing.

“Hey.”

“Whuh...?” A sudden voice from below provoked a silly sound from Berkana—one she was quickly embarrassed by.

Looking down, she saw a young man she didn’t recognize. He was a fighter—at least, based on his equipment. He also had some painful-looking burn scars.

Erm...

Berkana searched through her memory, “Ah...” She finally recalled who he was. “You’re the one who...went to slay the dragon... Right?”

“Yeah... I’m Schumacher.”

The son of a shoemaker briefly introduced himself, then pressed the bundle he was holding toward her. Berkana blinked as she looked at it. The bundle contained a large pair of waraji.

“I didn’t get the chance to thank you back then. They wear down over time, right? Use them.”

“Y-Yeah, my feet...are kinda big.”

Berkana hung her head and fidgeted. She could see her toes sticking out over the end of her own waraji sandals.

She was always embarrassed about how much larger she was than the boys her age, let alone the other girls. It made buying clothes and shoes a real hassle.

“Th-Thanks...!”

“It’s no big deal...” mumbled Schumacher. “See you.”

Then, just as suddenly as he had appeared, he faded into the crowd, disappearing into the bustle of the tavern. Berkana couldn’t have known his background, but perhaps it was only natural that he fit right in at the tavern now that he was an adventurer.

It’d be nice if I could too.

Just as she was thinking that...

“You’re popular,” said Raraja, who had come up to her at some point. He had no idea how those words affected her.

“Murgh...” Berkana puffed out her cheeks. It was the only way she could express herself. “It’s...not like that.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

That's where the conversation ended. It always made Berkana nervous whenever this happened. Should she say something? Or would that just make it weird? She was always so conflicted during moments like these. So, after some time spent agonizing, she decided to ask a harmless question.

"H-How was she?"

"I just got back from asking Sister Ainikki." With that preamble out of the way, Raraja leaned back in his chair and looked around the busy tavern. "Well, her abilities (level), or rather, her *soul*... They were badly exhausted by the whole ordeal."

"Yeah..."

"So she's gonna have to start from the beginning. Like us."

"Oh..."

They didn't need to specify who they were talking about. Even though they didn't say her name, the girl in question soon appeared.

A small, timid figure stood on the other side of the crowd. She was wrapped in bandages to cover the marks that curses had left all over her body. Her lone eye was slightly clouded. Even so, this rhea girl clad in fresh priestly vestments wove her way through the crowd of adventurers with the aid of her staff.

Once she found Raraja and Berkana, her demeanor changed completely. She strode toward the two of them with determination.

"I'm here," Orlaya spat in a tone that didn't even attempt to hide her foul mood. The eye glaring up at them was powerful—considering the intensity of her gaze, Berkana and Raraja didn't even question how well she could see out of it.

"We're going on an adventure, right?" she demanded.

"Yeah. Starting with the first floor." Raraja grinned. He was beginning to feel like he could sorta understand the reason Iarumas had taken him—a thief—into the party. "Now that we've got someone who can cast priest spells and identify items...there's a whole lot more we can do."

"Let me say this right now... I'm not going to be your errand girl."

“I know.” Waving her words off, Raraja picked up his bag and headed toward the tavern’s exit in high spirits.

Before they got up to chase after him, the two girls he’d left behind looked at each other. Orlaya peered up at Berkanan, who had the quiet, gentle nature and womanly figure that she lacked. Berkanan peered down at Orlaya, who had the resolute will and cute body that she lacked.

Their gazes met, and Orlaya was the first to talk.

“I’m not going to lose!”

“Erm...” Berkanan’s voice cracked. “A-At what?”

“Anything! Everything!”

Having said her piece—or perhaps having gotten embarrassed at what she’d said—Orlaya turned around and walked off.

“Hold up!” she yelled angrily, chasing after Raraja.

This left Berkanan to hurriedly grab her sword, adjust her hat, and shout after them, “I-I’m coming too...!”

The slight pain in her chest—the frustration. It was all gone now.

The master of the tavern, Gil, silently polished cups as he watched them run off. He was sure they would be needed when those three returned.

§

“And?”

Sister Ainikki smiled gently. Her lost hands were hidden by bandages.

“What is it that has you feeling lost this time, Iarumas-sama?”

Business was booming at Durga’s Tavern, but the Temple of Cant was just as busy. There was no shortage of adventurers exploring the dungeon. That meant many would die, and many would return to this world.

They would go on adventuring, treading over the ashes and remains of the lost.

In one corner of the temple where those adventurers gathered, Iarumas sat

on a long bench, playing with the objects that sat in his palm.

Two shards—two amulets.

That's an unusual sight, thought Ainikki. It was rare to see the dungeon or anything related to it give this man pause. He delved into the dungeon, hauled back dead bodies, reported to her, and then went back again.

Yet here he was, stopping by the temple. She couldn't imagine that he had been charmed—ensnared by the amulet the same way Goerz had.

She planted her soft behind on the bench next to him.

"No..." he murmured. "I wouldn't say that I'm lost."

Iarumas glanced at the silver-haired nun. The elf stared back into his eyes.

With a sense of resignation, he mumbled, "I was just thinking, 'It wasn't me after all.'"

Saying the words helped to solidify the answer inside of him.

Ainikki's blue eyes urged him to continue. Iarumas smiled ever so slightly.

"I'm no one, Sister Ainikki."

Iarumas was more or less certain of it. In all likelihood, he was a nobody.

He wasn't the Diamond Knight.

He hadn't found the jewel.

He hadn't stopped the wizard from returning from the depths.

He hadn't saved the queen from her suffering or rescued the ruined kingdom.

"I haven't even gotten the amulet." Iarumas held the now-powerless shards tightly in his fist, speaking as though he was giving up on himself. "I'm sure I was only ever a corpse retriever."

Sister Ainikki stared at Iarumas's face. He looked completely defanged.

After some time, she gave a small sigh. "I'm astonished. So you've finally reached that point, have you?"

"What...?"

“Now you listen to me, larumas-sama.”

She thrust one of her bandaged arms at larumas’s nose. Under normal circumstances, she would have been pointing at him with one of her slender white fingers. From behind that invisible finger, now turned to ash and lost, Ainikki stared at larumas. Her eyes were completely serious. He felt like she could see all the way to the depths of his heart.

“In this dungeon, the brave hero, the great man, and the village youth are all equal—the weakest of the weak.”

What she was saying was basic knowledge in Scale—in the dungeon.

Everyone—at least any adventurer who’d delved into the dungeon—knew it. No matter what kind of life a person had led in the world outside, everyone started as the weakest in the dungeon. There was nothing remarkable about anyone aside from slight differences in natural talent (bonus points).

So why was she stating the obvious?

larumas was unable to see her intent, so Ainikki sharply informed him, “What I am saying is that even if you never accomplished anything, even if you never were anybody, your past doesn’t matter in the slightest.”

larumas’s eyes widened.

He’d never considered that.

Delving into the dungeon, exploring, and searching for the amulet—these things were as natural to him as breathing. They were everything to larumas. He knew nothing else.

“Just like how that girl went from being a slave with no name to becoming the Diamond Knight, you, too, can become something more...”

Being a nobody—that was the first thing every brash youngster who took off from his village to enter the dungeon had to come to grips with.

And larumas was only figuring it out now. This exasperated Sister Ainikki, but she was also genuinely happy to see it.

No matter how slow his pace, moving forward is a sign that he is living a better life. Oh, Kadorto, behold! This man is certainly raising the value of his life!

“I am sure you will accomplish something in the future, larumas-sama.”

Hearing those words... How did larumas take them?

He was silent for a time, and then he clenched his fist around the two shards in the palm of his hand.

“So, in short, nothing has changed, huh?”

He would brave the dungeon. Enter burial chambers—slay the monsters—seek the amulet.

No matter what awaited him at the end of that—no matter what it led him to become.

larumas slowly rose to his feet. He set the two shards in Ainikki’s lap as she gazed up at him.

“Are you going?”

“I am,” larumas answered with a nod.

At the entrance to the temple, a redhead girl—the legendary hero with a priceless sword on her back—was barking as loud as she could.

“The Diamond Knight was able to return. So perhaps now I can obtain the amulet.”

Having said that, larumas headed toward the entrance of the temple—toward the dungeon and the amulet. Garbage barked at him as if complaining that he was taking too long.

After watching the two of them go, Ainikki prayed gleefully in her heart.

May there be blessings (KALKI) wherever he goes!

Afterword

Hello, it's Kumo Kagyu.

How did you like *BLADE & BASTARD 3: Return of The Hrathnir*? I did my very best writing it, so I hope you enjoyed it.

I know that some folks read the afterword first, so I'll avoid spoilers... Now then, let me tell you about the "Diamond Knight" in this volume. It's a variation on the name given to the legendary hero who wielded the equipment that appears in *Wizardry 2* (or 3 in some numbering schemes).

The kingdom of Llylgamyn is struck by a calamity—the demon Davalpus. The goddess has put a barrier around the city that repels evil beings, but the barrier is powerless against evil born within its bounds. Davalpus uses his horrible powers to slay the royal family and take Llylgamyn for himself. However, the young Princess Margda and Prince Alavik escape his grasp.

The royal siblings become adventurers, seeking to defeat Davalpus. They look for the equipment of the famed slayer of demons, the Diamond Knight. In addition to the different pieces of armor with various effects, there is also the sword Hrathnir.

Prince Alavik arms himself with these and enters a decisive battle with Davalpus. However, the demon uses the last of his power to punch a hole in the ground, and the two fall into the bowels of the land—alongside the Diamond Knight's armor and the goddess's staff, which was stolen by Davalpus.

The surviving Princess Margda becomes queen. She puts out a call for adventurers to delve into the demon hole, find the Diamond Knight's equipment, and reclaim the goddess's staff.

The one who goes on an adventure and comes to wear that equipment becomes the second Diamond Knight.

In short, it's the player—you.

When they told me I was allowed to write a *Wizardry* story, this was one of the ideas that I thought of. We don't know what happens to this equipment after the events of 2 (or 3, as the case may be).

This is the story of its return.

Yeah, I know. "Kumo Kagyu's writing this kind of stuff again, huh?"

I hope that you experienced adventurers will crack a smile at it. And for the uninitiated, all you really need to know is that there was that kind of legendary equipment.

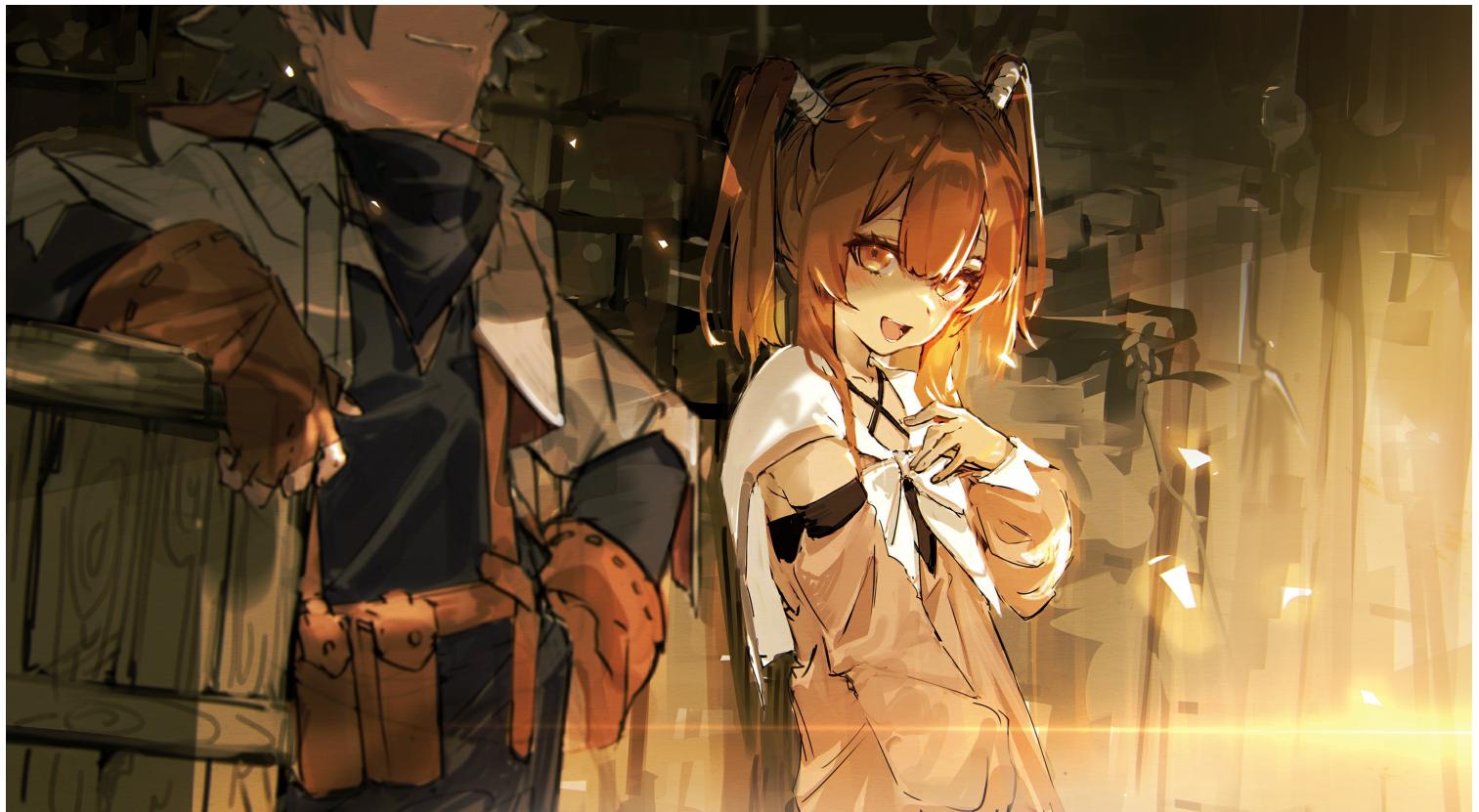
For the next volume, I expect to write a bit of this and that about the dungeon town, Scale. I'm kind of feeling like, "I-Is it okay for me to tell tales of adventure?!"

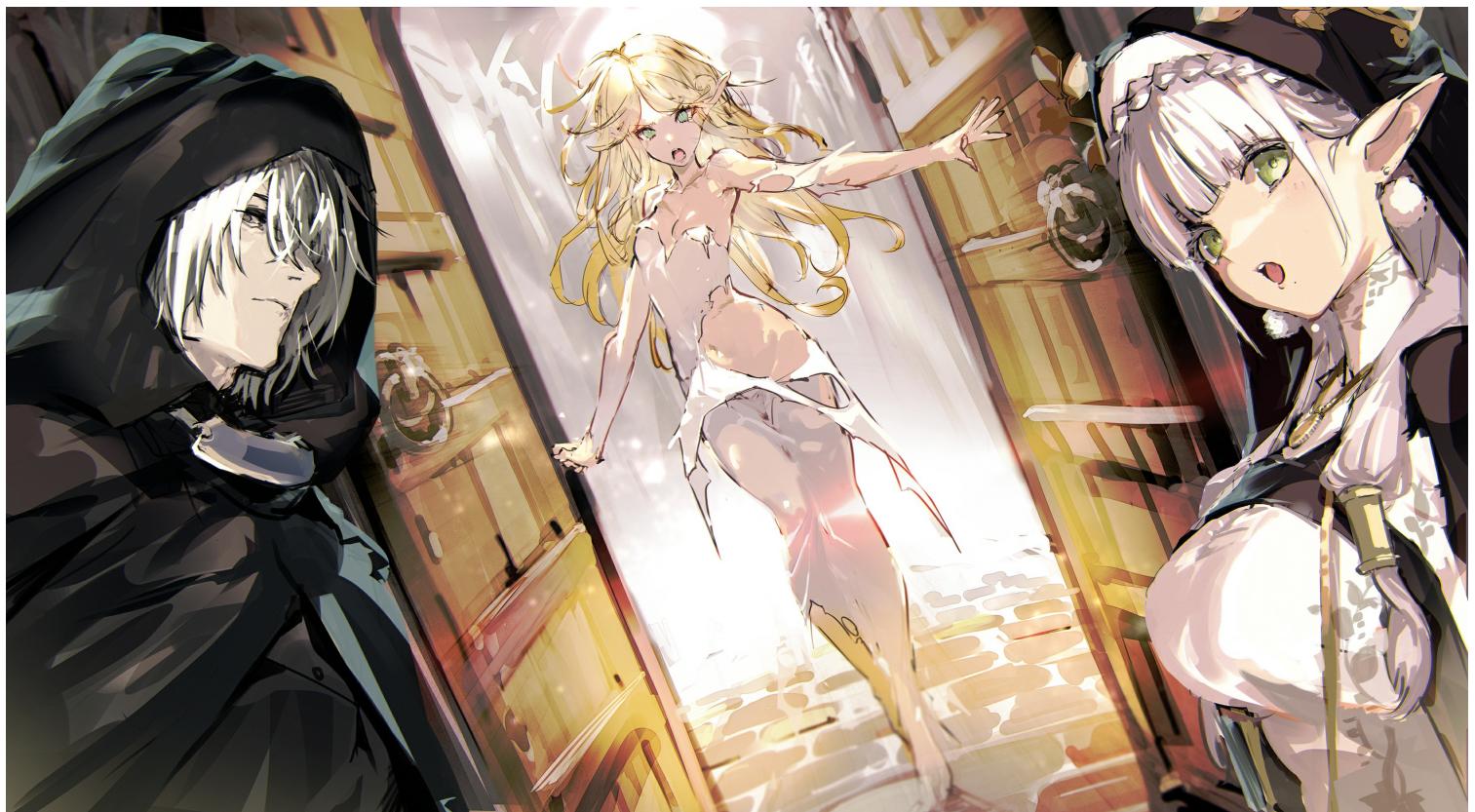
I'm very excited to be able to continue my involvement with the world of *Wizardry*. I could go on cheering forever, but that's enough for now.

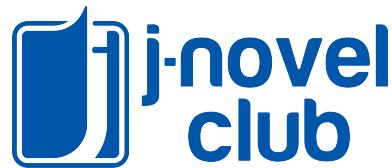
So, I hope you'll continue to support *BLADE & BASTARD*.

See you again next time.









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BLADE & BASTARD: Return of the Hrathnir Volume 3

by Kumo Kagyu

Translated by Sean McCann Edited by C.D. Leeson

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2024